

Lewis Park

by Liz Beall Poelker



Fig. 1 Lewis Park monument sign on south side of park (2015)

Perhaps you have noticed an impressive new sign for Lewis Park on Delmar Boulevard. This sign and one like it at the north entrance are part of a recent refurbishment of the Park. But this is not Lewis Park's first makeover. **(Figure 1)**

The property which is now Lewis Park was the westernmost part of city founder E. G. Lewis' homestead in University City. Lewis chose for his home Lots 1, 2 and 3 at the corner of Delmar and Yale because they were considered the most difficult to develop due to the unevenness of the terrain. His improvements included a 16-room house, gardens, tennis courts, swimming pool and a spring-fed lake.

In 1922 University City established a Park Commission with the task of acquiring and developing land for a series of parks. At that time the former Lewis property was owned by Montague Punch. Punch in 1923 offered to the Park Commission a plot of land described as “having a frontage of approximately two hundred feet on the North side of Delmar Avenue, and a depth of approximately five hundred and eighty feet” for \$25,000. The Commission thought the price was too high and turned down the offer. After several months of negotiation, and a petition signed by 67 citizens, the deal including an access path to Yale was concluded for \$17,500.

The park was named in honor of E. G. Lewis.

The next year the Park Commission authorized the building of four lawn tennis courts in the park. By the time they were completed 200 permits had already been sold. Tennis, including many regional tournaments, was played on those courts for more than 20 years. The courts were enlarged in 1935 for \$275 by moving the fences at the east and west ends. In the year 1940 the fees for tennis play were: \$5 for non-resident annual unlimited permit, \$3 for resident annual unlimited permit, \$1 for resident limited permit (Monday - Friday), \$.35 for daily play (Saturday, Sunday and holidays) and \$.25 for daily play (weekdays). **(Figure 2)**



Fig. 2 Tennis courts and pond (1930)

In 1946 clay was purchased for the tennis courts and a man with a team and plow was hired to plow, harrow and spread new clay on them. Plans for building three all-weather courts in the Park were considered as well as lights to permit nighttime play. Objections from the neighboring home owners were loud enough to scuttle all future plans. After the 1947 season, the Lewis Park courts were never used again for tennis. \$3000 was put into the 1950 budget for hard sur-

facing of the courts but in 1951 the fences were removed and the area plowed and seeded for grass. All that remains from the tennis courts is a stone retaining wall and chain-link fence at the northern edge of the play area.

After the tennis courts became inactive, badminton courts were set up. The park was particularly suited for badminton because the area is low with windbreak all around. Badminton enthusiasts were delighted with the facilities; they requested that lights be installed for night time play. If this were done, the Missouri Badminton Association was sure that Lewis Park would become the badminton capital of Missouri. The neighbors of the Park were vociferously opposed to this plan, so the suggestion was tabled indefinitely by the Park Commission in 1949.



Fig. 3 Playground and Pond: Same view as Fig. 2 in 2015

From the beginning the spring-fed lake (**Figure 3**) caused continual problems for the tennis courts. The lake was drained at least twice to deal with the situation. Drainage from Punch's pool on the adjacent property into the pond was a problem in 1927 and had to be referred to the city attorney. During the 1930's the city used WPA labor for many park projects, including the construction of a stone retaining wall for the Lewis Park pond. Thereafter, the wall was re-

pointed and the pond thoroughly cleaned several times. The pond was regularly stocked with fish and used for fishing lessons as part of the summertime playground programs. (In September 1971 one of the park commissioners reported that “there are still some lunkers in the pond.”) By 1960 the pond walls had deteriorated greatly and major repairs were necessary. A new concrete wall was built to support the WPA rock. The spring was located in the southeast corner and its water was filtered and piped into the pond. A new water supply line was established to the center of the pond where a base and a fountain were added. The refurbishment was so extensive that a re-dedication ceremony was held in May 1961. The fountain was enhanced a few years later so that it recycled the water continuously and operated on a timer.

The central fountain was totally revamped in 2013. Missing and damaged stones in the base were replaced with limestone from River des Peres; decorative fish were carved by Andre Buehler, a Parks Department employee, from limestone recovered from a replaced wall at City Hall.

As an added feature the pond now sports a sculpture entitled “Fish on a Bike” which has been on permanent loan from the Gateway Foundation since 2005. **(Figure 4)**



Fig. 4 “Fish on a Bike” sculpture in pond. Carved fish on fountain in background (2015)

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 had 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 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. “No Skating” signs were posted again in 1990 at the request of the police department. **(Figure 5)**



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, Montague Punch again 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 has 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 the former trespassing to retrieve balls and the latter refusing to return “captured” balls. 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

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