

## **The Nature Area**

### **AKA**

#### **Woodland Park, Park Hetzel Jr Woods, Nature Park, Brook Creek Park Woods, The Woods**

##### Public record:

The 43 acres of woods that act as a buffer between the northernmost residences of Brook Creek Neighborhood and the Public Works Yard and the BNSF railroad tracks were the site of Woodland Park, an amusement park started in 1910. Originally owned by the land developer, N.P. Dodge, who first developed the residential area north of 15th St., it was purchased by the Lawrence Amusement Company who built a roller coaster, ferris wheel, dance parlor, and other attractions.

At some time in the late 1920's or early 1930's, the amusement attractions fell into disuse and disrepair. The land was offered to the City of Lawrence for free, under the condition that it remain a park. The City turned down the offer because they had ideas to make use of it for industrial purposes. It's unclear how long the stalemate went on, but by the 1950's the natural growth of trees were becoming reestablished, and by the 1970's, some houses were being built on part of the land.

The owner at that time was Park Hetzel Jr., a longtime independent crane operator and house mover. He owned most of the land east of Haskell Ave. on the north and south side of 11th St. (except for the City Public Works Yard) including the now wooded nature area. This is when the Brook Creek Neighborhood Association (BCNA) President, Mark Taylor, precipitated the City buying the Nature Area. Douglas County had plans to build the new County Jail on the site, but Mark led the fight to stop that. The City then bought the land, and the Director of Parks & Recreation, Fred DeVictor, said "The intent was to keep it natural, which is what the neighbors wanted. It's a beautiful woodland". His quote is near the end of this Journal World article - <http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2010/mar/28/daisy-dozers-day-lore-surrounding-bygone-roller-co/>.

##### BCNA record:

The history of the intent to preserve the Brook Creek Woods as "The Nature Area" appears in several BCNA documents. Mark Taylor's recollections that appear in the April-May-July 2009 Brook Creek Breeze include the following:

"The jail would have been directly to the east [of his house] and would have taken up most of what we consider the Nature Area". He further relates "The land under consideration was privately owned at the time. The City purchased the land for a park". The article concludes "Mark described taking many walks through what is now the Nature Park with Fred DeVictor, then head of the City's Parks & Recreation Department, who decided that the City would keep the park in its natural state and not put in things like asphalt trails".

The next reference appears in the September 1998 Brook Creek Breeze, withing the minutes of the 12 May 1998 BCNA meeting. It reads

"John Sullivan presented a proposal to create a Langston Hughes Memorial Trail in the park, including color blazes on the trees . . . General consensus was no objection to the [trail] markers, but trails should not be cleared or widened . . . no benches or rest points allowed . . . and the agreement with the City must be in writing".

The City didn't put forth a written agreement still, and BCNA failed to follow through and push the issue. Then problems arose in 2012 when the Parks & Rec Supervisor took it upon himself to strike a deal with the K.U. Running Club (without informing or consulting with BCNA) to cut wide trails through "The Nature Area". Dickie Heckler and Beth Anne Mansur heard Mitch running a brush hog through the woods, and got him to stop. He agreed to meet with the neighbors to explain what he was up to. A number of us met with him on 19 November 2012, following which he attended the next BCNA meeting.

The BCNA meeting minutes from 12 December 2012 cover the discussion with Mitch Young, and Garrett Jones of the K.U. Running Club. Excerpts from those minutes read:

“17 members attending, plus guests, who were principally interested in the main agenda item, which was the new trail system being implemented in Brook Creek Park . . . Mitch Young, District #3 Supervisor of Lawrence Parks & Recreation, gave an overview . . . for permission to create the trail . . . A letter was read from Michael Almon . . . outlining a meeting of concerned neighbors . . . with Mitch Young on November the 19th. The meeting brought to light an historical agreement whereby the park was to remain a wilderness park and to have no human modifications . . . members of the BCNA recall with clarity the purchase of the additional 43 acres of wooded area in 1996. Apparently there was much talk at the time by both City and County Commissioners in regards to the leaving of this land as pristine wilderness . . . Fears were raised that the cutting of a trail . . . would lead to the unlawful incursion of ATVs, and that the cutting of trails violated the natural beauty . . . Mitch did wonder whether some mention of the historical significance of the park might be in keeping with local residents' interests. This idea was not widely embraced . . . It was resolved that a letter be drafted . . . outlining BCNA members' objection to the development of trails . . . Andrea Repinsky agreed to author the letter.”

Andrea Repinsky drafted a letter to the City Commission and staff for discussion at the BCNA February 2013 meeting. It appeared in her e-mail on 5 February 2013, with excerpts as follows:

“Many long-term residents of the Brook Creek Neighborhood are opposed to trail and other infrastructure development within the wooded portion of Brook Creek Park. These residents recall that when the land was purchased by the City, the City agreed to maintain it as a wilderness park . . . infrastructure such as trails, lighting, and benches would not be added to the park . . . Please include the neighborhood in discussions and decisions regarding park management . . . BCNA encourages City staff to create a written park management plan . . . A written plan could prevent any management 'surprises' in the future.”

The City didn't put forth a written agreement still, and BCNA failed to follow through and push the issue, until BCNA had a new slate of officers in 2015. BCNA decided to write another letter to the Director of Parks & Rec, Ernie Shaw, restating our desires. In addition to a written agreement for maintaining the wooded portion of Brook Creek Park as a nature area, other ideas were added to our request concerning general park maintenance. The letter was drafted on 7 October 2015, and a final version was mailed on 4 November 2015.

In response, the Parks & Rec Assistant Director, Mark Hecker, attended the BCNA meeting on 6 April 2016. The discussion covered the historical background of maintaining the woods as a natural area (though not in as much detail as above), as well as the list of additional maintenance ideas. It was stated again that we want a written agreement and plan that requires the woods be a wilderness park. Mark suggested we work up our ideas in detail, and then meet with Rowan Green, District #2 Supervisor of Lawrence Parks & Recreation to craft a written agreement. An Executive meeting was planned to do the initial policy and word crafting, and then to bring it to a general meeting for discussion and approval. The official 6 April BCNA minutes can be accessed at -

[https://brookcreeklawrence.files.wordpress.com/2014/01/bcna-meeting-minutes\\_almon\\_6apr16.pdf](https://brookcreeklawrence.files.wordpress.com/2014/01/bcna-meeting-minutes_almon_6apr16.pdf)