

Sandwiching in History

Idlewild Park

Cedar Street and Idlewild Avenue, North Little Rock

October 7, 2016



Good afternoon, my name is Mark Christ, the poor man's Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the "Sandwiching in History" tour of Idlewild Park. I'd like to thank Sandra Taylor Smith, Director of the NLR History Commission, Jared Craig, our UALR graduate assistant, and Audrey Burtrum-Stanley for their help with today's tour, and Mayor Joe Smith for not charging us for the use of the

building. This tour is worth one hour of HSW continuing education credit through the American Institute of Architects. Please see me after the tour if you're interested.

Next month's tour will be at the John F. Weinmann House at 2214 South Battery Street in Little Rock. And I am pleased to introduce you all to Revis Edmonds, our new preservation outreach coordinator who will be leading future Sandwiching in History tours. We grabbed Revis as soon as the ink dried on his doctorate from Arkansas State University's Heritage Studies program.

Park Hill History

The Park Hill housing development, which now encompasses more than 1,600 acres, was the **brainchild of businessman Justin Matthews** (1876-1955). Matthews was born in 1876 near Monticello, Arkansas, and moved to Little Rock in 1901. He opened the **Rose City Cotton Oil Mill in 1902** and amassed a considerable amount of money, which enabled him to invest heavily in real estate. He bought land on a hill just beyond the northern boundary of North Little Rock.

But 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. Justin Matthews spearheaded the plan to create **improvement districts in North Little Rock** to fund the **paving of city streets, a sewer and drainage system (1913-14)**, and the **construction of the Broadway Bridge (1923)** over the Arkansas River. Matthews also had the Main Street viaduct over the railroad yard between 9th and 13th Streets rebuilt to handle increased traffic (1927). These public improvements played an instrumental role in the growth of NLR by making it easily accessible and more desirable, but they also helped Matthews develop his own land north of the river. It was no accident that the **Arkansas-Missouri Highway** (which is now JFK Blvd.) was one of the first paving projects undertaken by the state's first highway commission. Matthews was appointed to the commission, and the highway just happened to be the main thoroughfare through the Park Hill development.

Park Hill was the **first major suburban development in North Little Rock** and the **second development in the Greater Little Rock area**—Pulaski Heights was the first (platted in **1892**). Matthews **platted the first**

sections of Park Hill in 1921 on the land he had purchased. Because Matthews had worked to improve NLR's roads and bridges, Park Hill was accessible by automobile.

So even though Park Hill was the LR area's **second** major suburban development (after Pulaski Heights), it was the **first to rely solely on automobile transportation** (Pulaski Heights developers relied on a streetcar system to transport residents). Park Hill was advertised as the “**second Pulaski Heights,**” but with more advantages like **closer proximity to downtown** Little Rock and North Little Rock, **greater elevation** (which provided cooler temperatures and health benefits), **better views**, and **level land**.

His advertisements even mentioned the fact that the roads leading to Park Hill ran north-south, so you **wouldn't have to face the sun** driving to and from work like you would if you lived in Pulaski Heights (located west of downtown).

Matthews formed the **Park Hill Land Company** to market, sell, and develop the area, while the Justin Matthews Company supervised other

projects in central Arkansas (including Lakewood, Sylvan Hills, Country Club Manor...near current North Hills Country Club, and Kellogg Acres).

At its peak, the Park Hill Land Co. **employed over 200 people**, including an **architect/builder, brick mason, horticulturist/landscape artist, and road construction engineer**. The Justin Matthews Company proclaimed that they built houses to **“endure the ravages of time.”** Matthews cautiously opened one section of Park Hill at a time. In the first eight years of development, 159 houses and a school were built. The most **intense periods of growth in Park Hill** were the **1920s and 1940s**. Park Hill initially took off in the 1920s, development slowed in the 1930s b/c of the Great Depression, and then picked back up in the 1940s—first b/c of men being stationed at nearby Camp Robinson for training during WWII and then after the war when the soldiers came home.

Parks of Park Hill

One of Matthews’ priorities was to include public areas throughout his developments. An undated newspaper clipping in the files of the North Little Rock History Commission features the headline “Matthews Gives to Park

Hill Many Parks and Playgrounds.” It begins by lamenting the lack of parks in North Little Rock before extolling Mathews’ virtues.

It continued: “Our Park Hill and Sylvan Hills areas are especially blessed with an abundance of public parks. It has always been the policy of Justin Matthews to dedicate to the public a plot of land for a public park, with each tract of land platted. There are more than a dozen public owned parks in Park Hill and Sylvan Hills. Some are only small triangular parks, others comprise a block or more, while one park in Sylvan Hills dedicated to the public by Mr. Matthews has about a mile and a half front. ... If other subdividers would adopt Mr. Matthews’ view, our park and playground problems would in a few years be solved.”

Mathews created five parks in Park Hill. The Lakewood Park and the T.R. Pugh Memorial Park, as well as Crestview Park, feature concrete sculptures created by the acclaimed Mexican sculptor Dionicio Rodriguez in the mid-1930s.

T. R. Pugh Park was public, constructed in 1933 to be a tourist destination as Mathews could not sell property in Lakewood during the Great Depression.

Lakewood Park was part of the Lakewood development after WWII and was restricted to Lakewood property owners. It is now public.

A triangular park Matthews deeded to the public in 1921 is near Idlewild Park. He named it Louis Alzheimer Park, but it was named Fearneyhough Park in 2001 after an adjacent neighbor who took care of it for many years. According to Sandra Taylor Smith, it was really never known as Alzheimer Park in her lifetime, but may have been earlier. It is located at the corner of Plainview Circle and E. "C" Avenue.

The fifth park is the subject of our tour today: Idlewild Park. And before I go further I want to expressly thank Sandra Taylor Smith of the North Little Rock History Commission and Jared Craig, our graduate assistant from UALR. They did some real detective work to find information on this park.

According to a May 25, 1924, Arkansas Gazette article, a newly paved section of road running along Idlewild to Five Points “runs the full length of a triangular park that comprises practically two acres.” Five Points by the way, was where North and South Idlewild, East and West Garland and Quapaw Place intersected.

So we know that the park was in place by 1924, but when were the fieldstone building and other amenities added? That answer might lie in the depths of the Great Depression. Project No. 3-50-G-119 of the Works Progress Administration, a federal relief program of the era that has left an indelible mark on Arkansas's built landscape, was dated August 6, 1935. It set aside \$56,251 to "Construct public play ground and grandstand." A March 18, 1936, supplement to the project raised the project amount to \$172,715 and amended the project to "Grading, draining and landscaping for a public playground, and construction of a grandstand."

This, I would submit, was likely the source of the building and amenities at Idlewild Park, which include retaining walls and that really cool kiva. The 1939 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map for the area shows that this building was in place by then, and a May 30, 1940, Arkansas Gazette article shows that it was being used by the Boy Scouts.

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.

On June 8, 1947, an Arkansas Democrat article proclaimed that “development of a Park Hill recreational area got underway this week following the announcement that a triangular tract at Goshen and Idlewild had been obtained for use as a playground. In addition, three lots on the northwest corner of that intersection are to be purchased and converted into tennis courts.

The triangular plot is to be furnished with slides, swings and other equipment for use by younger children while the tennis courts will serve to attract teen-age groups. ... The plot already has a number of improvements and has served as a park for many years. A small stone building located on the west side will still be used for Boy Scout activities on certain evenings. The area also contains several barbecue pits, stone benches, walks and other improvements.”

This equipment apparently remained in place for 40 years and in October of 1987 around 125 people gathered at Idlewild Park to meet with then-Mayor Terry Hartwick – who no runs the North Little Rock Parks Department – to discuss concerns about the condition of the park. The mayor urged them to bring their concerns to the city’s Parks and Recreation Commission. When

asked by a youngster if the kiva was a wishing well, Hartwick replied
“Yeah. You throw all your pennies in there and we’ll come by and take them
out every four weeks.”

I’m not suggesting that that was the funding mechanism, but major
improvements were made at the park. The city paid around \$50,000 to
rehabilitate the old Boy Scout building and for other improvements. We can
all appreciate the results of those efforts as we enjoy Idlewild Park today,
and the building is still used by such groups as the Park Hill Neighborhood
Association.