

Lewis Park

by Liz Beall Poelker

Part Two

As early as 1924 danger signs were posted on the ice which often grew to 6 inches in thickness during the winter. In 1953 the Commission decided not to issue permits for ice skating on the pond because they didn't want to be responsible for this activity without supervision. People continued to skate there without permission and in January 1954 pictures of skaters there appeared in the paper that “made our small pond appear as large as the Forest Park Lagoon.” A park policeman was assigned beginning in January 1956 to make sure the ice was safe for skating and to keep a bonfire burning during evening skating hours. During the next 19 years (in the days before global warming) ice skating on the Lewis Park pond was very popular when weather was favorable—in January 1957 there was an average of 150 skaters per day when the ice was good. In January 1962 there was so much snow that it formed a blanket which prevented the water from freezing so there was no skating that month. Usage reached a peak in January 1963 which saw 1210 people skating for a period of 17 days. Lewis Park continued to be a popular skating venue until the Ice Rink in Heman Park was opened in December 1974.



Fig. 5 Skaters on the pond, 1957

The size of the park was increased twice. In 1929 a lot on the north side of the park was purchased for \$3750 to provide access from that direction. In the same year once again Montague Punch offered property to the city--the lot at the corner of Delmar and Yale--for \$55,000 but the commission thought the price was too high. Over the years various other pieces of property to the east of the park were offered to the city but none was accepted. However, in 1954 the lot at Delmar and Yale was acquired through tax sale for \$1080.66. Nothing was done with the additional land for several years; its condition deteriorated so much that numerous complaints were made that it was dangerous and an eyesore. In 1957 considerable effort was expended by Park employees to remove dead and diseased trees and perform regular mowing; the lot was graded to fall from Yale westward. A ditch was dug to allow drainage from the lot into the pond in the older part of the park. In 1967 a volleyball court was built for neighborhood leagues; a few years later the volleyball posts were interfering with touch football and other fall activities so they were removed for the season and returned in the spring. In its early years as part of the park, the "upper lot" was not clearly separated from the nearest house and yard, leading to difficulties with trespassers. Since then a "jungle" of weeds and volunteer trees have created a distinct barrier.

"Ball playing" was a continual problem for many years. The space was considered by the City to be too small for organized sports. Nevertheless, boys would gather for impromptu games and balls would be hit into neighboring yards. Many altercations between players and homeowners ensued because of trespassing to retrieve balls and refusal to return balls when "captured". Since the problems arose because of the use of bats, "No Batting" signs were posted. However, ball-playing behavior continued unless a park employee was on site. During the same years suggestions were made several times that the former tennis court area would be an ideal location for a "tot lot", a playground equipped for younger children. In addition to their value as a playground for local children, the structures would make the area unsuitable for playing ball. Many discussions were conducted with the homeowners and parents of small children taking one side and the parents of ball players on the other side. In 1968 the "tot lot" faction won the battle and four complete pieces of playground equipment were installed along with three spring animals. The equipment was "rehabbed" in 1984 and a wooden play structure was added in 1987. (This is the equipment my daughter played on.) Entirely new playground

equipment was installed in 1998-99 and a resilient material was placed on the ground surface in 2000. (This is the equipment my grandson now plays on.)

An unusual feature of the Lewis Park landscape is the University Heights entrance marker near the intersection of Delmar Boulevard and Yale Avenue. **(Figure 6)** The subdivision first requested permission to erect a marker in 1961. The Park Commission was sharply divided on the subject with those opposed concerned that allowing a private group to situate a marker on public park land would set an undesirable precedent. However, when the City Council was approached, permission was given subject to a lease for a specific parcel of land. According to the terms of the lease, the University Heights subdivision would erect and maintain the marker which was to be built to specifications approved by the City. The lease specified a payment of \$1.00 for a period of 10 years to be automatically renewed for five year terms under the same conditions. The marker's construction was completed in 1964. In later years the lamp was converted from gas to electric and the words "National Historic District" were added to the sign. However, the marker remains today in essentially its original form with ornamental plantings carefully maintained by a subdivision resident.

Lewis has become a true neighborhood park. In addition to its enjoyment by local children and their care-givers, athletic runners, and meditative walkers, it has for several generations been a favored venue for snow sledding; the slope from Delmar northward is ideal for this purpose. The upper lot is used for impromptu soccer games and the park is often the scene of subdivision gatherings. Other use by neighbors is suggested by a comment from a Park Commissioner in 1966: "a lot of billing and cooing is going on in Lewis Park at night."

Lewis Park has been the subject of improvement plans at various times over the years. However, the Master Plan of 2013, revised with input from neighboring homeowners, contains the most extensive redevelopment of the park's nearly 100-year life. Phase 1, completed in 2015, included paving of entrance areas on both north and east, redesigning and repaving of all the walks within the park, erection of new park signs on Delmar and at the north entrance, and addition of notice boards at several points. The two deteriorating stairways from Delmar were removed and new stairs with an iron railing built. The pond was dredged for the first time in

many years and new floating side fountains added. New arrangements make the park's lighting totally supported by University City personnel and no longer dependent on Ameren. Phase 2 will provide completely new playground equipment and play surface beneath it along with a nature playground area.

Throughout its history Lewis Park has deserved its description by a Park Commissioner in 1982 as: “a most poetic pocket park in University City”.



Fig. 7 University Heights subdivision marker

Based on

- Minutes of the University City Park Commission (1923 to the present)
- Parks, Recreation and Forestry Department monthly reports (1947 to 2000)
- University Heights subdivision files lent by Mark Harvey, Trustee
- Conversation with Ewald Winker, University City Park Operations Superintendent
- Conversation with Linda Strominger, who grew up next to Lewis Park
- Photos from University City Public Library Archives
- Photos taken by Tom Poelker and Sue Rehkopf