

For Thirty Years New Albany's Summer Social Life Centered On Glenwood Park

Homes Now Completely Occupy Spring and Beharrell Site Street Car Company Maintained To Further Use of Trolleys

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The new four-lane bridge which will span Silver Creek near East Spring Street may also be a symbol for the very imaginative. The bridge, part of a link between New Albany and the Clark Bridge expressway, also connects the past with the present.

Some 24 years ago, Glenwood Park, a spot for picnics and all variety of entertainment, ceased to exist. The march of time smothered it out amid gasoline fumes and the purr of many motors.

Glenwood Park had its beginning in 1902. From a forest covering 25 acres, it emerged as the acme of picnic areas within the Falls Cities.

The site was shaded by giant beech trees and was bordered on the east by Silver Creek. It seemed that nature had carefully selected the setting for a picnic ground. The trees were large, shady and well spaced.

Owned By Beharrells

The 25 acres were owned by the well-known Beharrell family of New Albany, but the New Albany Traction Company, with an eye for business, purchased the property for a picnic area. It was a stroke of genius.

The geographical location of the park was ideal. Transportation was no problem. The rails "fed in" from New Albany to the west, Louisville and Jeffersonville to the south and east.

A year or two before the park was to spring into prominence with its vast assortment of attractions, those persons who loved to just "eat in the outdoors" boarded the street cars and with bulging picnic baskets entered the shaded domain of the giant beeches. The Traction Company was reaping a harvest.

Adjacent to the Park property was the baseball diamond, where some of the game's great and near-great were to perform. But the ball park, boasting a wooden grandstand, bordering the east side of Beharrell Avenue and facing the playing area, was not a part of the park property.

The clay diamond, subject to erosion throughout the years, was owned by the Duffy estate of New Albany. However, the street car company had a definite "finger in the pie".

Played Like Professionals

New Albany baseball teams, in those days, were as strong as many professional aggregations. Hundreds of New Albany and Jeffersonville baseball fans boarded the interurbans every sunny Saturday and Sunday throughout the season, to see the vaunted New Albany Glenwoods perform.

The crowds were usually so large that extra cars were "parked" on the tracks awaiting the exit of the baseball enthusiasts.

The entire Glenwood area was encircled by a large wooden fence. Main entrance was at the corner of Spring Street and Beharrell Avenue. From that point the park area fanned out. It was bordered on the north by a wooden fence, separating the park proper from the baseball park. The fence separating the two parks ended at the very end of the outfield playing area.

Sloped To Creek

Beyond the picnic area was a huge slope which merged into the bank of Silver Creek. A rough path, erosion pocked, exposed the looped roots of several trees, and descending the hill was often a very vigorous chore for the elderly picnickers.

The park area had three main entertainment sites – a dance floor, at the very peak of the slope descending to Silver Creek; the theatre building, midway between the park entrance and the dance floor, but situated near the fence separating the baseball diamond; and the bandstand, which was set high and faced the east, just a stone's throw from the theatre building.

The soft drink "emporium" was on the very southern fringe of the park, between the dance floor to the east and the park entrance to the west. It was operated by Joseph Renn, who presently resides at 502 Bank.

Renn Had Concession

Renn set up business there in 1917 and faded out when the park drew its last breath in 1935.

"We set up a tent right there in the park in those days," said Renn, "and camped beside our place of business.

Renn found that sleeping was a problem for a while. The car tracks ran some 30 feet south of the huge soft drink stand, separated by Spring Street on which was a wooden passenger bridge crossing Silver Creek.

"Those cars made a terrible racket whizzing by our stand," said Renn, "but we got used to it."

When Renn moved into the Glenwood stand in 1917, he found it to be too small. He solved the problem by adding to the original structure. It was open on all sides. A giant counter ran the entire length of the rather large structure, covered by a roof.

Truck Meets Test

Renn said that he purchased one of the very first one-ton trucks as a means of hauling many thousands of soft drinks to Glenwood Park.

"That truck had to prove its worth, though," said Renn, "so we tested it by driving it up Spickert Knob Hill carrying 50 cases of soft drinks. It passed the test okay, so I bought the truck."

Renn said that, following the demise of the park in 1935, he was "very interested" in purchasing the park, and made an attempt to do so, but was unsuccessful.

Renn, who wore the mythical crown as the soft drink king of New Albany, said he had to pay rent to the Duffy estate to serve soft drinks during baseball games. It was worth it, however, as a sizzling baseball game in hot weather was made to order for reaping a pop-bottle bonanza.

Mecca Of Thousands

Glenwood Park, with its vast roof of beech tree branches and leaves, was visited by thousands throughout its years of existence. It swayed to the beat of the then-modern dance music from the roofed dance hall, heard the splash of many swimmers as they jumped, slipped or fell off the slick wooden pier, which seemed to emerge from the mud-slick bank.

The park shuddered when the bravest of the swimmers climbed upward through the web of supporting beams of the bridge, just above the dam, gained the bridge proper and then dived, amid screams, into the muddy waters of the creek.

Glenwood Park came into prominence in 1904 when the first Chautauqua to be held in New Albany was presented there. The feature attraction was the great silver-tongued orator, William Jennings Bryan, who tried for the presidency of the United States three times, only to fail. Bryan's topic on Aug. 4 of that year was "Value of an Ideal."

Bryan Awe-Inspiring

Bryan's speech was awe-inspiring. The following year, to the day, he appeared again at the New Albany Chautauqua and held the vast audience spellbound with his "Prince of Peace."

The Chautauqua was held for 12 consecutive years at Glenwood and featured many nationally known personages, including Billy Sunday, the famed evangelist; Charles Hitchcock, the great actor of his day; Judge Marcus Kavanaugh, nationally known jurist and lecturer, and the famed political figure, Champ Clark.

The first Chautauqua, instituted in 1904, was governed by a board of directors. Dr. John Baldwin, a former citizen of New Albany, but a resident of Jeffersonville at that time, was the board's president.

Fireworks Featured

The park knew many other highlights, including the great Centennial of 1913 which commemorated New Albany's 100th birthday. A feature of the Centennial celebration was the presentation of a giant fireworks display on the baseball field. Thousands were crowded into the area.

The fireworks display was so constructed as to outline images and names, and it is believed to have been the first presentation of its kind in the history of New Albany.

Another attraction was the presentation of the 1922 Chautauqua, after a lapse of six years. It was the final Chautauqua.

A giant pageant of Oct. 4 and 5, 1923, was presented in the area between Silver Creek and the slope, with a cast of several hundred. Charles B. McLinn, former New Albany High School principal and once Mayor of New Albany, was director of the pageant, which was presented for the benefit of the Tuberculosis Sanitarium. Thousands attended.

Picnics Big Events

There were several annual picnics, including St. John's (June 24); grocers, Independence Day, and Labor Day. It was also the scene of hundreds of family reunions and private outings.

The annual grocers' picnic was a colorful affair. Many booths were in operation. Baskets of groceries were won by the turn of a wheel. The cry of "bingo" mingled with those of several "barkers".

There was the usual circus atmosphere throughout the park area, including the whiffs of frying hamburgers and the chuckles and cries of children running through the park.

Dreyer Led Band

A great outdoor attraction was New Albany's own Dreyer's band, with each member in military-appearing splendor. Professor Dreyer, who conducted a studio at East Ninth and Main, erect as an arrow, directed his group of musicians, while hundreds of folk sat below and in front of the bandstand, beating the sawdust area with feet in time with the music.

The Glenwood Theatre, seating hundreds, was always alive with some sort of stage presentation. Famous personages, including Bryan and Hitchcock, trod the old wooden stage.

Possibly the first sign that time was "eating" into the very life of the great recreation site was the installation of a gasoline pump by Joseph Renn at his soft drink emporium. It was the first such pump to be installed in the eastern sector of New Albany.

Yields To The Times

The march of progress sounded the park's doom. Down came the old interurban trestle crossing Silver Street, robbing those daredevil divers of a place to roost. The trestle was replaced by a two-lane modern bridge, designed for automobiles. The old track between Jeffersonville and New Albany was no more. The original reason for a park area within the huge beech grove had died.

In 1934 the last base hit sounded at old Glenwood Park, the scene of so many great games and personages. The decay, caused by changing times, had all but crumbled the neglected stands. The old Glenwoods had faded into sports history and those great NAHS grid teams had switched their home field to the new one directly behind the new high school building on Vincennes Street.

Name Still Lives

Progress killed the park and then took over its territory. The old Glenwood Park site is now one of the most beautiful residential sections of New Albany. Only the name lives on.

The upcoming new four-lane bridge ironically depicts the progress which faded old Glenwood Park into oblivion. But it links, in a way, a glorious past with a progressive future.