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Robison Park, 1896-1919

ROBISON PARK

1896 - 1919

Second Edition

By Roy M. Bates

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ROBISON PARK

1896 - 1919

By Roy M. Bates

The author has been asked to write a brief historical narrative of Robison Park. That shrine of pleasure seekers served the people of Fort Wayne and vicinity from the years 1896 until 1919.

Created during the gay nineties, the park assumed the spirit of the period and retained this carefree and Riviera character throughout almost a quarter of a century of existence, which was contemporary with the rise and fall of that great electric railway empire, that was built up largely in Indiana and adjacent Mid-western States. The park was always under the control of the street railway system of the City of Fort Wayne, which from time to time was subjected to reorganizations and changes of ownership so characteristic of this lush and vehement period.

Robison Park was situated seven miles north of Fort Wayne in the west portion of section No. 8 of St. Joseph Township, Allen County, on the west bank of the St. Joseph River and a short distance to the east of the Fort Wayne and Leo gravel pike (now state roads No. 1 and No. 427). Here some heavily wooded lands and a large horseshoe shaped bend in the river combined to create a most scenic area. A short distance below this site, a seventeen-foot dam impounded the river waters for many miles up stream.

The original dam was erected at this point in the river in June, 1834, for the purpose of creating a water supply for the Wabash and Erie Canal under con-

struction at the time and whose route traversed the business portion of the City of Fort Wayne. The water thus impounded was conveyed to the main canal at Fort Wayne by means of a feeder canal, whose egress from the river was immediately above the dam and continued for about eight miles to the city. The dam which was always referred to as "The Feeder Dam" was two hundred thirty feet long and constructed of heavy timbers and debris and anchored to stone filled cribs. A guard lock was constructed in the canal a short distance from the river to prevent flood waters from overflowing the banks of the main canal. Incidentally, this dam was at the highest point on the entire Wabash and Erie Canal system.

Shortly after incorporation of the Fort Wayne Consolidated Railway Company in 1895, the management became interested in establishing an amusement park for Fort Wayne and this site on the St. Joseph River was selected. They were influenced in their choice by the scenic attractions of the area and the boating that would be made possible because of the existence of this large dam. And it was anticipated that the principal source of revenue to the company would be derived from the transportation of park patrons from Fort Wayne over a proposed seven mile, double track electric railway line.

Through the efforts of M. Stanley Robison, the first manager of the park, and who was succeeded by Charles H. Williams, the park developed into one of the most popular recreation centers in the Mid-West. All types of amusements and attractions were enjoyed here by the public. Boating on the river became very popular, with a large outlay of rowboats and power launches. A steamboat made frequent trips up the river. Sculling and various types of boat races were popular. Along the river north of the park were many cottages and club-houses which were readily reached by boat from near the car line terminal at the park.

The park always had a well-groomed look with its beautiful lawns and well-graveled and trimmed walks. Flower gardens and shrubbery were profuse, concessions and buildings always seemed freshly painted, and with flags flying, a carnival air prevailed. The picnic areas and forested sections added a rustic touch to the landscape. A day's outing here was a restful and relaxing experience; and it was with regret that the park's existence was terminated in 1919.

A DREAM MATERIALIZES

Fort Wayne's first electric street railway cars began operation in the year 1892, upon formation of the Fort Wayne Electric Railway Company. Prior to this time, horse cars were the principal means of public transportation in the city. Electric railway companies were generally short-lived and the Fort Wayne Electric Railway Company was no exception, for, on November 20, 1895, after complete reorganization, articles of incorporation were filed with the Secretary of State of Indiana for the Fort Wayne Consolidated Railway Company which then assumed operation of the street railway system.

The management of this newly-formed company lost no time in making plans for an amusement park at the site previously mentioned on the St. Joseph River. They immediately purchased two hundred sixty-five acres from the Swift family who were owners of the proposed park site. The development program involving almost \$300,000 was approved. Plans for the intended buildings and concessions were placed on public display and the name Swift Park was decided upon.

By December 27, contracts for the construction of the seven mile double-track electric line were awarded to the M. J. Degnon Construction Company of Cleveland, Ohio. Additional contracts for power equipment and material and for

open-type summer cars were let. Work began on the contracts at once; and the feverish program for completion of the project by the following June was in full swing.

Additional land was acquired in January, 1896, when the street railway company purchased the Charles Kroemer farm adjacent to the Swift farm. It was the management's intentions to convert this area into a lake as one of the Swift Park attractions.

The spring of 1896 found construction of the electric line being pushed to the utmost. Some labor problems developed when charges were made against the Degnon Company of importing laborers to work on the right-of-way. These difficulties were soon overcome and by May 18 most of the grading was completed and six miles of rail were placed. New cars for use on the line began arriving in March, and a new type ticket for use on the lines in the city was issued which bore a picture of the large pavilion then under construction at the park.

As time for the opening of the park drew near, citizens of Fort Wayne became quite impatient to see the development and taste the pleasures which it would afford. On opening day, the few attractions available were the huge pavilion with its dancing accommodations and cafe, numerous boating facilities, and a large grove of many acres, with swings, comfortable seats, pretty little pavilions and summer houses and accommodations for picnic parties. Much of the park development was accomplished after the formal opening.

The first car to operate over the completed right-of-way was car No. 109 which left the city on May 30th with a party of newspaper men and prominent citizens of Fort Wayne, who at the invitation of the street railway company went out to christen the park. Their praise of the new development was reflected in the newspaper stories of that day.

It was the intention of the management to throw the park open to the public on Sunday, June 7, 1896, but an unforeseen accident delayed the opening until Saturday, June 13th, when the first regular car service began. Starting at 9:00 A.M. and continuing throughout the day cars were run on a ten-minute schedule and not a car left the city that was not filled. In the afternoon, the throng of excursionists grew larger. Toward evening, hundreds took passage to the park to enjoy the place by night.

At 6:30 P.M., a special car left downtown with the following invited guests:

John H. Bass	M. V. Walsh	F. S. Lombard
M. Stanley Robison	A. F. Glutting	A. W. Seasbrease, Jr.
R. J. Fisher	John T. Dougal	R. H. Carnahan
C. W. Edsall	J. M. Barrett	O. P. Kemp (Watertown, S. D.)
Dr. W. W. Mungen	Harry Harrison	N. R. Lombard
F. M. Smith	Herman Hormel	Anselm Fuelber
P. F. Smith, Jr.	Gus Muhler	Louis Heilbronner
Byron Hattersley	Frank Mohr	Ed. Muhler
W. W. Rockhill	John Bass, Jr.	R. B. Hanna
Ross McCulloch	E. H. Olds	Charles B. Muhler
Harry M. Metzger	H. C. Rockhill	Charles Hitzeman

The car reached the grounds at 7:15 and the party was taken on a tour of the park grounds. A banquet was then served to the group by Fred Foerster and Harry Buhlen, formerly of Columbus, Ohio, who had been selected by the management to operate its restaurant located in the main pavilion. These men were then taken for a trip up the river and back on the new steamer "Clementina."

The date set for the grand opening of the park was July 4th, although the intervening period was interspersed with banquets, excursions and special events, all of which were part of a protracted dedicatory period. Several very special outdoor attractions were arranged for those next few weeks. The Zorella family of aerialists was engaged to entertain the public for one week starting June 14. They were the best aerialists obtainable and they gave afternoon and evening performances. At night their apparatus was illuminated by electricity. The following week the chief attraction was the Leroy Sisters (Victoria and Sadie) and Professor S. L. Hibbard, advertised as America's favorite aeronauts. They made balloon ascensions each afternoon consisting of a race between their two large balloons named the Victoria and Excelsior. On Wednesday night, the ascension was illuminated.

Several accidents occurred during the week. On one occasion, Miss Victoria and Hibbard left the earth together and sailed away side by side. The balloons were so ballasted that when the parachute was cut away the balloon would turn over letting the smoke and gas escape and allowing the balloon to fall close to the parachute. When Miss Leroy cut away her parachute her balloon was directly beneath that of Hibbard's and the smoke, hot air and gas completely enveloped the man and rendered him almost unconscious. He miraculously managed to cling to the trapeze until the descent was made; shortly afterward he revived. Miss Leroy fell among the branches of a tree some distance from the park. A rope was thrown to her which parted as she was beginning her descent from the tree; she fell to the ground and was picked up unconscious but not badly injured. Miss Leroy was killed a short time afterward at the St. Louis County Fair being held at Dwyer Station, Missouri, when she fell a distance of 2500 feet before a horrified audience of 10,000 people.

CHANGE IN NAME

The following announcement was made by the Consolidated Railway Company on June 29:

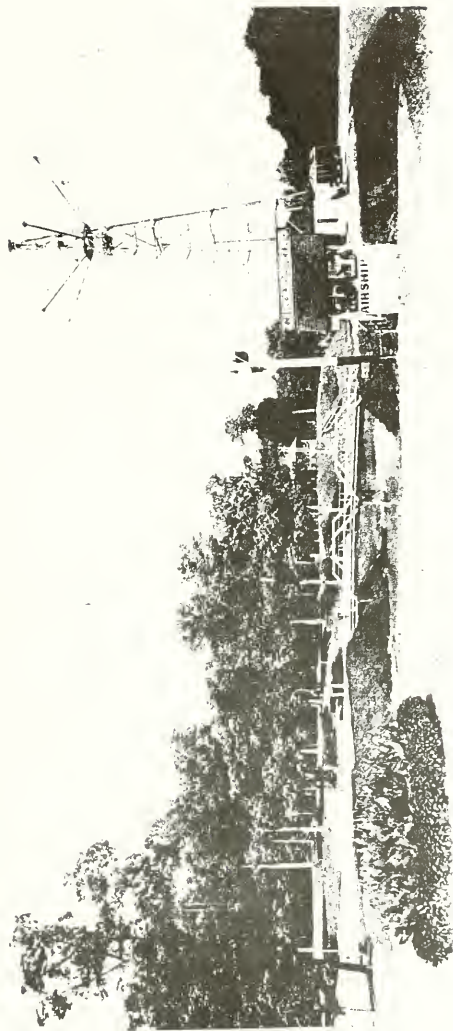
"By reason of the many requests from the citizens of Fort Wayne that the name of Swift Park be changed to Robison Park, the Board of Directors of this company in deference to such requests have this 29th day of June, 1896, decided to change the name to Robison Park by which name it will be hereafter known."

The park was renamed for M. Stanley Robison who had been a leader in the movement to create it, and who became its first general manager. He was regarded highly by his associates and the public. From the foregoing it will be noted that the change in name occurred between the time the park was given over to the public and its formal opening.

THE FORMAL OPENING

The largest crowd ever assembled at one place in Northern Indiana up to this time congregated at Robison Park on July 4th, resulting from the extensive publicity given the grand opening which was combined with the celebration of Independence Day. The chief event of the day was a public wedding witnessed by thousands of people at the band stand. No better account of the day's celebration could be found than a newspaper article in the Fort Wayne Sentinel, from which we quote:

"The biggest celebration of the day, of course, was at Robison Park where



A 27245 View in Robinson Park near Ft. Wayne, Ind.

35,000 people had gathered. It was by long odds the largest crowd ever gotten together in one place in Northern Indiana and no words can express adequate praise of the manner in which they were taken care of. To handle such an enormous throng would test the capacity of the biggest line of street railway in America, and outside of the largest cities accommodating such a number would be out of the question. The transportation facilities afforded were the best. The crowd was taken to and from the park with ease. Cars were run two minutes apart all afternoon and evening, and some times oftener, when the jam of humanity became too great.

"There were various forms of amusement at the park and lovers of sport of whatever nature were satisfied. There were boat races, tub races, and other aquatic events on the river besides baseball games both afternoon and evening. "Philion" the wonderful equilibrist gave an exhibition that thrilled, while it delighted the watching thousands. The great event of the day, however, was the wedding and the space about the platform which had been erected for the ceremony, was crowded long before the hour appointed.

"At 4:00 o'clock promptly Cassa's orchestra began the soft strains of Mendelssohn's Wedding March and Rutherford B. Wilson and Miss Lillie Fink walked through the shady grove into the band stand on the high bank looking over the river and bayou. Here the Reverend M. C. Cooper* was in waiting and tied the solemn knot.

"The bride blushed a rosy red, as she promised to love, honor and obey, and the groom looked as if he was in the midst of a small party of friends, as he slipped the ring on the lady's finger. After the final words had been said there was a loud cheer and thousands pressed forward to congratulate the newly married pair. Mr. Louis Heilbronner was the first to salute the bride, and he performed the function with a grace that looked like the result of long practice. Mr. and Mrs. Wilson were kept busy shaking hands for an hour after the ceremony, and they probably received more congratulations than any couple ever married in Indiana.

"The other features of the day at the park were enjoyable and the crowd remained until a late hour last night. The park is prettiest after nightfall, and the visitors appreciated the fact. One pleasant feature of the day was the excellent order preserved, which has possibly never been equaled in a crowd of such magnitude. There were no intoxicated men on the grounds and no trouble occurred of any kind. One tough escaped the vigilance of the police and found his way onto the grounds, but he was soon spotted by Officer Collins who ordered him away. He refused to go and resisted expulsion, and was immediately locked up in the park prison.

"There were probably fewer of our people left in the city than any Fourth of July for years. This owing in a great measure to the fact that Fort Wayne has an attraction in the shape of a summer resort.—The Robison Park. As will be seen by our local columns about 35,000 people visited that delightful pleasure place last Saturday and were given the same enjoyment that they would have secured at Rome City or Warsaw, and at a cost too, that was very small compared with what they would have spent going to these resorts. Robison Park is proving a great boon to our city and as the months and years roll by it will grow in attractiveness and popularity."

* Ed. Note—*Pastor, St. Paul's Methodist Episcopal Church.*

ACCESS TO THE PARK

Probably the most impressionable phase of a visit to the park was the thirty or forty minutes required to complete the journey by the electric railway. The open summer cars in use were generally operated in tandem, a power car pulling a trailer. They would leave Main and Calhoun Streets, going east on Main Street, making a circuit of the block back to Calhoun Street, then to Superior Street and on to Spy Run, to a point near Centlivre Park, then east to the river. From here to the park the country traversed was quite scenic, with the canal feeder on one side and the St. Joseph River on the other. Trees and woodlots lined the route for most of the distance.

Tickets to the park were generally sold in a block of three. The first ticket would read "From Fort Wayne to Centlivre Park." The second ticket read "From Centlivre Park to Robison Park," while the third or return ticket read "From Robison Park to Fort Wayne."

This trip became so popular that trolley parties were organized by various groups, and quite often tickets were sold at a price that would allow the sponsors a small profit. These trolley parties were generally scheduled for the evening and quite often several of the city lines would be included in the itinerary before making the park run.

The cars in use would accommodate about sixty people and were arranged with ten or twelve seats placed crosswise of the car. The conductor in collecting his fares made use of a running board at the side of the car, and this arrangement became somewhat precarious at times. Hand brakes were the only means of retarding speed and avoiding accidents. Good judgment was required in their use. During inclement weather, canvas curtains would be drawn quite similar to an ordinary window blind. The passengers were fairly well protected with this arrangement, but the trainmen were generally well soaked, especially if they neglected to bring their oil skins.

GROUNDS AND ATTRACTIONS

Throughout the year of 1896 and well into 1897 an army of men was kept busy at the park rushing to completion the plans of the architects and landscape gardeners. Each day saw amazing progress made. The depot and waiting rooms were completed, the large car loop was plotted with grass, walks around the pavilion were completed and large stone flower stands erected on the sides. The long rustic bridge was finished and the boat house well on its way to being used.

A water supply system was put into use consisting of an artesian well, with electrical pumping equipment. Water was pumped into a huge tank at the top of a high stone tower, which somewhat resembled a dutch windmill. A pressure sufficient to supply the park was thus obtained.

Within a few years' time after the park opening many attractions and concessions were added. The boat and bath houses were enlarged and additional landscaping with flower gardens were added. This latter work was under the direction of Mr. Harry Doswell who for years operated a floral business in Fort Wayne. Greenhouses were built so plants could be propagated during winter months for park use. For the convenience of cyclists a gate was opened on the west side of the grounds; later this was used by carriages and shelters for horses were erected. A charge was made for gaining admission to the park through this entrance.

A police force of about a half-dozen men was kept on duty at the park who

were deputized by the Allen County sheriff, and the original force comprised Phillip Lintlage, John Aiken, Peter Collins, Edward Tanner, and Henry Sanders. It was a company policy that no liquor should be sold or carried onto the premises and this policy continued throughout the park's existence. With few exceptions the crowds were always orderly which considerably eased the work of the police. Efforts to circumvent this liquor prohibition were made at various times. About the time of the opening of the park, Edward Geary opened a saloon nearby and on July 15, 1896, The Consolidated Railway Company filed affidavits against him for selling liquor without a license. He was later fined one dollar and costs and several other charges against him were dismissed. Another and rather unique attempt to outwit the prohibition ruling was made by a man referred to as Colonel Allen who dispensed alcoholic beverages on a barge about thirty-five by twelve feet in size, anchored by the river bank opposite the park. Contact with the barge could be made by procuring a rowboat and return trips were sometimes made with difficulty.

The boating concession which was awarded to Henry, Joseph and John Hartman was operated by them continuously until about 1905 when the large dam in the river below the park, which had progressively deteriorated was almost totally destroyed by unusual flood conditions. This disaster lowered the level of river considerably and shortly afterward canoeing became the only boating on the river. The Hartman concessions were extensive. The steamboat "Clementina" could accommodate a considerable excursion party and on busy days trips were scheduled for up river at about half hour intervals. Several naphtha launches were maintained for use of the public and about one hundred rowboats were kept in use. The trip up the river was delightful, for miles there was a broad deep stretch of water. The stream which flowed between the high wooded banks furnished an ever changing scene of beauty.

A huge electrically operated organ or Orchestron was installed in the west end of the pavillion. The general effect of the music produced on this instrument was that of a large and complete orchestra. On it were produced classical, operatic and popular airs. Its volume was tremendous and it could be heard in almost every part of the park. The Orchestron was built in Freiburg, Germany, and was set up by K. A. Engman and Son of Fort Wayne; its cost completely installed was almost \$10,000. John E. Hoke operated the Orchestron during the years of 1896-97 until he was called to the Spanish-American War. He was succeeded by Benjamin Ankenbruck.

Dancing was first carried on in the main pavilion under the direction of Messrs. Forrester and Buhlen who also operated the restaurant. In 1898 a dance hall was erected near the theatre in the grove and Mr. Louis Heilbroner became its manager. In later years a dance hall was erected near the car line depot for more convenience to the public and was operated by Mr. George Trier, who also operated a dancing school in the city.

The first theatrical performances given at Robison Park were held under a large tent. A commodious and well appointed theatre was later erected in the grove and for about five years after the park opening these shows were managed by Mr. Louis Heilbroner after which Mr. George Fisher assumed management. Tom Conrad was stage manager and Harry Dunfee, who was a stage hand, later became property man while Mrs. Dunfee sold admission tickets. The theatre carried on for most of the park's existence giving first rate billings to the public. In later years some movies were shown. The theatre could seat about nine hundred people and performances were usually scheduled for 2:30 and 8:15 P.M.



Most of the attractions were located in the grove to the north of the main pavilion. A bay or bayou off the river separated the pavilion area from the grove, and in this bay an island had been created on which was erected a tall swing. This was a steel frame tower, with six or eight cars suspended by heavy cables from the upper portion which could be made to revolve. The resulting centrifugal force would send the cars and their occupants increasingly higher and farther away from the tower as speed was increased. Some occupants after alighting from the cars had difficulty in following a straight course.

Many times during the afternoons and evenings screams could be heard emanating from this area, as directly opposite the circle swing was the roller coaster. The ups and downs of this device were somewhat wicked. Many will remember the routine of the mad dash. A car that would accommodate about a dozen people would arrive at the platform where a group was awaiting its punishment. When loaded an attendant would push the car for a short distance until it made contact with a heavy chain power drive that would pull the car up the forty-five degree incline until it reached the very summit of the structure, where the car and its occupants were abandoned to the laws of gravity. The severity of the drops that followed could be gauged by the screams of the women passengers. After a minute of maneuvering during which one lost all sense of direction, the car finally coasted into the home stretch and brakes were applied by an attendant perched on a high seat. On many occasions we have made this trip four or five times in succession without leaving the car.

Beginning at the circle swing and roller coaster and continuing northward was a sort of midway leading to the upper portion of the grove. Here would be found the shooting gallery, confection stands, photograph studios, theatre, sea wave, bowling alleys, merry-go-round, and a pony track. On the hill at the north side of the bay was a large band stand, where concerts were given on holidays and Sunday afternoons and evenings, often by the Verwiere Band under the direction of John L. Verwiere. Other prominent bands participated.

Hard by was the shoot-the-chutes, another device designed for thrills. Here a flat bottomed scow about twenty by seven feet in size would be pulled by a power drive to a platform about sixty feet above the water, where after receiving its human cargo the scow made a fast run down a one hundred fifty foot, thirty degree incline and would hit the water at a terrific speed. The attendant would maneuver the scow back to a dock, unload his passengers, hook on to the power drive and repeat the performance.

Along the river and to the east of the segregated amusement section was an area of many acres well adapted for camping purposes. In later years this area was acquired by the Fort Wayne Council Boy Scouts of America for a scout camp. Each scout troop was assigned a definite plot of land and on several of these lots permanent buildings of logs were erected. Your narrator spent many days as scoutmaster of Troop No. 10. This camp site was abandoned shortly after the closing of the park and a camp was established on Sylvan Lake at Rome City, Indiana, by the Fort Wayne Scout Council.

During the year 1897, a Robison Park Base Ball League was organized and a ball diamond was prepared on land to the west side of the park not far from the carriage entrance. Bleachers were erected and considerable crowds were attracted by the sport. Some of the ball clubs affiliated with the league were the Maroons, The Hibernarian Rifles, The Keystones, The Shamrocks, The Spy Runs, The Standards, The Wayne True Blues, The Broadway, and others. At the end of the

season, the pennant winning team would be presented with a gold medal by the park management. The first officers of the league were C. Moran, president; E. Kielsley, secretary; and E. Kintz, treasurer.

ACTIVITIES

To the late Louis Heilbroner of Fort Wayne is due a major portion of the credit for the success with which Robison Park was accepted by the public. It was he who planned the general programs of activities at the resort and the work allotted to him was detailed and arduous and required his services throughout the year. He brought to the park some of the finest talent available in the country at the time, and presented them to the public in outdoor performances usually without charge. He worked closely with the railroads and electric lines entering Fort Wayne in planning excursions to the city and the park. Thousands on thousands of people were brought here through his cooperative efforts from such points as Indianapolis, Toledo, Muncie, Lafayette, Logansport, Hillsdale, Grover Hill, Lima, Van Wert, Bluffton, and numerous other cities. At times there would be three or four excursions on one day. All were heavily laden and ran on special schedules at reduced fares.

Mr. Heilbroner worked closely with lodges, clubs, societies, churches, military groups, brotherhoods, farmers and other organizations in planning their outings, reunions, picnics, barbecues and special events, all to their individual likings. For years he booked all the attractions at the park theatre with a complete change of program each week. In short he was the front man, the park's general sales manager.

During his association with the park Mr. Heilbroner maintained a very complete and orderly scrap book pertaining not only to his work but to all the park activities as well. The book includes newspaper clippings, programs, handbills, tickets, notes and correspondence. And it was a happy coincidence when we were offered the use of this scrap book by Mrs. Lyman T. Rawles, the Curator of the Allen County-Fort Wayne Historical Society's Museum, in whose custody the book is kept.

Throughout the winter, Mr. Heilbroner would look from his desk many times a day to see a strange face at the window. Sometimes it was the blue shaven mug of a low comedian or the pinkblonde skin of a soubrette, a stately leading lady, or a black browed "heavy." Again, it would be a dog trainer, a boxer, a skirt dancer, a song and dance team, a trick bicyclist or a "child wonder."

In spite of the fact that Robison Park was on the circuit of continuous performance theatres in Chicago, St. Louis, Cincinnati and Milwaukee, he received hundreds of letters and personal calls from vaudeville performers. Some of these were amusing because of their self praise and the size of the salaries demanded. All requested one hundred fifty dollars per week to start with, then gracefully descended to fifty dollars and some of them went to anything they could get. The names of many of these had in past times adorned the bill boards as stars of the first magnitude now dwindled to a twinkle in vaudeville.

The result of this separation of wheat and chaff was the appearance at the park of the greatest variety and highest order of entertainment available. Fort Wayne was always considered a good show town, and talented showings were generally well patronized. At some time or other there appeared at the park theatre many of the great of the legitimate stage: operatic stars, leading dramatists, comedians, and magicians, and specialists in the field of vaudeville.

In August of 1897, Mr. Heilbronner introduced Edison's new Projectoscope considered at the time to be the greatest of all motion machines. These pictures of course were crude compared to the modern movie projectors. They flickered until they looked as if they had been taken in a downpour of rain. This was one of the earliest showings of movies in this area. Probably the first were shown at the Temple Theatre in Fort Wayne during the same year.

The great outdoor celebrations such as Independence Day observance and Labor Day picnics attracted the greater crowds. Included in these programs were prominent orators of the day, sporting events, special outdoor performances, barbecues, and fireworks that were publicized throughout a wide area by means of newspaper stories and handbills. There was a continuous schedule of picnics, reunions, and outings by organizations of all types. To give some idea of the scope of these events we list here chronologically a few months of these incidents taken from Mr. Heilbronner's schedules:

1896

- July 4—Grand Opening of the Park
- July 5—Tangent line (Findley, Fort Wayne and Western) Excursions
- July 12—Fort Wayne Rifles, Fort Wayne True Blues
- July 14—Third Presbyterian Church Sunday School
- July 15—Salem Reformed Church Sunday School
- July 19—Order of Eastern Stars; Jolly Sixty-five Club
- July 21—English Lutheran Church of the Redeemer Sunday School
- July 22—Fort Wayne Canton No. 17 I.O.O.F. P.M.
- July 23—Aged People's Home
- July 24—Simpson M. E. Church
- July 28—Sons of Columbus
- July 29—Trinity English Lutheran Church
- July 30—Knights of Pythias
- July 31—Calvary United Brethren Church
- Aug. 2—Pennsylvania R. R. Excursions from Lima, O., and Plymouth, Indiana
- Aug. 3—Fort Wayne Consolidated Railway Company Employees
- Aug. 4—Baptist Church Sunday School
- Aug. 5—Heidelberg Reformed Church Sunday School
- Aug. 6—Walther League of St. Paul's Church
- Aug. 7—Ladies Auxiliary of Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers
- Aug. 8—Fort Wayne Electric Corporation, Volunteer Firemen Annual Excursion
- Aug. 9—Excursions by Lake Erie and Western Railroad from Muncie and the Wabash from Logansport
- Aug. 12—Zion S. Bass Post G.A.R.
- Aug. 18—Bob-O-Link Club
- Aug. 19—Van Wert Lodge, Knights of Pythias
- Aug. 20—Young Men's Society Evangelical Lutheran Church.
Minnewa Council D. P. Indiana Order of Red Men
- Aug. 21—Caledonia Society
- Aug. 23—Wabash R.R. Excursion from Toledo, Ohio
- Aug. 23—Reunion of German Societies
- Aug. 25—Wayne Tent No. 54 K.T.O.M.; Order of Red Cross
- Sept. 7—Labor Day—8th Annual Celebration Trades and Labor Council
- Sept. 11—School Children's Outing
- Sept. 13—Lake Erie and Western and Findley, Fort Wayne and Western Railroad Excursions

Sept. 14—Fort Wayne Ministerial Association
 Sept. 16—Concert and Dance, first Regiment A.O.V.W. Band
 Sept. 18—Kekionga Council No. 93 National Union
 Sept. 23—Annual Excursion, Junior Order United American Mechanics
 Sept. 24—Farmers' Day
 Sept. 25—Aquatic Day
 Sept. 27—Lake Erie and Western and Findley, Fort Wayne and Western Railroad
 Excursions
 Sept. 29—Fort Wayne Hibernian Rifles

1897

June 2—Northern Indiana Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen
 June 3—Combined Walther Leagues of Fort Wayne
 June 4—Ancient Order of United Workmen
 Degree of Honor of Northern Indiana
 June 5—Christian Endeavor Society of Church of Christ
 June 8—Olive Club
 June 10—Young Women's Christian Association
 June 14—First Anniversary of Robison Park
 June 19—Excursion of the Hillsdale Athletic Club of Hillsdale, Mich.
 June 22—Ladies Society of Westminster Presbyterian Church
 June 21—Ladies Aid Society of Lakeside
 June 23—Royal Arcanum Day (20th Anniversary)
 June 24—Knights and Ladies of Columbia
 June 25—Baptist Church Sunday School
 June 26—Children's Day
 June 27—Lake Erie and Western Railroad Excursion from Indianapolis
 June 29—Ladies Auxiliary, Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers

THE CANOE CLUBS

Practically all boating on the river ceased to exist after the destruction of the feeder dam. However, within a few years after this accident two canoe clubs were organized and club houses erected on park property. They were known as the Riverview and Wayne canoe clubs, and they continued in their chosen sport until the park was terminated. To my knowledge these were the only private organizations ever tolerated on park property and from what I can gather, they were the first organized private canoe clubs in the State of Indiana.

Canoeing is at its best in shallow and swift waters and with the destruction of the feeder dam, the St. Joseph river above the dam became ideal canoe waters, and again some activity appeared on the river. I doubt if any group of young men ever enjoyed more clean and healthful sport than these seasoned canoeists and campers. It was my good fortune to become affiliated with the Riverview Canoe Club shortly after its organization.

We spent week ends and holidays on the river from April until around October of each year. Saturday nights found us camping on different sites along the river sometimes many miles above the park. The canoes were immaculate with carpet, back rests, cushions, flags and other refinements. The club houses and grounds were orderly and well groomed. The canoe club docks were kept afloat by many empty barrels held in position under the flooring, and after the spring thaws the docks would be placed in the river and removed in the late fall.

The park was opened to the public from June until late September and dur-

ing this period many exhibitions of canoeing skill were made before interested crowds on the river bluffs. Races and canoe tilting contests were on the agenda. In the latter affair two canoes faced each other with a man at the back end to paddle and steady the craft, while at the front end a man stood with a bamboo pole about twelve feet long on the end of which was a large pad resembling an oversize boxing glove. The object was to push the opponent off his precarious position, and if possible to upset the canoe and its occupants. Some of the contestants became quite proficient in being able to continue the contest for a short period of time before being dunked. All was not fun, however, for during the 1913 flood which inundated many sections of Fort Wayne, many of the members of the clubs and their canoes were pressed into service delivering supplies to marooned families and ferrying people across flooded areas. A number of the canoes were engaged in the 1916 pageant at Reservoir Park celebrating the 100th anniversary of Indiana's statehood.

As time passed members of the canoe clubs would make trips to more distant waters. Occasionally several members would team up and paddle down the St. Joseph river to Fort Wayne and thence down the Maumee River to Toledo, Ohio. On one occasion the writer in company with Mr. George Craigshead, a member of the club, traveled by canoe from Lake James, Indiana via Jimmerson Creek and the Fawn River to Constantine, Michigan, and then followed the St. Joseph River of Michigan through Bristol, Elkhart, South Bend, Niles and Berrien Springs to St. Joseph and Benton Harbor on Lake Michigan. We camped throughout the trip which required about ten days time. Other trips by canoe took us to such distant rivers as the Abitibi of Quebec Province, the Ottawa and St. Lawrence of Canada, the Flambeau and Fox of Wisconsin and the Vermillion and St. Croix of Minnesota and always without benefit of guide. But the training waters for these trips was the St. Joseph River at Robison Park.

CHANGES IN OWNERSHIP

As previously mentioned, electric railways were generally short lived. It is a fact, as the financial and statistical records will prove, that very little money was ever made by this method of transportation. In many instances operating expenses exceeded gross income. Stock and bond issues were out of all proportion to investment and income. Right of ways were costly, and with taxes on the increase the final accounting generally left an appalling picture. The result was always the same, hundreds of people invested their money in these ventures only to lose it. Companies went into receivership or joined in consolidations almost as fast as they came into existence. However, without this electric railway service Robison Park could not have existed, and during most of its lifetime, the line and park were owned and controlled by one and then another of the major interurban electric lines entering Fort Wayne. With this Tinkers to Evers to Chance game, the wonder is that the park survived as long as it did.

Almost two months to the day, following the formal opening of the park, (September 8th to be exact) the Fort Wayne Consolidated Railway Company filed application for receivership. Judge Edward O'Rourke appointed John H. Bass and M. Stanley Robison as co-receivers. Most of the company's bonds were held by Cleveland interests, and after considerable court action, the assets of the Consolidated were sold on September 27, 1899, to these Cleveland interests for the sum of \$1,092,000. From this transaction, the Fort Wayne Traction Company came into being and became the park's new owners.

In a little more than three years, title to the park property again changed when on December 11, 1902, the Cleveland interests sold the Fort Wayne Traction Company for the sum of \$2,000,444 to the Murdock Syndicate. Leaders in this organization were Henry C. Paul, Stephen B. Fleming, James, Samuel, and Charles Murdock of Lafayette, Indiana, George R. McCulloch of Muncie, Indiana and J. Levering Jones of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Within a period of five months after the Murdock group came into control of the Fort Wayne Traction Company, a new electric railway corporation came into being that was designed to control the Fort Wayne City Lines and Robison Park. This was the Fort Wayne, Logansport, Lafayette and Lima Traction Company, incorporated May 29, 1903. Less than a year later, the corporate name was changed to Fort Wayne and Wabash Valley Traction Company. They purchased the feeder canal paralleling the Robison Park line presumably for water rights and proposed extending this line northward into DeKalb County.

The Wabash Valley held ownership to the park until succeeded by the Fort Wayne and Northern Indiana Traction Company. This was a huge merger of nine traction lines and three power companies which took place February 25, 1911. This new venture operated at its peak a total of two hundred nine miles of rail. They were pioneers in the sale of light and power to cities and homes along the right of way. James M. Barrett of Fort Wayne was appointed corporation council and he later succeeded to the presidency of the system. This company was sold under foreclosure proceedings on December 20, 1919.

Its successor was the Indiana Service Corporation, organized by Samuel Insull, Midland Utilities Company, and formal transfer to the new company took place on April 28, 1920.

This transfer was Robison Park's death certificate.

NATURE REGAINS CONTROL

In the Spring of 1920, the Traction Company announced that the park would not open that year and set forth its plan to sell the land and equipment. The company had threatened for some time to junk the car line but no definite announcement was forthcoming until Mr. Robert M. Feustel, receiver for the Traction Company, made the following statement through the newspapers at that time:

"In answer to the many requests from patrons as to the closing of Robison Park, the Traction Company has had no real choice in the matter. It requires car equipment to give the service and the open cars were no longer in safe condition to operate. The company felt that the real protection to its patrons was the first consideration.

"Regarding the earning side of Robison Park, the story at Fort Wayne has been the same as all street railway parks over the country. Where a long haul was made over a route which was not used all the year round in regular service these parks have never paid.

"The year 1919 was the best in the history of the park with a total earnings of \$28,498 which was about 18 cents per car mile of operation. This cost barely paid the wages of trainmen and the actual power costs. It left nothing for car or track maintainance and other miscellaneous expenses.

"The figures show that 197,232 passengers were carried to the park in 1919; this number of passengers is less than the number carried in four average week days in the City of Fort Wayne at the present time."

Mr. Feustel went on to say, "That the double equipment necessary for this business is of course a burden we would not dare to put on the car riders, if we were to buy new summer equipment to replace the old equipment.

"The automobile has taken the place of the open car for the cooling ride in summer. This is evidenced by the fact that one-fifth of the people who visited the park last year rode in automobiles.

"While the company has known for years the park was not a paying venture they have continued the operation because of the sentiment of the public. Now there is no equipment to be had and that men are scarce even if the equipment was available, the operation is out of the question.

"The Company expects to cooperate in any movement to furnish service to parks close to the city where the regular equipment can be used. The land and equipment at the old park will be sold and the money devoted to the improvement of the city service."

With this official pronouncement, an era of wholesome amusement and recreation came to a close.

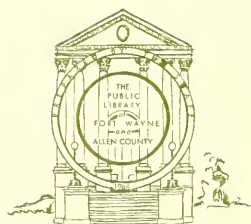
Soon after this publication many of the buildings and concessions at the park were dismantled or removed to the newly created Trier's Park (now West Swinney Park) in the west side of the City of Fort Wayne and the rail lines were scrapped.

In later years, some of the park land was acquired by the city of Fort Wayne for the site of a dam in the St. Joseph River for water supply purposes. This plan never materialized. Nature gradually took over possession of the site, tall grass, brush and trees now flourish where formerly were flower gardens and lawns. The old stone water tower stood for a considerable time after the park's closing, a nostalgic reminder to all of the pleasant days spent in the area. It too finally disappeared from the scene.

Much of the park site is now in the possession of Mr. Paul H. Holbrock who maintains a Palomino horse farm on a portion of the property. A few months ago, with permission of Mr. Hobrock, we visited the area, and the sight that met us was disheartening. So great was the change in the landscape that we were lost during much of the exploratory trip. The only identifying remains discovered were some brick supports of the main pavilion building. Several cement sections of the flooring of the electric railway depot were still in place and some traces of the dance hall are in evidence. The site of our former canoe club buildings is now occupied by trees thirty to forty feet in height. The bay is now free of water and occupied by acres of tall trees. That nature can eradicate man's handiwork in a comparatively short time is well exhibited here. It was difficult to imagine the former beauty of the area with its thousands of pleasure seekers milling about the grounds and we left the area feeling akin to one who had just visited a consecrated site.

Many persons of the older generation who were familiar with Robison Park and who by chance may read these lines will share with your narrator many nostalgic reminiscences.

Progress is relentless.



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