

Artificial Lake: Ice Rink & Wading Pool

In the early days of West Park interest in ice skating in winter seems to have run strong, and there are hints that summer wading pools were considered desirable too. An opportunity arose in the 1930s to create a feature in West Park to allow both skating in winter and wading in summer.

This opportunity arose in the midst of devastating unemployment and general economic woe nation-wide. What had been an era of prosperity in the 1920s ended abruptly. In 1929 the stock market crashed so drastically that soon the entire economy collapsed. Stocks on the New York Stock Exchange lost 50 percent of their value. [As stocks continued to fall during the early 1930s, businesses failed, and unemployment rose dramatically.](#) Banks failed and life savings were lost. With no job and no savings, thousands of Americans lost their homes. Economic problems had a stranglehold on the nation in what was known as the Great Depression. Michigan was even more adversely affected economically than much of the country. Between 1930 and 1933 unemployment in Michigan was 34 percent, compared to 26 percent overall for the nation. Employment in the auto industry, a key industry for Michigan, declined precipitously in only a few years. This being the situation, there was a compelling need for the city to support relief work for the city's unemployed residents.

In this tough economic climate and recognizing Ann Arborites' desires for both skating in winter and wading in summer, the city decided in 1933 to create an artificial lake in West Park:

"The Board made a tour of inspection visiting the various projects which had been carried forward with relief labor during the summer. Chief among these was the artificial lake in West Park which was being paved with cobble stones, the interstices of which were flushed with a soft concrete to make a combination wading pool and skating rink. Also, the new fence around the Bischoff property and improvements to the baseball diamond."

-- Common Council minutes, October 13, 1933.



unlabeled photos from Parks Department file for West Park.

The artificial lake was built in the flat area at the bottom of the Huron Street side of West Park. Given that it was constructed in the summer of 1933, it seems to have been a work relief project funded by the city, though projects along those lines would soon be supported with federal New Deal funds. The artificial lake project provided unemployed workers desperately needed work and income. And their efforts paid dividends in terms of enjoyment the community derived from using the artificial lake for ice skating in winter and as a wading pool in summer. Subsequent projects in West Park about five years later, e.g., the Band Shell, would rely directly on New Deal funding.

How long the artificial lake remained in use is not entirely clear. An old anecdote in circulation says that a West Park skating pond in the southwest part of the park went away after Eli Gallup (parks superintendent 1919-1964) fell through the ice. That seemed to prompt the opinion that it was too easy for kids to fall in, which led to filling in the lake. This item in Common Council minutes might show how that played out in the public arena:

“The Supt. of Parks reported that the old wading pool in West Park [remember the artificial lake was wading pool in summer] had developed a leak which resulted in a collapse of a portion of the bottom. The hole created thereby being too deep for safety. Since the pond had been emptied complaints had been received from nearby residents of a smell nuisance. It was moved that the Supt. of Parks be authorized to purchase earth and have the old wading pool filled up and the area seeded. Carried” – Common Council minutes, July 14, 1947

Whether or not this is how the artificial lake met its demise is not entirely clear, but we do know for certain that the artificial lake disappeared. We also know that a new wading pool was constructed in 1944 in West Park by the Kiwanis Club:

“Moved that the Park Board send a letter of appreciation and thanks to the Kiwanis Club for the gift of the wading pools constructed by them in Burns Park and West Park.”
– Park Board minutes, August 16, 1944



It seems a new wading pool came on board shortly before the artificial lake met its demise. Dedicated July 27, 1944 by the Kiwanis Club to the Park Board, who in turn gifted it to the “anticipatory youngsters of the community”, West Park’s wading pool was built in the shape of a saucer with a cement base, and held 38 feet of water, which was to be changed every day.

The new wading pool was to last at least through 1957, as indicated by this July 1957 photo of a sailboat race on the West Park wading pool

[‘Sailboat Race in West Park Pool, July 1957’](#), AADL