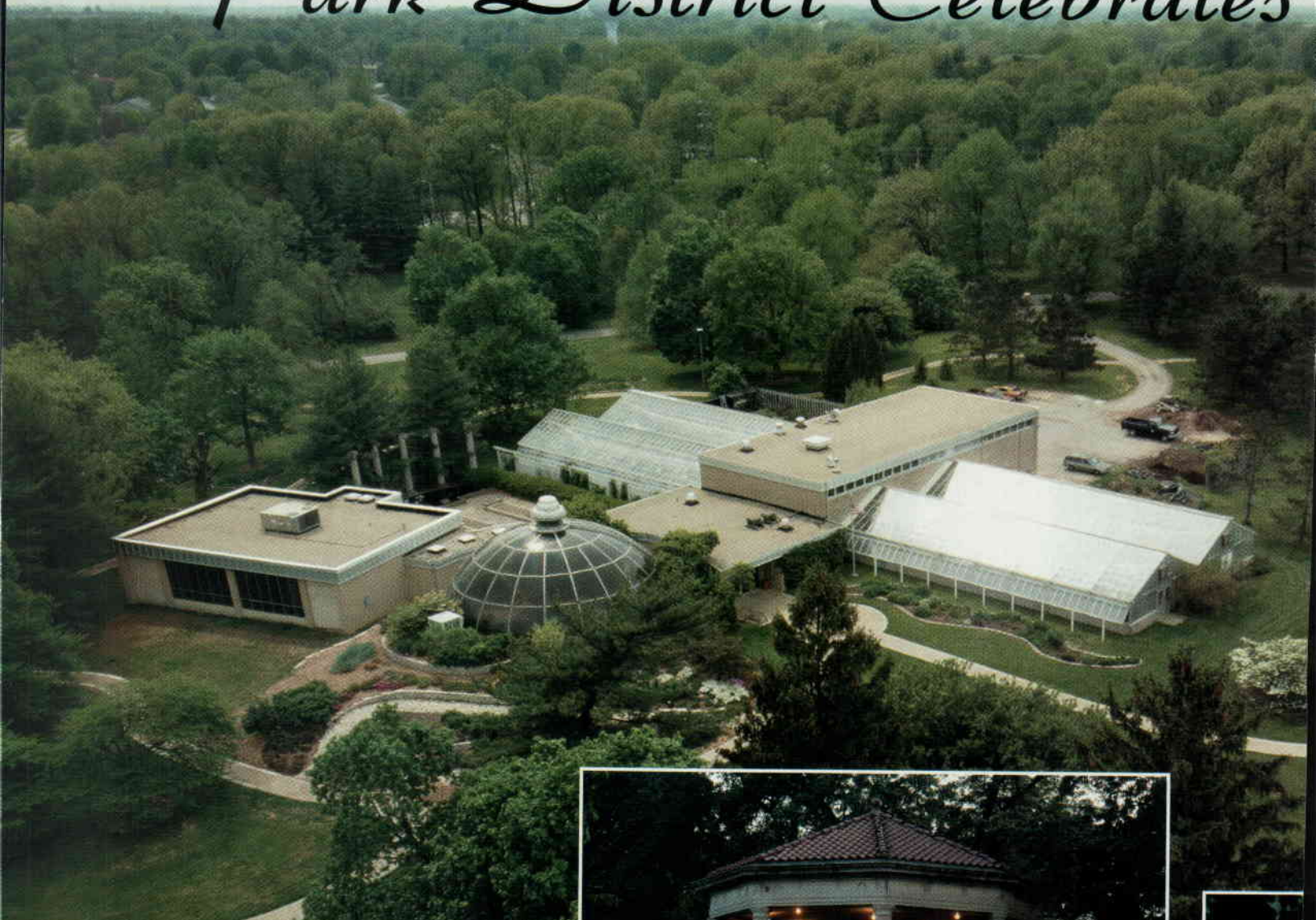


Park District Celebrates



100 Years

BY DAN NAUMOVICH
PHOTOS BY TERRY FARMER

The first annual report for the Springfield Park District and Pleasure Driveway, as the park district was known then, expressed the opinion that the townspeople were not interested in having a first-rate park system. Looking back during this, the 100-year anniversary of the park district, one can see that the citizens of Springfield quickly opened their eyes. We can see it today by strolling through Washington Park on a Sunday afternoon. And we can see it all the way back to 1900, in the stories set in the parks throughout the years.

Washington Park, the first in the district, is known today for the world-famous Rees Carillon and for its beautiful rose gardens. Before it was actually a park, it was thought by some to contain a sort of fountain of youth. Chief among these believers was Horace Leland, who thought so highly of the recuperative powers of the iron spring water, that he kept it on draught at his hotel. After his death, the spring was turned over for use by a herd of cows. They didn't fare any better and the spring was eventually abandoned.

In earlier times parks were quite different than the recreational parks we know today. White City Park featured "Coney Island type attractions" and moving pictures, then found a nice niche as a gambling den during Prohibition. Zoo Park was short on animals, but featured a roller coaster. The Velvet Coaster at that park covered several city blocks. The short-lived Mildred Park featured vaudeville acts and a theatre showing a scenic reproduction of the famous San Francisco earthquake and fire. Reservoir Park hit its stride as an ice-skating rink.

It wouldn't be long however, before corruption would hit the Springfield Park District. During the 1910 park board election, the first ward showed that 640 people had come to vote; yet 1,200 votes had been cast. "Whence came the other 600 ballots?" screamed the headlines. Whence indeed. Other wards discovered similar discrepancies. To ensure their reelection, and to get their hands on the cash from a bond referendum that was being voted on, the incumbent candidates did a little stuffing of the ballot box. Unfortunately for them, while they saw to it that their names were checked, they forgot to vote yea on the bond issue, which subsequently failed. After being discovered, they were ousted and the park district has been in good hands ever since.

This isn't to say that it has all been leisurely strolls and picnics. Springfield's Krous Park was easily one of the most colorful parks of its day, and not just in foliage season. The park's namesake, John Krous, operated a saloon just outside its borders. It was an immensely popular park. The highly spirited crowd would soon lose their pleasure time retreat however, when the citizens of West Springfield voted to revoke the saloon's liquor privileges. The bacchanalia thus dismissed, the park eventually vanished, as did John Krous.

Krous Park was also the setting for a story that could have come straight from a Wodehouse book. A group of locals with a taste for gambling, put together a book with the intent to separate a



Jacksonville Scot from his money. A cinder track for foot races had been laid in the park to interest the post good-time crowd. A race was planned, pitting a "watch factory speedster" against some heavy-footed rival. The Scot was fed inside information on both runners from separate sources. On race day, he laid down \$8,000 on the sure-thing watchmaker, who led throughout before stubbing his toe just shy of the finish line. The underdog crossed the finish line first and the Scot left the park, and his \$8,000 behind.

While all parks have at times provided a haven for cutthroats and ne'er-do-wells, the local park district has excelled in their mission to serve the upright citizen. At times, they have served them in ways unintended. The road in Lincoln Park that rises adjacent to the duck pond, into fourth street, was once known as "test hill." Speculative car buyers would bring new vehicles to the park for a test drive. The car would be set in high gear, and if it climbed the grade satisfactorily, the car was thought to be sound, and a purchase not unwise.

But more than for their own needs, the local citizens prized the parks for the benefits they afforded their children. No one went further to see that their children had a park in their neighborhood, than the people of Fairview (as the North End was once known). Fairview

Park was built on land leased from the C&IM Railroad and developed with money raised from a neighborhood association. It was only then that the railroad decided to sell the land to a housing developer.

In stepped Monsignor Alphonse 'Father Al' Bertman. The monsignor met with the railroad brass, and walked away with a deal that saved the park. Father Al's major bargaining chip was the hard-working character of his fellow Northenders. They were given a two-year option on the land, during which time they were to raise \$10,000 for its purchase. True to the neighborhood spirit, the first \$1,000 didn't come from a wealthy benefactor or through political graft. Rather, it came from the proceeds from a spaghetti dinner.

These are just a selected few of the stories that occurred within the city's parks. More stories are unfolding everyday, and will into the future. One hundred years from now, readers of Springfield Magazine may be given to wonder why it was once more popular to play golf with a little white ball, rather than with the standard Frisbee of the day. Saturday evening band concerts may make a comeback, although it's doubtful that jognastics ever will. Whatever changes may come, the tradition of the Springfield Park District will remain.

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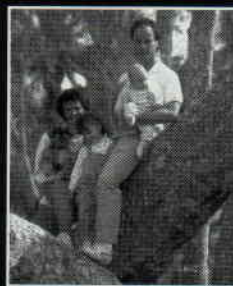
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