

RAMSEY COUNTY
History

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The burning of St. Paul's International Hotel in 1869. See article on "the men who ran with the machine," St. Paul's volunteer firemen, beginning on page 4. "The Mystery of the Leaking Lake" begins on page 18.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Ramsey County History is your magazine. Without readers who have an interest in St. Paul, Ramsey County and the surrounding area, this magazine cannot be a forum for ideas and discovery about the history of Ramsey County.

Because the Editorial Board wants to encourage and support writing about urban and rural history relating to St. Paul and Ramsey County, we invite you to send us any suggestions or ideas for future articles or topics to be presented in this magazine. Perhaps there is a favorite landmark, person, group or institution that you would like to know more about. Whether your question concerns the origin of a street name in St. Paul or the origin of a neighborhood in Ramsey County, let us know of your interest and desire to learn more. Please call or write our editor, our executive director or the Society's general office in Landmark Center.

—John M. Lindley, chairman, Editorial Board

The Mystery of the Leaking Lake: Phalen Park And Its Almost-100 Years of History

Tim Koran

Phalen Park, with its 292 acres of land and 222 acres of water that make up Lake Phalen itself, is one of the largest and most popular parks in St. Paul, a place where people skate, ski and ice-fish in the winter, swim, canoe, hike, bike during the summer.

It was the site of the 1986 Winter Carnival's world-famous ice palace and the Minnesota Boat Club holds its regattas there. Phalen Park's origins nearly a century ago are deeply rooted in the history of Ramsey County and St. Paul.

Called a rim lake because its basin was formed by rings of glacial hills, the lake is part of the Phalen-Keller-Gervais-Vadnais-Pleasant chain of lakes that are strung, like turquoise beads on a string, along the ancient bed of the pre-glacial St. Croix River. Melting blocks of glacial ice, embedded in gravel the glacier deposited in the old river bed during the last ice age,

were left behind as lakes when the glacier retreated 13,000 years ago.

Phalen Park is located in the northeast corner of St. Paul between Frost Avenue on the north, Maryland Avenue on the south, and East Shore Drive and Wheelock and Johnson Parkways on the east and west. Lake Phalen was named for Edward Phelan*, one of St. Paul's earliest settlers. A native of Ireland, Phelan was discharged from the army at Fort Snelling in 1839 and took up a claim that ran along the Mississippi River flats below the present-day Civic Center.

When the body of John Hays, another discharged army veteran who held the adjoining claim, was found floating in the Mississippi, Phelan was accused of murdering him and jailed at Prairie du Chien. Released for lack of evidence, Phelan returned to St. Paul and settled in the valley known as Swede Hollow. His new claim was on the creek flowing out of the lake that now bears his name, its spelling

**See also A Matter of Time, page 27*

changed to Phalen. In 1850 Phelan left St. Paul for the California gold fields, but apparently he was murdered along the way.

For the next fifty years, the land around Lake Phalen remained rich farmland. Then St. Paul was captured by an early "beautification" movement that was spreading across the country. It was a product of the prosperous "golden age" of the 1880s and 1890s when the establishment of city parks became important.

In 1872 Chicago landscape architect Horace W. H. Cleveland visited St. Paul, at the invitation of the St. Paul Common Council, and proposed the creation of a city-wide park system. In 1884 a board of park commissioners was formed and the move to establish several major parks was underway.

Phalen Park was one of them. In 1892 the acquisition of land around Lake Phalen got underway, but it was not until 1899 that 129½ acres of land were acquired through assessments, bonds and condemnation proceedings. The cost was \$22,000. On November 8, 1899, under the leadership of Commissioner of Parks Joseph Wheelock, Phalen Park was opened to the public.

Development of the park, however, depended upon how hard the city's park commissioners would work to promote it. By 1891 there were four members of the park board. In 1901 the board's membership was increased to five, but Wheelock, who presided over the park board for thirteen years until his death on May 9, 1906, was the guiding force behind the development of Phalen Park.

He was among the first to see the natural beauty of the lake, trees, flowers, shrubs and grasses. Wheelock Parkway, which links Como and Phalen parks, was named in his honor.

One of Wheelock's goals was the dredging of the shallow, weedy channels in the



Cross-country skiing at Phalen Park during the winter of 1989.



Lake Phalen's crowded beach in 1931. The lake's basin was formed by rings of glacial hills some 13,000 years ago.

Phalen-Keller-Gervais chain so that boats could tour the three lakes along a water promenade illuminated at night with electric lights strung along the channels. In 1901 the city purchased the land along the banks of the channels and dredging began immediately. A machine operated by the Wisconsin Central Railway Company began scooping out the weedy shallows on the south end of Lake Phalen and in the creek between Phalen and Keller Lake.

By 1903 other enhancements, such as a refreshment and music pavilion, were being added. Three years later, dredging of the channels was completed and boat rides through the three lakes began. About this time, the first municipal bathhouse and beach area were developed on the east side

of Lake Phalen, and a curious rumor began to circulate. Nails on the diving platform, it was whispered, were deteriorating, falling into the water and infecting bathers. In 1904 a dam was built to separate the lake into sections so that the entire lake wouldn't be contaminated.

In the meantime, pathways, roadways and bridges were constructed. A shelter was built for picnic parties. To help hold down the costs of mowing the grass, the city purchased a flock of sheep and a dog, and hired a sheep herder. In 1913 Wheelock suggested that an electric railway be built to carry the public to the park. Revenues from riders, he argued, would help pay for the railway, as well as support park improvements. But Wheelock died

that year—1906—and H. C. Topping took over his position.

Under Topping, minor improvements were made to the bathhouse and a sewer system was installed. Some bridges were built, a small shade tree nursery started and twelve children's swings placed in the picnic area. Between 1901 and 1910, grading and seeding of the drive that marks the Arcade Street entrance to the park was completed.

J. M. Clancy succeeded Topping. During his tenure, and with the help of Commissioner Bingham of St. Paul's Department of Playgrounds, Phalen Park became the site of the city's first municipal golf course, a nine-hole course. Clancy also played a pivotal role in a brief struggle to



Ice skating at Phalen Park in 1931. Winter, as well as summer, draws people to the park. St. Paul Daily News photo. Below, youngsters try ice fishing in a program sponsored by the American Legion in 1954.

locate the course at Phalen Park instead of Highland Park.

In 1912, with Lake Phalen's bathhouse growing more popular, St. Paul Mayor Herbert P. Keller asked city engineer Oscar Claussen to close up and seal the twenty-four-inch clay water pipe which, since 1882, had been used to convey drinking water to downtown St. Paul. This ended Lake Phalen's role as a supplier of the city's water. In 1913 the pipe was sealed with a porous material and for the next forty-odd years people forgot about it. In the 1950s, it figured in the mystery of the leaking lake.

With the sealing of the pipe, the bathhouse could be used more extensively; in 1914 alone, more than 500,000 people paid to use the facility. The boat launches and the pavilion, with its outdoor amphitheater, also were well patronized by the public.

By 1917, however, vandalism in the park was getting out-of-hand and eventually a petition signed by 120 property owners reached Commissioner Clancy's desk. It stated that after-hours parties were immoral and obscene, that drunken partygoers were filtering into the surrounding neighborhoods and that property values were being depressed. The result was that the park board hired more park patrols and

the St. Paul police arrested anyone found in the park after hours.

About this time, the bathhouse and beach area were moved from the east to the west side of the lake. A new, sandy beach was created by covering the ice with sand which then sank to the bottom as the ice melted in the spring. A driveway and park-

"Then St. Paul was captured by an early 'beautification' movement when the establishment of city parks became important."

ing lot were constructed around the bandstand and a new golf clubhouse and additional boat launches were built. In 1919 a new playfield was constructed near the picnic pavilion and two tennis courts and a ballfield were erected on the south side of the park.

H. C. Wenzel became commissioner in 1920 and the history of Phalen Park continued to be one of continual change, improvement, and expansion to keep pace with the park's growing popularity and the changing interests of its visitors. Wenzel's first step was to grade and pave a road running around the southeast section of the park, a project finally completed by the end of the decade.



There was an explosion of new building in 1923 when Wenzel ordered the most extensive improvements since the park was established. They included construction of a new bandstand, refreshment stand, parking lots, water tower, warming house at the athletic field and footpaths around the lake. A Kasota stone gateway was built to mark the entrance to the park from Wheelock Parkway.

During the next two years, the old streetcar station refectory, where all the park projects were mounted, was remodeled. In 1926 four new tennis courts were built, the old canoe docks were demolished



A wooden water wagon at Phalen Park in 1930. Wagons like these helped park attendants keep the grass green during the dry years of the 1930s.

and new docks built and a game refuge for mallard ducks, Canadian geese, snow geese and other migratory birds was created at adjacent Round Lake. A year later, nine more holes were added to the golf course and the Wacquah Canoe Club held its first boat tour.

In 1930 Clyde R. May took over as commissioner of parks and playgrounds. The next year, twenty-seven elm trees were planted by the Minnesota Federation of Women's Clubs as a memorial to George Washington. A small nursery was begun that developed into a woodland grove.

Fred Truax, who succeeded May in 1932, pushed for modifying the golf course so that the first tee began and ended at the clubhouse. Three years later, a fire destroyed the canoe and boat docks, but the 300 privately-owned canoes and forty-five city-owned rowboats were spared.

By this time, the Depression of the 1930s had settled down on St. Paul and money for any improvements was scarce until creation of the federal government's Works Progress Administration. With the help of WPA engineers and laborers, the bathhouse and its shelter, the refectory



Beads on a string. Beginning in 1901, channels were dredged to connect the Phalen-Keller-Gervais chain of lakes.

building, boat docks, diving tower and stone stairs all were rebuilt.

On June 5, 1937, a memorial to the Civilian Conservation Corps (another Depression-era federal project) was erected in Phalen Park—an idea of Edward

Mueller's to honor CCC workers who lost their lives while protecting the United States' natural resources. The memorial, which still stands, was composed of stones from CCC camps throughout the country where an enrollee had been killed. Presi-



The Phalen Park Golf Course around 1920. This was St. Paul's first municipal golf course. C. P. Gibson photograph. A launch (below), plied the lake in the 1930s but no longer operates.

dent Franklin Roosevelt sent a stone slab from the White House.

Perhaps the most useful of the WPA projects was construction of a dam between Phalen and Keller lakes that helped control the water levels in the chain of lakes by releasing water in the spring and retaining it in the fall. However, dredging

“Nails on the diving board, it was whispered, were deteriorating, falling into the water and infecting bathers.”

of Lake Phalen in the 1920s had removed the clay covering that protected the lake's soft, muddy bottom and this apparently caused a yearly rise and fall of the water level. In 1942 Lake Phalen flooded its banks, while in other years the water level remained normal.

During those World War II years and the late 1940s and early 1950s, few improvements were made. Then, in the early 1950s, the lake seemed to be leaking, its



water level decreasing at a rate of two feet, or 750 million gallons of water a year, even though the WPA dam was releasing water.

People were concerned. Ramsey County engineer Deane Anklan had three pumping facilities built that sent 3,000 gallons of water per minute into the lake. No success. Better pumps were installed, more water pumped. Nothing. The lake still leaked.

“By 1917, vandalism in the park was getting out-of-hand. A petition . . . stated that after hours parties were immoral and obscene”

Anklan next used fluorescent dye tests to find the source of the leak. Results revealed that the diminishing water followed the same course as the old Phalen Creek* and reappeared near Hamm’s Brewery in Swede Hollow where Edward Phelan once had lived. This sent Anklan back to the official records where he discovered the 1913 sealing of the pipe that had sent water into downtown St. Paul.

During the winter of 1959–1960, Anklan ordered workers to drill 12,800 holes in the lake bottom and fill them with eighty tons of a volcanic ash (bentonite) that expands in water. It was a material that was used successfully in the also-leaking Como Lake in the winter of 1957–1958.

Lake Phalen still dropped—six feet in 1960. Four new pumps were installed to deliver 9,000 gallons of water per minute. In addition, the WPA dam was left open. Still the lake stayed below its normal water level. Next, a 2,000-foot dike was built across the south end of the lake. Only 60 percent of the leak was controlled. More bentonite was rammed into the lake bottom and more water pumped into the lake. Still it leaked.

In 1967 the dike was torn out and a new dike built. The following year, a ninety-two-inch storm sewer was installed between Phalen and Wakerfield Lake, a mile away, and 96,000 gallons of water per minute were pumped. Finally, success.

This solved the problem of the dropping

*The creek now runs underground through a culvert.



Band concert in the park. Family groups gather (above) in 1925 to listen to music at the new bandstand built in 1923. C. P. Gibson photograph. A diver (below) joins the 1932 swimming races. The diving tower probably was a later version of the 1903 platform with the deteriorating nails.



water level but not the mystery of why it was dropping. Best guesses were that the dredging operations in the 1920s that cut

had allowed lake water to drain into the 100-foot-thick Jordan sandstone beneath it and escape into the Mississippi through the porous seal on the 1882 pipe.

Pile driver at work on a dam on Keller Creek, at the north end of Lake Phalen, in 1940. The Phalen Park pavilion (below) was built in the early 1930s. Phalen Park was opened to the public on November 8, 1899, under the leadership of Joseph A. Wheelock, who was among the first to sense the potential beauty of the lake and its surrounding trees, flowers and shrubs (bottom photograph).



During this troubled period, such organizations as the Phalen Park Improvement Association (PPIA), formed in 1957, and the Phalen Area Community Council (PACC), formed in 1965, worked for the preservation and improvement of the lake and the park. Members helped plan community programs and plant trees, they took civic groups to the park and they helped find grants and loans to improve the park and fight vandalism.

In 1968 the two-story diving platform was replaced by a pontoon platform; a year later, bike paths around the lake were paved. In 1972 limestone walls, bridges and stairs were built to stop the erosion that had washed out bike and pedestrian trails. More trees were planted.

Then, in 1973, the lake faced a new threat. After more than two years of research and testing, chemist William Ginther found that Lake Phalen was dying because of storm sewer run-off that provided nutrients for lake algae. As the algae died and decomposed, oxygen in the water was used up, a loss that over a period of ten to fifteen years would destroy the lake's ability to support life. The condition is difficult to reverse. Since Phalen was the only city lake that could support game fish, it was clear that action was needed. A new sewer system was installed on East Shore Drive, across from the lake.

The biggest year, in fifty years, for park



The famous ice palace erected at Lake Phalen in 1986 as part of the St. Paul Winter Carnival's 100th anniversary celebration.

improvements was 1974 when Mayor Lawrence Cohen supported a million dollar program for the park. It was funded by a twenty-year federal loan to the city of St. Paul. Under this program, old buildings were demolished and replaced with a new but smaller bathhouse, a golf clubhouse, fishing pier, a bridge, six parking lots, an amphitheater and picnic pavilion.

The golf course was rearranged, a sewer project was launched by the Metropolitan Sewer Board, and a mile of footpaths was created around Round Lake. Traffic on Wheelock Parkway was rerouted so the parkway could be rebuilt and a new Phalen Drive added. The athletic field was moved to the other side of the golf course on Wheelock Parkway.

Although few improvements were needed between 1975 and 1983, a \$1 million grant from the Environmental Protec-

tion Agency supported restoration of the lakes in the Phalen-Keller-Gervais chain. Because of this, no gasoline-propelled boats are allowed on the lake, except for those of the rescue squads, but Winter Carnival car races are held on the ice.

However, the additional parking lots attracted drug peddlers and beer parties, and vandalism was again on the rise until strenuous efforts on the part of the St. Paul police brought some control over drug pushing and violence. Park patrols helped keep an eye out for vandals and other potential disturbers of the peace.

Phalen Park today, almost 100 years after the first attempts to acquire the land and lake for public use, is a family park that attracts all ages and acts as a gateway to the chain of five lakes that extend north into Ramsey County.

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A fully annotated and footnoted copy of this article in manuscript form is available in the Ramsey County Historical Society office, 323 Landmark Center, St. Paul.

This article is based on the term paper Tim Koran wrote as a student at the University of St. Thomas, St. Paul. He now is personnel coordinator for a temporary help agency in St. Paul.



Before the days of boom boxes, canoeists at Phalen Park in the 1920s brought along their victrolas to listen to music. For a history of the park and of Lake Phalen, see the article beginning on page 18.

R.C.H.S.
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