

History of Fayetteville City (Wilson) Park

By: J. B. Hogan

For over one hundred years, Fayetteville's City Park, officially named Wilson Park, has provided citizens with a pleasant recreational area where they and their families could picnic, play, and swim. Although the park is no doubt familiar to most locals, its history may not be quite as well known.

Fortunately, the history of City Park falls into three distinct phases that can be identified through its ownership and management. As early as 1906, the park was privately owned, maintained, and operated by A. L. Trent, a very benevolent and civic-minded man.

In the mid-1920s, a group of local businessmen – led by Dr. Noah Drake of Drake Field fame – purchased the park from Mr. Trent. Dr. Drake and his fellow investors formed the City Park Company and that organization ran the park – building the first permanent swimming pool and several stone cottages (one of which still stands today) – until the 1940s.

The city of Fayetteville purchased City Park from Dr. Drake – who had bought out the other investors – in late 1944 and has owned it ever since. Under municipal ownership, the park was expanded greatly and the tennis courts and ball field,¹ among other improvements, were added over the years.

What we have today, though, is owed to a very large degree to the original owner of the city park area: A. L. Trent. According to W. S. Campbell, in his book *One Hundred Years of Fayetteville, 1828-1928*, Trent had been a cashier at the old Washington County Bank before becoming an insurance man.² He was also a practicing Methodist and a member of the Chamber of Commerce.³

In the early years of the twentieth century, Trent had purchased the land in and around the original City Park. Through his own good will he provided Fayetteville with a place for individuals and families to gather in “a place of beauty”⁴ and in good weather swim and boat in what was then called Trent’s Pond.⁵



City Park and Trent’s Pond with Old Main in background, Photo from City of Fayetteville

In 1908, an anonymous writer going by the name “City Park Poet” penned a tribute to the natural beauty of this new addition to Fayetteville. In the poem “Athens of Arkansas,” the author tells the audience that “By being more friendly with Nature and Art,” we “have added to town a beautiful park” and:

To sum it all up – to come to the test,
 There's but one addition that we can call best,
 The one by Mt. Nord through Englewood shade,
 The place of all places that Nature has made,
 The place she has made and sealed with her mark
 The beautiful place we call CITY PARK.⁶

Besides anonymous poetic renderings of the park's fine qualities, A. L. Trent himself (there is no evidence that he was the City Park Poet, too) liked to write occasional letters to the newspaper touting his park and its facilities.

On October 21, 1916, over a month after the park had closed for the season, Trent wrote a letter printed in the *Fayetteville Daily*. He thanked the public for their "patronage" and said he "hoped to make the Park a still more inviting place." To do so, however, he noted that it was "entirely beyond" his "means or ability to do so."

Lobbying for the city to take ownership of the park ("of course the city should own the park"), Trent reminded readers that three years before he had offered the park and the springs, two one-half acre deeds, to the city if they would agree to improve the property. With no response to his offer, he continued maintaining the park by himself.

Trent stressed in the letter that the park, if maintained at a high level and advertised throughout the region, could bring in visitors from Texas, Missouri and steal some of the thunder of other "Summer Resort" destinations like Winslow and Eureka Springs.

The following summer, Trent wrote another letter to the paper that provides a glimpse into the life of our city nearly a century ago. Trent's purpose was to announce an increase in the price of swimming at City Park to 25 cents whether swimmers provided their own suit or not – the same price as charged in area towns he had visited like Muskogee, Oklahoma and Ft. Smith.⁷

Trent reminded his customers that previously he had offered a 5 cent reduction in the price if they brought their own swim suit. Morning short swims ("before breakfast") would

remain 10 cents, but patrons were asked to be out of the water by “7 o’clock” so that “the boy who waits on them can go to breakfast too.”⁸



Trent's Pond, Photo from City of Fayetteville

By the early 1920s and on into the middle of the new decade, City Park was beginning to enter what might be called a transitional phase. A. L. Trent was still its owner and manager, but other voices with other plans for the park were being heard. In April of 1923, for example, it was suggested that the city of Fayetteville buy the park. An unidentified “prominent citizen” said that because the town was “growing rapidly” it could not expect “private individuals” (meaning A. L. Trent) to maintain this “valuable ground as a public playground free of charge.”⁹

A \$40,000 bond investment, it was suggested, would provide “20 acres of land” (including almost 17 acres to the west of the original park known as Wilson’s Pasture for use as a tourist camp) that would give Fayetteville a park “worthy of its name” and one “where the tourist public may be made comfortable and happy.”¹⁰

The same “prominent citizen” mentioned above advocated municipal intervention because this “beautiful hill-side which has been compared favorably by travelers in Athens to the most beautiful natural amphitheatre in the world must be cut up into building lots unless Fayetteville does something to save it.”¹¹

Early the following year, 1924, the Fayetteville Chamber of Commerce met to further plans for a tourist park. They proposed that Wilson Pasture, which it was believed could be purchased for \$10,000, “be utilized for an auto park.” By the end of March 1924, the Chamber had begun a Tourist Camp fund that, with a goal of raising \$1500, would finance an auto park to “lure tourists from all sections of the country.”¹² By April 2, the paper reported that the camp had had its first guests and they “Like it.”¹³

Even though the auto park was already in use, by mid-April the Tourist Camp fund drive was still in process and had taken in \$1,067 although about another \$500 was still needed to reach the earlier-announced goal.¹⁴

Near the end of the month, the paper reported that internationally renowned author, historian and philosopher Will Durant, on a visit to Fayetteville “several years” before, had said that the natural amphitheatre just beyond City Park “rivalled that at Athens.” Durant’s comment may be one of the original sources for the frequent comparisons between Fayetteville and Athens so often repeated by well-meaning local boosters during this optimistic era.¹⁵

On May 1, 1924, the Chamber of Commerce suggested what they believed should be the next big improvement to City Park. “Swimming Pool Urged for City By C. of C. Boosters” a page one story in the *Fayetteville Daily Democrat* reported. “A concrete swimming pool,” W. F. D. Batjer, Secretary of the COC said, could be built for an estimated \$3000 and would be “a great drawing card for tourists and ... vacationers.”

Despite Batjer's optimistic projections, plans for a "concrete" swimming pool in City Park did not begin to firm up until March of 1926. A. L. Trent, still owner and manager of the park, offered to build a pool and continue to maintain the park free if the city would provide free water. In a letter to the *Democrat*, Trent was responding to the "considerable agitation" the city had gone through in regard to "buying a site for park grounds, tourist camp, etc." These efforts by the city, Trent noted, had seemingly "failed."¹⁶

Later in the month, however, a solution was found. With Dr. Noah F. Drake as its head, a private company was formed by local stockholders (including Drake and Trent, among more than forty others) with the goal of purchasing City Park and building a swimming pool there.¹⁷ City Park Company was the name of the new ownership group and the by the end of March 1926 some \$14,706 in stocks had been purchased by investors.¹⁸



Dr. Noah F. Drake, courtesy of University of Arkansas Libraries, Special Collections

On April 3, 1926 it was announced in the *Democrat* that City Park had been purchased from A. L. Trent for \$8500 (the official date of the sale would be August 6, 1926¹⁹). Work on the proposed new pool and a playground for children was to begin in ten days.

The pool was to be located south of Trent's Pond, which it was said would be preserved (it was not).²⁰ There were also plans to build a band shell by the pool where musical shows could be performed for patrons who sat in chairs or on blankets and watched the entertainment from above on the rolling hill above the pool parking lot.

Once the announcement of a new swimming pool had been made, a contest was held to find a name for the park itself. On April 14, the *Democrat* reported that "City Park" was the name selected for City Park. Two ladies, Miss Vera Drake and Mrs. Fred Armstrong split the \$10 contest prize for their shared suggestion. Not quite two weeks later, April 27, the paper noted that ground had been broken on the new swimming pool.

Just over a year later, on May 1, 1927, the pool was opened to the public. The *Democrat* reported that nearly 1,000 people attended the opening of City Park with close to 200 of them availing themselves "of swimming privileges." The pool was described as being 60 by 160 feet in size and that it and other improvements to the park had cost almost \$40,000.

The tourist camp had also been expanded and now consisted of six small houses and three stone cottages.²¹ Tourist camp capacity was estimated as "150 cars or 450 people." A. L. Trent's son-in-law and daughter, Mr. and Mrs. Keith Carson, would reside in the park and be in charge of "grounds, tourist camp and concessions." Frank Barr, well known bandleader in town, was the "general park director."²²

In the summer of 1928, the tourist camp did landmark business. From June 15 until the first week of September some 4500 tourists and 937 cars were listed in the record books of the park.²³



Wilson Park pool 1940s – courtesy University of Arkansas Libraries, Special Collections

For the next fifteen years, City Park remained under the aegis of the privately owned City Park Company but there was a continual, low level discussion concerning the appropriateness of municipal ownership of the park. In October 1933, Dr. Drake even offered to sell City Park to the city of Fayetteville for \$20,000 but in those cash-strapped days of the Great Depression the offer went unanswered.²⁴ Finally, during the difficult days of World War II, city ownership moved closer to reality.

In May of 1942, the City Park Company was dissolved with Dr. Drake taking sole ownership of City Park.²⁵ About two and one-half years later, in December of 1944, the city finally agreed to buy City Park from Dr. Drake for \$16,000.²⁶ City Park was now officially owned by the government of Fayetteville and it remains so today.

For years, the large tract of land west of City Park proper, known as Wilson's Pasture after the prominent local family that owned it, at times had been rented for tourist camp parking

and other recreational uses. In mid-1945, with Victory in Europe assured and hopes of a Pacific victory in the offing, an influx of college-bound veterans began arriving in town to attend the University of Arkansas on the GI Bill.

Fayetteville Mayor George T. Sanders and the city council initiated a program that allowed returning vets to park trailers throughout the grounds of City Park for an affordable fee while going to school or readjusting to civilian life. Although opposed by some, the trailer program brought in needed income to less than overflowing municipal coffers.

In the summer of 1945 Charles Morrow Wilson, third generation scion of the highly regarded Wilson clan and an internationally known and respected author, offered to sell Wilson's Pasture to the city on the condition that the park be named in memory of his mother Mattie Morrow Wilson.²⁷ Wilson envisioned the new, expanded park as a "beautiful and valuable"²⁸ place for local residents to enjoy an undeveloped natural site in the heart of Fayetteville.

On August 5, 1946, the *Northwest Arkansas Times* reported that the city would purchase the 16 7/8 acre tract from Wilson. The price of the land to the city was \$15, 500 (the actual sale price was \$22,500, minus the author's donation of \$7,000).²⁹ Twelve days later, on August 17, it was announced that the contract for the land was signed. City Park now encompassed 22 acres in all.³⁰



Charles Morrow Wilson – courtesy of University of Arkansas Libraries, Special Collections

Despite Charles Morrow Wilson's presumed verbal agreement between himself and the city of Fayetteville to keep the newly purchased area "an ornamental city park," on August 20 Mayor Sanders announced in the *Times* that veteran's trailers could now be parked not just in the old City Park area but in the new section as well.³¹

A few months later, in the fall of 1946, Mrs. Roberta Fulbright, owner of the *Northwest Arkansas Times*, wrote in her "As I See It" column that the city should honor A. L. Trent, the man who had founded City Park. Mrs. Fulbright proposed that a day in October be set aside as A. L. Trent day.³² Mrs. Fulbright's suggestion did not come to fruition, but her idea remains a valid one right up to the present day.

From December 1947 through the spring of 1949 a controversial proposal to build a Boy's Club in City Park caused a fair amount of rancor between proponents and opponents of the plan. On December 15, 1947, the *Times* reported: "City Park Site Accepted For New Boys Club Building."

Almost from the beginning, the proposal had its detractors but by late March 1948, plans had been made to start work on the new Boy's Club.³³ W. W. Higgins, director of the Boy's Club board estimated that the building would cost around \$35,000 and would be built "just north of the present swimming pool,"³⁴ although the recommended location was shortly changed to the west end of the park, the area formerly known as Wilson's Pasture and recently purchased from Charles Morrow Wilson.

By the end of the year, opposition to the plan had grown to such proportions that Wilson himself, who was also upset by trailers being allowed in the area he had sold to the city, wrote a letter of protest to the *Times*. The new Boy's Club building, Wilson said, would grossly violate

the “gentleman’s agreement” he had made with the city to ensure that City Park (especially the western part that he had sold to them) would “be used as an ornamental public park for the benefit and good of the general public of Fayetteville.”³⁵

In the January 5, 1949 *Times*, proponents of the Boy’s Club plan began to retreat from their position. Protesters sensitive to Charles Morrow Wilson’s point of view, suggested that the Boy’s Club building be built in the northeast section of the park as had originally been planned, and not on the west side.

That same day, Mrs. Fulbright devoted her “As I See It” column to the controversy and suggested finding another place for the Boy’s Club outside of City Park altogether. Wilson was so annoyed by the whole affair that the next day he offered to buy back “the land in question (the old Wilson’s Pasture) in its entirety at the amount of money received by me from the city.”³⁶

Fortunately, the election of Admiral Powell Rhea as mayor of Fayetteville in 1949 helped bring the Boy’s Club controversy to an end. Rhea, while serving on the Boy’s Club executive board, had opposed building the new club in Wilson Park and shortly after he assumed office it was also reported that the trailers in City Park would not be replaced.³⁷ A little over a year later, in July 1950, the Fayetteville city council voted to remove the trailers by June 1951.³⁸ With the trailers on the way out and the Boy’s Club plan no longer viable both controversies simply faded away.

By January 1951, some four and one-half years after his sale of Wilson’s Pasture, Charles Morrow Wilson’s desire to have City Park renamed for his mother had still not been fulfilled. Alderman Hugh Kincaid addressed the council on January 29 and requested City Park be renamed Wilson Park. The council voted to leave the name as City Park but approved a plan to

erect a plaque to the people who expanded it and then “await the reaction of the public.”³⁹ Neither the plaque nor a public reaction to it seems to have been forthcoming.

For several years there had been plans to build tennis courts in City Park and in 1951, the courts – “long under construction” – were finally opened on August 18.⁴⁰ Just a few days later, the old tourist cabins (seven in all), which had slowly fallen into decline over the years, were sold to local entrepreneur H. O. Bailey for a total of \$852. Bailey bought the cabins to use in opening his own tourist camp on Highway 71 south of town.⁴¹

As for the Boy’s Club, in the fall of 1951 the *Times* reported that the club would move temporarily to the White Chapel Assembly of God Church building on south College.⁴² The church was located just south of the Rock Street intersection with Archibald Yell Boulevard (it is currently a vacant lot). By the mid-1950s, the Boy’s Club used the facilities of the National Guard Armory before a new building was erected at Harmon Field in the late 1950s.

With regard to the long-delayed renaming of City Park to Wilson Park, the next attempt to do so was registered in a *Times* editorial of August 22, 1960. With the recent addition of Walker Park in south Fayetteville, the writer observed, it was now “a good time to name the park in the north section of the city, now called City Park. And the name it should have is Wilson Park.” The editorialist went on to give details of the 1946 sale of Wilson’s Pasture and concluded that the renaming “would be a gesture of recognition to Charles Morrow Wilson and the family which has so long lived in this area.”

Despite the several attempts and exhortations to rename City Park, no official change was made. The split or simultaneous usage of the two names is apparent in city of maps of the era. The 1962 Fayetteville city map lists City Park but four years later the 1966 version uses Wilson Park. In keeping with the dual names, the 1966 phone book uses City Park.

In the latter 1960s, Fayetteville took an important step with regard to its growing park system. The city council proposed and adopted Ordinance #1526 which created the Department of Parks and Recreation. Some sixty years after A. L. Trent had privately provided the city a public park, municipal management of all parks in town was complete.⁴³

June 16, 1969, over twenty years after Charles Morrow Wilson's sale and gift of Wilson's Pasture to the city of Fayetteville, City Park was finally, and officially, renamed Wilson Park in honor of the writer's mother Mattie Morrow Wilson. Mayor Garland Melton, Jr. suggested at a city council meeting that City Manager Wesley Howe "be given the latitude to have the proper inscription placed on a plaque formally naming Wilson Park."⁴⁴

On June 30, 1969, the *Times* ran a laudatory editorial on the dedication and renaming of the city's flagship park. And while the name change was and is official, even today perhaps as many people still refer to our main in-town recreation area as City Park as those who call it Wilson Park. Traditions, even when they are just names, are slow to change or die out.

End Notes

¹The ballfield in City Park opened in 1955 as the original home of the Sherman Lollar Little League, as well as other youth baseball leagues. With the opening of Walker Park on the city's south side in 1961, Fayetteville Little Leaguers alternated play at both locations. City Park field was phased out of youth baseball and turned into a softball field in 1968.

²Campbell, William S., *One Hundred Years of Fayetteville, 1828-1928*, □Fayetteville, AR, 1928, pp. 17 and 78. Trent's obituary in the Northwest Arkansas Times, Thursday, May 2, 1940 refers to him as a "prominent realtor."

³Campbell, pp. 70 and 87.

⁴*Fayetteville Daily (FD)*, October 21, 1916.

⁵Trent's Pond, a small, spring-fed lake used for boating and swimming in City Park, was located just north of the current swimming pool, basically covering what is now the softball field. The 1908 Plat Map of Fayetteville clearly shows where the lake was located.

⁶*FD*, April 8, 1908.

⁷*Ibid.*, June 27, 1917.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Fayetteville Daily Democrat (FDD)*, April 23, 1923.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.* Although it is difficult to see today, the natural amphitheatre was located on the hillside north of Trenton Avenue as you go east away from Wilson Park. Now developed with homes, businesses and overgrown with brush and trees, the old amphitheatre was formed where the hill sloped down to the south towards the creek running alongside Trenton Boulevard about where Lollar Avenue cuts north midway to College Avenue.

¹²*Ibid.*, January 4, 1924.

¹³*Ibid.*, April 2, 1924.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, April 11, 1924.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, April 29, 1924.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, March 1, 1926.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, March 25, 1926.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, March 31, 1926.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, August 6, 1926.

²⁰Trent's Pond was used again, for boating only, in 1927 but by 1928 it had been drained and the paper reported there were plans to put a sunken garden in its place (*FDD*, April 25, 1928). In later stories in the *Northwest Arkansas Times*, the location of the pond was described as "directly north of ... current swimming pool" (November 6, 1982) and as lying "beneath park's softball field" (June 22, 1985).

²¹One stone cottage remains today in the park. It is located north of the swimming pool, facing the tennis courts.

²²*FDD*, April 25, 1927.

²³*Ibid.*, September 7, 1928.

²⁴*Ibid.*, October 23, 1933.

²⁵*Ibid.*, May 5, 1942.

²⁶*Ibid.*, December 12, 1944. The official date of sale was January 15, 1945.

²⁷*Ibid.*, July 3, 1945.

²⁸*NWAT*, August 16, 1946.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid., August 17, 1946.

³¹For more detailed information about the controversial and oftentimes acrimonious sale of Wilson's Pasture, see Hogan, J. B., "You Can't Go Home Again: Charles Morrow Wilson's Unhappy Return to Fayetteville," *Flashback*, Washington County (AR) Historical Society, Winter 2010, Vol. 60, No. 4, pp. 115-145.

³²Ibid., October 17, 1946.

³³Ibid., March 26, 1948.

³⁴Ibid., December 15, 1947.

³⁵Ibid., December 23, 1948.

³⁶Ibid., January 6, 1948.

³⁷Ibid., April 26, 1949.

³⁸Ibid., July 25, 1950.

³⁹City Clerk, Fayetteville, Arkansas, *Minutes, Resolutions, and Ordinances* of the Fayetteville City Council, January 29, 1951.

⁴⁰NWAT, August 17, 1951.

⁴¹Ibid., August 22, 1951.

⁴²Ibid., October 23, 1951.

⁴³City Clerk, Fayetteville, Arkansas, *Minutes, Resolutions, and Ordinances* of the Fayetteville City Council, January 3, 1967.

⁴⁴Ibid., June 16, 1969.