

# RIDGE RECORD



A publication of the Ridge Historical Society

Fall 2016

Beverly Hills • Morgan Park • Washington Heights • Mt. Greenwood

Vol. 45, No. 3

## Part III on the History of Dan Ryan Woods: "From sighing to singing"

By Carol Flynn; research assistance from Joe O'Connor, RHS Board member

The Dan Ryan Woods (DRW) have always been a unique feature within the Forest Preserves of Cook County (FPCC). The land is an isolated tract within the city, not connected to other preserves land. Actually, the land almost became a city park instead of part of the FPCC.

Chicagoans recognized the need for parks and recreation space from the city's earliest days. Within two years of being incorporated as a city in 1837, the first official park, Dearborn Park, was established on the land now occupied by the Chicago Cultural Center.

The second park was Washington Square, established in 1842. On the National Register of Historic Places since 1991, in its heyday this park was the most celebrated open air free-speech center in the country.

In 1860, a committee of North Side citizens petitioned that swampland, sand dunes and cemeteries along the lake front be established as parkland. This eventually became Lincoln Park. The chain of parks that includes Jackson Park and Washington Park was proposed in 1869.

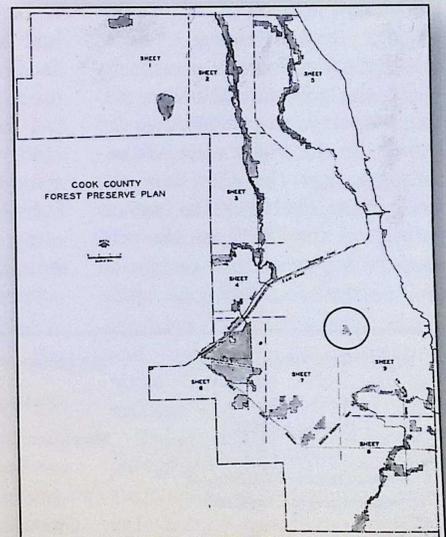
In 1899, the Special Parks Com-

mission was established to plan and oversee the continued development of recreation space. While recommending expansion and improvement in city parks and playlots, the Commission also supported the work of the Outer Belt Park Commission. This second group studied how best to preserve and use the bluffs, woodlands, prairies and wetlands that surrounded the city to establish "an Outer Belt of Parks and Boulevards." The work of these groups led to the formation of the FPCC in 1915.

At the time of the purchase by the FPCC, for many decades DRW land had been owned and used as a stock farm by John B. Sherman, the founder of the Union Stock Yard and Transit Co. Sherman was a member of the South Park Commission Board for 25 years. When he died in 1902, it was rumored that he intended to donate the land to the city for park purposes. The land never became a city park and it wasn't until 15 years later that the land

was purchased by the FPCC. In 1924, the preserve, until then known as the Beverly Hills Preserve, was officially named the Dan Ryan Woods, for the late Cook County Commissioner.

In 1929, a Forest Preserve Advisory Committee developed a document, "Recommended Plans for Forest Preserves of Cook County, Illinois," that proposed construct-



The Dan Ryan Woods (circle) have always held a unique place in the FPCC as a small piece of land within the city limits, not attached to the "outer belt." From the FPCC archives.

ing a highway that would link all of the preserves; reforesting areas; and building amenities and recreation areas. Of DRW, the Plans stated:

“Inside the City of Chicago are three rather large tracts of land, Beverly Hills [DRW], Beaubien Woods, and Wolf Lake Preserve, all of which should be planted with care with forest stock, and used for the present as picnic groves for small and large groups. Much planting is needed on all three tracts, and with the exception of Beverly Hills there may be expected only comparatively little use of the land until population becomes much denser.

“It is recommended that these three tracts be acquired by the South Park and the Beverly Park Districts, as soon as possible, by friendly condemnation suits. These tracts are better suited for city park use than for forest preserves, and the resulting acres to be gained for forested lands, may be used to acquire other forested areas which form connections with the present preserves.”

In real estate law, “condemnation” is the process by which the government seizes private property and compensates the owner. So the Plans were recommending that the City buy the lands from the FPCC to use as parks, and the FPCC use the proceeds to buy more land connected to the outer belt.

The Plans were adopted, giving the FPCC strategic direction for many years. The recommendation to turn DRW over to the city was not acted upon. Instead, the FPCC began a program of work that led to a number of long-lasting developments in DRW.

### The Great Depression

At the time the FPCC Plans were being written and approved, the country was entering into the Great Depression. The U.S. stock market crash of October 29, 1929, known as Black Tuesday, was the start of a worldwide economic depression that lasted for a decade.

There are competing theories as to the cause of the Great Depression, but the impact was undeniable. Personal income, tax revenue, business profits and international trade all fell. Heavy industry, construction, and mining and logging practically came to a standstill. Crop prices fell, and coupled with a severe drought, rural areas suffered. Unemployment reached 25% in the U.S.

By 1932, more than 5,000 banks had failed, and hundreds of thousands of people found themselves unemployed and homeless. Too late to retain political power, President Herbert Hoover and Congress began developing ideas for federal help, some of which became part of the framework for subsequent relief efforts.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was

elected President in 1932, and over the next decade instituted a series of programs known as the “New Deal” to stimulate demand and provide work and relief through government spending and oversight, and to effect financial reforms. An “alphabet soup” of agencies was set up, including many which have lasted to this day, such as the Securities and Exchange Commission, Social Security, the Federal Aviation Administration, and the Federal Communications Commission.

Other temporary agencies that were set up to provide relief and employment opportunities were abolished in the 1940s. Several of these agencies were involved in projects in the FPCC.

It is generally accepted that the Great Depression ended with the advent of World War II, due to massive government spending and reduced unemployment.

### Dan Ryan Woods and the FPCC in the 1930s

The 1929 FPCC Plans and the Great Depression relief and employment efforts led to construction work throughout the preserves, including the DRW.

On October 28, 1930, the *Southtown Economist* newspaper ran an article titled, “Beverly to Get \$150,000 for Forest.” It was reported that the FPCC was attempting to raise \$2.5 million in a bond issue that would result in immedi-

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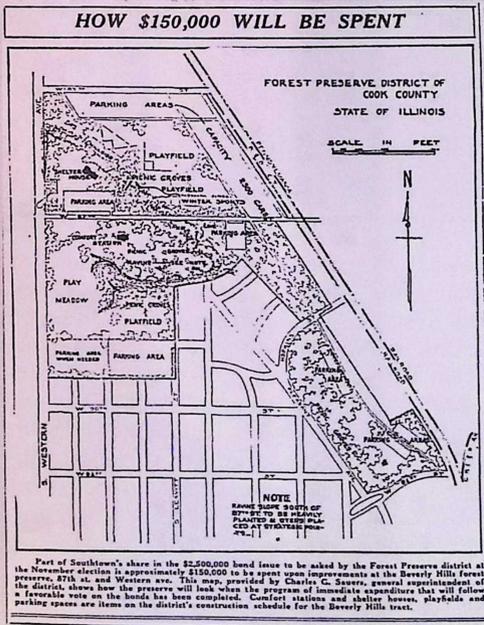
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ate improvements to the DRW.

Anton J. Cermak was then president of the Cook County Board. He asked for the support of the *Southtown* voters for the bond issue. Mentioning that the Beverly Hills woods were one of the most intensely used areas in the entire preserves, Cermak promised comfort stations, shelter houses and playfields. He also promised "properly prepared parking areas." Automobile traffic and adequate parking were increasingly becoming an issue in the growing city and suburbs. The article concluded:

"With the proper control of the automobile and adequate provision for parking, this area can be used more safely and conveniently by the citizens living nearby."

A map showing the intended improvements for Beverly was included with the article:



By the 1930s, automobiles were causing traffic and parking problems. Relief funds were used to build roads and parking lots. They were a major addition to the FPCC lands during the Depression-era improvements. Photo is from the FPCC archives at the U of I—Chicago Library.

The bond issue was approved, and the FPCC began its program of work. An interim report from 1931 written by Charles "Cap" Sauers, the first General Superintendent of the FPCC who served from 1929 to 1964, made note that a new frame field headquarters was built at DRW, utilizing materials left over from an old barn on the property, probably from the Sherman Farm.

But then, according to a report written in 1956 by Sauers, only \$500,000 of the bonds were sold before the Depression "really began to make itself felt," and "development

through this method had to be discontinued." Work didn't stop for long, however. As explained in a history summary by the FPCC:

"The Great Depression posed challenges for the FPCC. After 1931 the county's tax receipts had

shrunk so precipitously that the county and the district had trouble paying their bills. But the Depression also brought new opportunities. The district enjoyed an influx of state and federal funds from such federal and state bodies as the National Park Service, the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, and the Illinois Emergency Relief Commission. Above all, the programs of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, especially the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), but also the Civil Works Administration [CWA], the Public Works Administration [PWA], and the Works Progress Administration [WPA], allowed the district to embark on large projects to develop the preserves. Among such projects were the construction and renovation of hiking trails, picnic and toilet facilities, swimming pools, toboggan slides, and golf courses."

These organizations were all part of the "alphabet soup" of New Deal agencies, established to provide mostly unskilled, manual labor jobs for unemployed men. The CCC concentrated on development of natural resources. The CWA provided construction jobs during

the hard winter of 1933-34. The PWA provided contracts to private construction firms for large-scale projects. The WPA was the largest and most ambitious program, providing millions of jobs for public works projects.

Sauers reported that by 1932, the FPCC began to receive its first allotments of relief labor. In 1933 came the CCC and CWA. Wrote Sauers, "The development program which was abandoned because of lack of funds, had taken on a new life and proceeded at a much more rapid pace than originally proposed. Through all the depression work - Illinois Relief, CWA, WPA and CCC - more than

thirty million dollars were spent on forest preserve development."

A September 1933 *Chicago Tribune* article discussed the CCC and the workers in the forest preserves:

"Two months ago, many of the men who are doing this salutary work at \$1 a day from the United States government were physically emaciated, broken in spirit, despairing, ragged. Some of them thought about suicide in a bitterly objective way. They were typical victims of 'the depression.'

"Today all of them are of a reddish-bronze; fleshed up; smiling, and when they laugh you can hear them a furlong away. These happy men are members of the C. C. C.

(Civilian Conservation Corps), which Franklin Roosevelt thought up. [They have gone] from sighing to singing. Their camps, considering what our country has been through since the winter of '29-'30, are the most inspiring places you ever visited."

FPCC documents list the improvements at DRW that occurred during the 1930s. Parking lots, ball fields, dance floors, a wading pool and a stone shelter house were all added. The most unique features of this time period, which exist to this day, were the "ravine enforcement" and "aqueducts" created in the woods south of 87th St.

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The DRW warming shelter nestled into the Ridge north of 87th St. between the sledding hill (left) and the skiing hill (right, now closed) was built by the CCC in 1935. Photo by C. Flynn.

### Activities in DRW 1930s-1950s

During the Great Depression and World War II, the FPCC became more popular and important than ever as a source of entertainment and recreation. Few people could afford expensive vacations, and war-time automobile tire restrictions and gas rationing curtailed travel. Thousands of picnics, parties and rallies were held in DRW, which was popular because it was accessible by public transportation. Just a few interesting excerpts from these years follow.

In summer 1938, and for several

following years, the *Chicago Tribune* sponsored a "twilight music series" featuring "informal vesper choral concerts" in five of the preserves, including DRW. On Sunday evenings, choirs from all around the city and suburbs performed in the woods, with only "a grassy slope or a great moss mat" as a stage and "the wind playing through the branches of old oak trees and slim white birches" as the only accompaniment. These concerts attracted thousands of visitors, and were lauded by everyone from the conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra to

the director of Hull House for bringing free concerts to the people and making great use of the forest preserves. Choirs ranged from church groups to children's choirs to opera companies. Performances included everything from "negro spirituals" to romantic light opera to popular Irving Berlin songs - "God Bless America" premiered in 1938.

Sauers declared that "necking" in the forest preserves parking lot was allowed, as reported in a 1939 *Tribune* article. In fact, roadside courting was actually encouraged.

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FPCC materials describe the special DRW features as follows:

"In the south section of Dan Ryan, a series of stone aqueducts wind peacefully downhill through the site's oak woodlands. Primari-

ly built as drainage structures and erosion control features, they were constructed from limestone flagstone, adding a unique aesthetic feature to the site. Even today, when rain falls, the channels

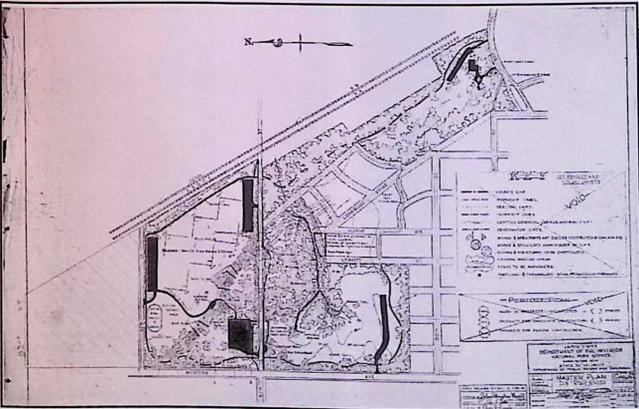
fill with water from the surrounding area. The water travels through the aqueducts to the lower eastern area of the preserve where it pools and percolates back into the ground."



The "natural drain" in the south section of DRW, as it appeared before development began in 1932. This geologic feature formed to allow rain and melting snow to run off from higher to lower elevation, in this case from the Ridge to the east. Photos from the FPCC archives at the U of I - Chicago Library.



The first "ravine" project in the early 1930s used relief labor to dig out a channel and line it with loose flagstone. In Illinois, the workers were known as "Emmerson men," after Governor Louis Lincoln Emmerson who served during the early Depression years (1928-1932).



Later, more formal plans were developed and work completed on the ravine and aqueducts. A series of 1937 blueprints in the FPCC archives indicate a number of agencies were involved. Illinois received generous funding from the federal government because of political affiliations.



Today the ravine makes for a pleasant hike in the south portion of DRW. Photo by C. Flynn.

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An excerpt from the article:

"The forest preserves belong to the people," said Charles G. Sauer, general superintendent of the district, "and we want the public to use them. Many a young fellow who hasn't the money for expensive entertainment can drive out to the preserves, buy a hamburger, and hold hands with his sweetheart."

There were some rules to obey – automobiles had to be parked in the regular parking areas, and parking lights could not be turned off. If these two rules were followed, there was the guarantee that visitors would not be blinded by prying flashlights, questioned by rangers, nor restricted in any way.

The Chicago Park District was not so friendly. It was reported that more than 200 patrolmen combed the parks at night to discourage romance. Excerpted from the article:

"Necking in the park," said James B. Kerr, chief of the park police, "is, to say the least, unethical. We won't allow it at all. We are as strict as possible about public love-making. You see, it isn't the young kids that we have the trouble with. It's the adults. There's no fool like an old fool, you know."

It was reported that at least 300 cars pulled into DRW on a nightly basis. The number was even higher on the "best" nights – Wednesday and Friday.

In 1941, a particularly poignant article appeared in the *Tribune*: "Paint Snow as Black Because It Is to Them: Hull House Children Are Realistic." Inner-city children in the art program at Hull House, the social-reform settlement, painted winter as they saw it: sooty piles of snow on the street, dirty gray city park skating areas. The field trip

coordinator, who had brought the children to visit the hill in DRW in summers, decided to plan a winter trip also. But there were challenges for a winter trip that didn't exist in summer – the children had no mittens, no woolen clothes, no rubber boots. And they had no sleds.

More than 150 children signed up for the field trip. Hull House developed a "cooperative winter sportswear department" where the children could borrow appropriate clothes for outings and return them afterwards. For sleds, they scoured the neighborhood to borrow and buy second-hand sleds, and the children made their own out of tin cans and whatever materials they could find. The Hull House cabinet maker fashioned some out of used lumber. Mittens were fashioned in the art classes.

The trip was pronounced a "glorious success" by the attendees, who made great use of the warming house for "hands that

build snowmen without mittens and for little boys who slide down a hill without a sled." They hoped to make sledding trips to DRW an annual event.

Mention of DRW came all the way from Pampa, Texas, in 1946, when it was reported in a "Teen Talk" article in the *Pampa Daily News*:

Chicago bobby-soxers found a brand new idea in a street car party. They chartered a street car for \$18.75 for a whole day of fun at Ryan Woods. They brought along their phonographs, lunch boxes and games and roasted hot dogs over open fires. The conductor called for them three hours later and a whale of a time was had by all. The kids danced a Conga line on the seats.

To pass the time they also played a new game. Everybody puts a toothpick in his mouth, the one who starts the chain puts a Life Saver on his toothpick. The trick is to pass the Life Saver from toothpick to toothpick without touching it.



A new toboggan slide was installed in DRW for \$16,000 in 1954. Winter sports were very popular – sledding, skiing, and skating on frozen ball diamonds. This 1957 photo is from the FPCC archives.

DRW participated as a site for a mock "A-bomb" test in 1951. An "attack" on Joliet was planned to test how effectively help could be rushed from Chicago. Approximately 100 rescue vehicles, including fire equipment, bulldozers and ambulances, gathered at DRW for inspection but did not actually make the trip to Joliet. Civil Defense State Headquarters staff manned the state control center at the Museum of Science and Industry, and issued mock orders for evacuation and other activities that would be required if a major city were hit by an atomic bomb.

### Expansion of land and amenities

On July 24, 1949, the *Tribune* reported that DRW was annexing 40 acres through condemnation proceedings. The area covered Western Ave. east to the railroad tracks, from 83rd to 85th Streets. The area was cleared and landscaped in 1955 with forest and meadow areas and picnic sites.



Gone but not forgotten from DRW are horses. A 1940 *Tribune* article reported that horseback riding in the FPCC was more popular than ever, with 1,600 horses available for hire at \$1.00 to \$1.50 per hour, and many more horses privately owned. There were 150 miles of woodland trails, and in the southwest much of the riding was done in the Beverly Hills neighborhood. Photo from FPCC archives.

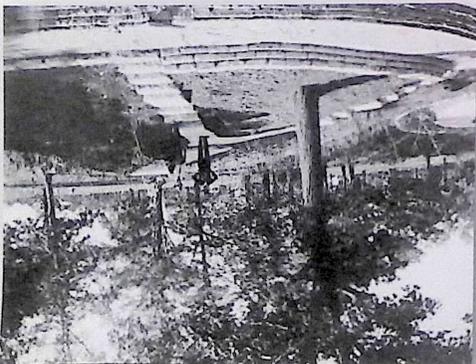
**Next issue: Fourth and final installment on the history of the Dan Ryan Woods: Close to nature**



This 1959 aerial shot of DRW looks northeast from 87th St. and Western Ave. The land north of 85th St. was newly developed and the small section north of 83rd St. and south of the train tracks was yet to be added to the FPCC. To the left is the Beverly Country Club, also founded on land originally owned by John B. Sherman of the Union Stock Yards. Photo from the FPCC archives.

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Fall 2016 Issue



The ravine and aqueducts built in Dan Ryan Woods are living history of the 1930s Depression-era work of the New Deal "alphabet soup" agencies. They are unique in the Forest Preserves of Cook County. Photo from the FCC archives at the University of Illinois—Chicago Library.

*Upcoming events in 2017 ...*

Saturday, January 7 – **Sweets, Savories and Champagne at RHS** – Join us for an evening of good conversation, bubbly and other refreshments.

Sunday, January 29 – **Romancing the Spoon: The Victorian Love Affair with Silver** - Join us for an afternoon program on a cold winter's day when local historian and author **Cynthia Ogorek** discusses why silver flatware became the must-have accessory of the proper Victorian home. Serving and place pieces will be highlighted. Attendees are encouraged to bring their own silver for questions and answers. Wine and cheese refreshments will be served.

Sunday, February 19 – **RHS Annual Meeting of the Members** – Join us for an afternoon event featuring the annual RHS business report and election, and a presentation by **Errol Magidson** on his upcoming book on the historic Glavin House, also known as the Irish Castle.

All events will be held at RHS, 10621 S. Seeley Ave. Contact RHS at [ridgehistory@rcotmat.com](mailto:ridgehistory@rcotmat.com) or 773/881-1675 for more information.