

Sandwiching in History
Lakewood Park
4500 Lakeshore Drive, North Little Rock
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By: Rachel Silva



Intro

Hi, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Thank you for coming, and welcome to the “Sandwiching in History” tour of Lakewood Park! I’d like to thank the Lakewood Property Owners’ Association for allowing us to tour the park today, and I’d like to recognize a few people for their help—

Ken Sullivan, executive director of LPOA;

Joe Whalen, longtime Lakewood resident;

And Sandra Taylor Smith, Cary Bradburn, and Suzanne Jackson with the NLR History Commission.

In addition to its recreational amenities, Lakewood Park contains 6 faux bois sculptures constructed between 1933 and 1935 by Mexican artist Dionicio Rodriguez. Faux bois (meaning imitation or fake wood in French) is cement sculpted to resemble objects found in nature, like wood, stone, and thatch. His

sculptures in Lakewood Park were listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1986.

Justin Matthews

Forward-thinking businessman Justin Matthews, Sr., shaped much of the residential character of present-day North Little Rock and Sherwood when he developed Park Hill, Sylvan Hills, and Lakewood. Matthews commissioned Dionicio Rodriguez in the early 1930s to create faux bois sculptures at the Old Mill, Lakewood Park, and Crestview Park.

Justin Matthews, a native of Monticello, Arkansas, moved to Little Rock in 1901, the same year he married Agnes Somers. Prior to his marriage, Matthews, who had a pharmacy degree, owned and operated three drug stores in southeast Arkansas. Agnes Somers Matthews, who was also from a prominent family, urged her new husband to take a job selling cotton oil mills over a four-state area for a company based out of St. Louis. Matthews got rid of his drug stores and began selling cotton oil mills. He enticed clients to buy a mill by investing his own 10 percent commission in the venture. In 1902, Matthews, himself, opened the Rose City Cotton Oil Mill, promoting development in the community east of downtown NLR. After about four years in the business, Matthews had sold 88 cotton oil mills and decided to sell his stock, earning him upwards of \$1 million (he was only in his late 20s at the time).

About 1908 Matthews began to invest in real estate, acquiring land on both sides of the Arkansas River. He realized the potential for residential growth in North Little Rock, so he diligently worked to make the north side of the river easily accessible and more desirable. The north side of the Arkansas River was low-lying and swampy, most streets were unpaved, and there was no drainage or sewer system. Water usually stood on the streets after each heavy rain, making them impassable for automobile traffic. Matthews spearheaded the plan to create improvement districts in North Little Rock to fund the paving of city streets in 1913 and the construction of a drainage and sewer system in 1914. He also served

on the Broadway-Main Street Bridge Commission beginning in 1917, which ultimately constructed the Broadway and Main Street bridges to replace an older bridge that could only accommodate one vehicle at a time. Matthews also pushed for the construction in 1927 of a new viaduct over the railroad tracks between 8th and 13th streets in North Little Rock. It was no accident that the Ark-Mo Highway (now John F. Kennedy Boulevard/Hwy. 107) was one of the first paving projects undertaken by the state highway commission. Governor John Martineau appointed Matthews to the commission (1927), and the highway just happened to be the main thoroughfare through Park Hill.

Park Hill & Sylvan Hills

In 1921 Matthews platted the first sections of Park Hill, which was North Little Rock's first suburban development. By 1930 Park Hill boasted 159 homes and a school; however, the Great Depression significantly slowed construction, forcing Matthews and fellow investor Henry Topf ("Tupp"), then-president of Twin City Bank, to suffer financial losses. In the late 1920s, Matthews also developed some land in Sylvan Hills (modern-day Sherwood), including the 18-hole Sylvan Hills Golf Course (1927), which provided upscale recreational opportunities for the residents of Park Hill.

The Old Mill

By 1930, Matthews had already purchased the land on which he would later plat the Lakewood Addition, but because of the Great Depression and World War II, construction didn't begin until 1947. So in the meantime, Matthews established the Lakewood Development Company in 1931, which completed the construction of six lakes and dams the following year. Then Matthews took the most undesirable lot, which was situated in a drainage area between lakes number 2 and 3, and built the Old Mill on that site. This was an extremely smart move on his part because no one would have wanted to purchase that lot, and the Old Mill served as a popular attraction during the years prior to Lakewood's development,

making people familiar with the area and enticing them to purchase lots once the addition was platted.

The Old Mill is a replica of a 19th century gristmill (never really functioned as a mill) and was built as a tribute to Arkansas's pioneer culture. Frank Carmean, Matthews's resident architect and builder, designed the mill building and the layout of the park. In 1932 Matthews hired Mexican artist Dionicio Rodriguez to build his distinctive faux bois sculptures in the mill building and throughout the park. The Old Mill at T. R. Pugh Memorial Park was dedicated in August 1933 and was named in honor of Thomas Robert Pugh, a longtime friend of Justin Matthews from Portland, Ashley County, Arkansas. At the Old Mill's dedication, Rodriguez called it his "greatest achievement."

[The Old Mill was featured in the opening credits of "Gone with the Wind" in 1939 (it is not known why David Selznick of Selznick Studios chose the Old Mill for the movie, but it is believed to be the only extant structure used in the filming).]

Lakewood Park & Lakewood Development

Matthews also hired Rodriguez to build faux bois sculptures at the foot of Park Hill in Crestview Park and north of Lake No. 3 near present-day Lakewood Park. In the early 1930s, Lakewood was considered to be out in the boondocks. A few unpaved roads provided access to the lakes and the Old Mill. McCain Boulevard, named after E. A. McCain (longtime friend of Justin Matthews and superintendent of the Park Hill Water Company), only went from the Ark-Mo Highway (JFK) to Lakeshore Drive. Matthews's friend and fellow investor, Twin City Bank president Henry Topf ("Tupp"), even had a hunting lodge out near the present-day site of Lakewood Elementary (and Topf Road). The Lakewood Park sculptures were built between 1933 and 1935. At that time, a surface-level stream ran down the middle of the Lakeshore Drive median (drainage from Lake No. 4 to Lake No. 3), and a small pond was located on the current site of the baseball field. Matthews had Rodriguez put several faux bois sculptures in the median around the stream and in front of the "lily pond" on McCain.

In 1946 North Little Rock annexed the Park Hill neighborhood, and in 1947 the first lots sold in Lakewood. Lakewood was advertised as an expansion of Park Hill, and it was a planned development from the very beginning. Justin Matthews's Metropolitan Trust Company hired Buford L. Pickens, AIA, the head of the school of architecture at Tulane, as a planning consultant, and he and his students created an 8' x 8' model to represent Lakewood in miniature. The model was on display at the Metropolitan Trust Company office, so you could see where future streets and buildings would be constructed in relation to your lot. The neighborhood was laid out to minimize traffic along most streets and reserved sites for parks, schools, and churches. Apartments would serve as a buffer between proposed shopping centers and single-family homes. Sections of the neighborhood were opened gradually as lots were developed—lots were not sold until streets and utilities were extended to them. A 1948 promotional brochure proclaimed, "Lakewood now has by far the most modern Protective Covenants any local subdivision has ever had...Among other things, they provide for the inspection and architectural approval of all house plans, assuring you that houses built next door to you, or anywhere in the neighborhood, will compliment your home and create a harmonious neighborhood." And like many subdivisions at this time, Lakewood was restricted to whites only. The first 20 homes in Lakewood were built on the west side of Lakeshore Drive, facing the median, and along Lakeview Road, which is one block to the west.

In 1953 the Arkansas Home Builders Association held its annual Parade of Homes in Lakewood, featuring 12 houses on Lochridge Road. The following year, Lakewood won the prestigious National Association of Home Builders Award of Merit for Neighborhood Development. A promotional piece from 1955 described the advantages of "year round resort living" at Lakewood:

"If a boy today dreamed about living in a 'dream neighborhood,' it would likely be a wonderful place where he could go swimming in his own back yard; a lake next door where he could fish with Dad, and picnic and park areas down the street for Mom, Sis and the whole family. It would probably also include baseball diamonds, tennis courts, and maybe even a water ski

course. The wide concrete streets would be virtually traffic free so he could ride his bike to the new school a few blocks away, with no danger. From the standpoint of appearance, the 'dream neighborhood' would consist of a large area of rolling tree-covered hills surrounding a half dozen lakes of clear blue water. Modern homes with well kept yards would complete this neighborhood. But this actually is no 'dream neighborhood' in that sense but a reality—Lakewood, a subdivision with recreational facilities unequalled.”

North Little Rock annexed most of present-day Lakewood in 1951. At that time, there were 4,000 people living in Lakewood. Justin Matthews, Sr., died in 1955, and his children divided his assets (Justin, Jr., Thomas Somers “Nook,” and Anne taking Metropolitan Trust; John P. Matthews starting John Matthews Company). His son, John Matthews, started the John Matthews Company, which continued the development of Lakewood and later became General Properties and the Crestwood Company. 1955 was a record construction year for Lakewood, followed by 1963. And Lakewood continued to grow—the 16-story Lakewood House building at the northwest corner of McCain and North Hills was completed in 1965 (designed by Erhart, Eichenbaum, Rauch, and Blass of LR) and because of the high elevation on which it was built, was the state’s tallest apartment building at that time. The John Matthews Co. began selling lots in Heritage Park in 1964 to compete with other upscale additions in Little Rock, like Robinwood. Homes in Heritage Park were required to cost a minimum of \$65,000 and have at least 3,000 square feet of living space. And the Lakewood Pool opened in 1966 at the northeast corner of McCain and Fairway (no longer extant).

Back to Lakewood Park...

By the early 1950s, Lakewood residents dubbed the Lakeshore Drive stream and the pond (on the site of the baseball field) a nuisance because the often stagnant water attracted mosquitoes, so it was put underground in a culvert. When they buried the stream (about 1953), the Rodriguez sculptures were relocated to the park, with the exception of the palapa shelter, which remains in its original

location. Lakewood resident Joe Whalen remembers watching people move the tree shelter down Lakeshore Drive on wooden rollers. The stump with the face carved in it (now at the water spigot) originally served as the base for the basket flower planter, but the two pieces were separated during the relocation. And at least one faux bois bridge didn't make it to the park—it was either broken during the move or was taken somewhere else.

Dionicio Rodriguez

Dionicio Rodriguez was born on April 11, 1891, in Toluca, Mexico, a town about 40 miles southwest of Mexico City. At the age of 16, he moved to Mexico City, where he learned the rustic technique from an engineer and a contractor who both specialized in the creation of imitation rocks, caverns, ruins, and ancient buildings. In the early 1920s, Rodriguez moved to Monterrey before coming to Laredo and San Antonio, Texas, in 1924. It is thought that Rodriguez not only came to the U.S. to find work, but also to escape the violence and political unrest in his native Mexico during the country's revolution years, which lasted from about 1910 until 1940. Although Rodriguez was commissioned for projects throughout the U.S. from 1924-1955, most of his work is concentrated in Texas, Arkansas, and Tennessee. He did a lot of work in San Antonio, and he was responsible for a large collection of sculptures at Memorial Park Cemetery in Memphis as well. Rodriguez did much of his work during the Great Depression. This can be attributed to the fact that his labor and materials were relatively inexpensive. In 1935 Rodriguez wrote, "It [his work] doesn't take much material or time and gives wonderful results."

Rodriguez suffered throughout his adult life with diabetes, which eventually caused him to lose his eyesight. In his later life, doctors wanted to amputate his leg, but they settled for a few toes. Rodriguez's personality has been described as "very distant and very serious." He was always dressed nicely, and did not have many friends because he never stayed in one place too long. In fact, he purchased a new car every year for his travels across the country (and was quite reluctant to let others drive). After all of his time in the U.S., Rodriguez never communicated

in English. He used interpreters or sign language to communicate with clients. Rodriguez was married and divorced twice and had no children. He died on December 16, 1955, in San Antonio and is buried there.

“Faux bois” technique

The “faux bois” or “rustic” or “el trabajo rustico” technique practiced by Rodriguez had antecedents in Europe, Asia, Central and South America, and other areas of the U.S. Many of these early rustic designs appeared in gardens and were executed with wood to create whimsical themes. Several mid-19th century catalogs featured drawings of designs similar to Rodriguez’s work. Even in the early 20th century when Rodriguez came to the U.S., he was not the only sculptor using the technique. However, his grasp of the technique and the detail of his work set him apart from other artists of the period.

The Secret Method

Rodriguez was extremely secretive about his work. He never worked from written plans, so none exist. He would mix coloring, bonding agents, and other products in the trunk of his car, slamming it shut if anyone approached. He would even remove the labels from, and break, the jars that contained his ingredients to ensure that no one could copy his work. Rodriguez sometimes hired people to help him create the rough base of his sculptures, but he never taught them the finishing techniques like how to apply the detailing or how to mix and use the coloring agents. Rodriguez also worked from inside a tent sometimes. However, we do know the basic method he used to create his sculptures.

For large pieces, Rodriguez poured a concrete footing. Then he used steel reinforcing rods or rebar to create the projections of the sculptural work. [FYI: On at least 2 occasions, at the Old Mill in NLR and at Memorial Park in Memphis, Rodriguez used copper rebar to ensure the longevity of the sculptures.] These projections were then tied together with wire, instead of being welded. The form was wrapped with metal lath, or metal mesh or screen material, and the lath was

filled with cement, adding rubble for larger pieces. A rough coat of cement was then applied to the exterior of this form. A final coat of “neat” or pure Portland cement was added to the sculpture surface directly from the bag. Rodriguez then used homemade tools and kitchen implements to create the realistic textures of rock, wood, and thatch. The final step was the application of color while the cement was still damp and hosing the sculpture off with water. Rodriguez used a mixture of water and various chemicals to create his tints, including sulfuric acid, muriatic acid, iron oxide, saltpeter, and lampblack.

[Notes on cement and concrete: Cement is made up of limestone, calcium, silicone, etc. heated until it forms a hard substance, which is then ground up into a fine powder and when water is added, it hardens. “Pure” or Portland cement was invented in the 1700s when clay was added to cement and heated. This substance can harden anywhere—even under water. It is still used to construct bridges. Concrete is cement mixed with gravel and sand (cement makes up about 10-15% of the mixture).]

Recent restoration efforts for sculptures—Cortes and Kresse

Lakewood Park is maintained by the Lakewood Recreational Improvement District in cooperation with the Lakewood Property Owners Association. Technically, it is a private park, but the area containing the faux bois works of Rodriguez is normally open to the public (unless a private event is going on).

In 2005 the Lakewood Recreational Improvement District received a Historic Preservation Restoration Grant in the amount of \$10,000 to restore the Rodriguez sculptures. The restoration work was done by faux bois artist Carlos Cortes, great-nephew of Dionicio Rodriguez. Cortes worked on the tree shelter, palapa, and the basket flower planter.

In 2008 or 2009, local artist Kevin Kresse (who did the Mother Earth fountain on 5th Street in Argenta in 2010) restored the two footbridges. Two of Kresse’s faux bois benches are now located near Lakewood Park as well.

Next tour Nov. 1 at the Colgan House at 2318 S. Summit in LR—great state historic rehabilitation tax credit project!!