

B'ham—The City That Grew



TODAY'S HANDSOME MUNICIPAL BUILDING

Ground was broken in 1928 for a modern building to house our city government.

Tents Served As Places Of Worship

Churches have always been a vital part of the Birmingham community. In the 1800's, several ministers preached their sermons in open tents as crowds of people gathered.

One of the first churches in the area was the Presbyterian Church. An article in the Jan. 4, 1883, Eccentric described the Christmas atmosphere in the Presbyterian Church.

"The Christmas entertainment at the Presbyterian Church on Friday evening last was a decided success. The church was tastefully decorated with evergreens, and the Christmas tree was loaded down with presents.

"MR. FRED K. Wolfenden, being introduced, immediately began his "chalk talk", commencing on artists and caricaturists, illustrating his remarks by the aid of his brush. His talk was full of anecdote and wit.

"After the speech, the tree was soon stripped, the closing hymn sung, the benediction pronounced, and then the delighted children went home to participate in the joys and sorrows which will come to them ere another year brings again the anniversary of that glad day on which God gave to the world his greatest Gift."

Role of the Horse Rated Star Billing In Good Old Days

Horses played an important part in the early days of Birmingham. They were the best means of transportation for people in and around the village and, though they are not as necessary today, the loss of a good horse was a severe blow to Birmingham's early settlers.

The following appeared in the first edition of The Eccentric, May 2, 1878:

"Henry Martin, of Troy, lost a valuable horse, on Tuesday last. On his way home from a birthday party at M. M. Tom's, he noticed the horse appeared strange driving to the post office; then, starting home, his horse staggered, and immediately after being unhitched, dropped dead in front of J. Baldwin's blacksmith shop—very convenient for Jack to remove the shoes."



YESTERDAY'S CRAMPED QUARTERS
Town was bursting at the seams.

Parks' Serenity Plagued by Strife

By MARY BAHN
Staff Writer

Trouble and strife have blemished the seemingly placid history of Birmingham's dozen parks.

Ranging in size from the 46-acre site of Springdale Park to the 1.66 acreage at one of the Baldwin parks, disagreements have varied from what should be included in the park facilities to what their official designation should be.

More than 3,000 residents crowded into Birmingham's first park on opening day, August 22, 1929. The new Bloomfield Township Park, to be later named Springfield Park in 1934, marked the end of careful planning by some of Birmingham's leading citizens.

HUB OF THE activities was the beautiful clubhouse, whose soft lights and music set toes to tapping. Clubs, men's and women's, met there for luncheons and dinners and it might have been called "the busiest place in town."

The gay life at the clubhouse was extinguished along with the flames that destroyed the building on Oct. 29, 1944. The fire, thought to have been caused by a defective cooling unit, caused a loss of more than \$25,000.

Almost immediately residents began thinking about rebuilding the structure. They did not get much past that stage, however.

PLANS WERE DRAWN, bids received but never approved by the city fathers. George William Averill, publisher of The Birmingham

Eccentric, reported in a May 5, 1949 news story that Plan Commissioner James J. Hogan called Springdale a "white elephant" and suggested it be sold. His suggestion was not heeded, but the park clubhouse continued to be a thorn in the city's otherwise placid park site. As late as 1959, plans for the new clubhouse were being rejected by the city commission, but a small golf rest station has been erected within the past few years.

Finances played a large role in the building of the municipal skating rink at Eton Park in 1956. Originally slated to run about \$110,000, building costs ran as high as \$175,000 due to more elaborate facilities.

During the building, Mayor Renfrew charged that the city commissioners "must accept full responsibility for permitting Eton Park skating rink costs to exceed original estimates by more than 50 per cent."

However, more than 2000 skaters flocked to the rink's opening, and have kept the rink busy throughout its season with free-lance skating and exhibitions.

PEACEFUL, SCENIC Shain Park, which boasts the United Nations tree, also had its share of controversy.

A petition campaign was begun during the hot August month in 1950 to convert the city park into a parking lot. Opinions flew, pro and con, during that month, but when the opening of school began in September, the issue died.

Civic Center Result Of Population Rise

By MARY ELLEN MEAD
Staff Writer

No matter where a town, city or village — U.S.A., '64 — the chromium glitter and vast array of merchandise characterizing our modern-day drug stores draw more daily customers than crowded aisles can accommodate with ease.

Strangely enough, although long ago there wasn't a Cunningham's on the southeast corner of Woodward and Maple, much the same kind of traffic problem existed, for it was on this corner that the old Baldwin Public Library building stood, also housing Birmingham's police department, fire department and village offices.

To describe the small quarters as busy and cramped was putting it mildly. But for many years, long before a group of civic-minded residents decided that their growing village needed a larger home for municipal offices, this was the situation.

THE TOWN WAS growing by leaps and bounds, literally (in the old library building, anyway) bursting at the seams. At the dedication ceremonies in 1928 of the present municipal building a report prepared by the late Charles J. Shain, former president of the village, and George R. Averill, publisher of The Eccentric, told of the tremendous growth of Birmingham:

"Hundreds of new homes have been erected here since 1922; the village has increased in area during the time from its original square mile of 640 acres to over 2,900 acres.

"Population has more than doubled until today it is estimated that approximately 12,000 people live within our corporate boundaries. Such progress has taxed to the utmost the institutions of Birmingham, including its municipal government."

BECAUSE OF THESE conditions, a civic movement slowly gained momentum. The present municipal building was first conceived as part of a Civic Center Plan during the regime of Village President Shain and Commissioners Charles A. Bingham and Olive W. Bell.

It was finally decided that the best interests of the community would be served if the future library and village offices were separated into their own buildings. More incentive for the building

movement was supplied when the widening of Woodward Ave. was proposed, thereby necessitating the tearing down of the old Baldwin Public Library building.

Through court action, the library property was acquired by the village commission and the library board was granted control over the first block of the Civic Center originally purchased for both purposes.

On this first site of the center was built the present Baldwin Public Library.

WHEN THE WIDENING of Woodward became more than a proposal, and the commission discovered that there was too high a value on the property acquired through the court action, a search began to find a suitable piece of property to house the village offices.

With the hope that the village might actually have a Civic Center with all the different functions housed together, attention was turned to a section of land one block east of the property where the library was under construction.

From two bond issues approved by the voters and \$125,000 acquired from the sale of the old library property, the village commission started its plans to build the beautiful building that houses our city government today.

Ground was broken in January, 1928, with the cornerstone laid April 21. The new building was ready for occupancy in October 1928.

THE COMMISSION desired that the fire and police departments be housed in the building in such a manner that if the future development of the village required their quarters for offices, they could be removed to another location without excessive expense. This was done, and the building included the Fire Dept. at one end, Birmingham's police force at the other, plus offices for the city manager, engineer, treasurer, assessor, municipal judge, clerk, building inspector and water department.

Since then the Fire Dept. has been moved to two other modern buildings on Chesterfield and Adams.

Also included in the building is a spacious room where the city commission meets every Monday night. The building houses a staff of approximately 100 city employees, which includes department heads plus police and fire department personnel.



SPRINGDALE CLUBHOUSE BURNS
1944 Fire Destroyed Popular Activity Center