

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF CRAIGHEAD FOREST PARK

In 1937 trains were the primary method of transportation for business travelers. Such a train trip between New Orleans and Memphis involved a conversation which later resulted in the acquisition of Craighead Forest Park.

Ben Berger, President of the newly formed Mercantile Bank in Jonesboro, and Charles Frierson, Jr., President of the newly formed Young Men's Civic Club, talked about what was needed to improve the quality of life in Jonesboro and the conversation naturally turned to recreational opportunities.

A few days later, Mr. Berger reported that he had located 612 acres south of Jonesboro which seemed to be well suited for what they had talked about. The property was owned by a Mrs. Bina West Miller of Chicago who had purchased it a few years before intending to make a livestock farm, but the Depression had killed that idea. The opportunity was presented to the Young Men's Civic Club and they agreed to buy the property for slightly less than \$5.00 an acre. They designated some trustees to hold the legal title and borrowed most of the money from a local bank. It was the YMCC's idea title to the property would almost immediately be transferred to the City of

Jonesboro for the price of \$1.00, with a stipulation that the land would be “for the public benefit and use forever”.

The City Council passed Ordinance No. 673 creating a Craighead Forest Board which, at that time, would consist of members of the YMCC. This Board was authorized to make improvements and to maintain the Park as a public forest and park.

The YMCC was a locally named and organized civic group made up of some of the leaders of the community. It was organized in 1935 and by the end of 1937 had 107 members. It had organized Craighead Forest Committee and appointed Joe N. Martin as its Chairman. The committee was comprised of the following individuals:

Dr. Ralph Sloan - M. H. Ladd - Clarence Freeze  
Sidney Camerson - Alan Clark - Mode Gregory  
Clyde Knight - Cecil Gage - Andrew Eastin  
Charles Metzler - Dr. E .J. Stroud - Hansel  
Winters - Boyd Finch - Dr. L. S. Johnston, Jr.  
Ralph Matthews - Maurice Fairhead - Charles  
Wilson, Jr. - Caleb Watson - Donald Murray  
Julian James - Harold Hodges - G. F. Castleberry  
Kenneth Riddle - Charles Firerson, Jr. and  
Joe N. Martin

The Committee proposed the following improvements for the property:

1. The entire Park will be adequately fenced.
2. A large dam will be constructed to make a lake several miles in circumference which will be Stocked with a generous supply of game fish.
3. Bridle paths, trails and roads will be built.
4. Thousands of Walnut, pine, black locust and white oak seedlings will be planted.
5. A large area will be set aside for wildlife preservation..
6. A fire protection unit of the State Forestry Commission will be maintained with appropriate towers being built.
7. Spacious park and picnic grounds will be provided.

Most, but not all, of these anticipated improvements were in fact completed.

Raising the money to pay the bank loan was not an easy task. 1937 was still a depression year. The Club conducted several different projects to raise these funds. One of the most successful was the idea of "selling" an acre of land to anyone who donated \$5.00. This acre was represented by a certificate by never involved transfer of title. There was some cleared land in the 612 acres that had been farmed, but almost all of this would be soon consumed by the lake that would be constructed. Therefore, this farming could not be counted upon as a source of revenue.

Previous to the time of this purchase there had been at least ten different homes, either on this particular piece of property or immediately adjacent to it through the 1800's. At the time of this purchase there was only one house that remained, and it was utilized for several years as a caretaker's home.

A nursery was started by the Club in 1937 at the corner of Angelus and Park Avenue where over 10,000 trees had been planted and were growing, mostly black locust. It was believed that at least 80 acres of black locust could be set out which, in just a few years, would be sufficient to be harvested and produce income to the Park.

By July of 1938, Mr. Frierson, as President of the Club, had announced that work had been started on a WPA project at Craighead Forest. Initially, a crew of 50 men was engaged in building roads and trails and in digging survey pits for the proposed dam. WPA District Engineer, H. E. Remsburg, informed the group that within a week a crew of approximately 100 men chosen from county relief rolls would be employed. A newspaper report at the time indicated that a lake was planned for approximately 25 acres, but the memory of individuals now indicate that the initial lake site was about 50 acres. By July of 1939, the picnic areas had been completed, along with roads and the administration building. The fourth and final major step was another WPA project which, at that time, was awaiting approval. It included completing the dam, some stables, an amphitheater, wells, boat houses, a dock, a landing area and a children's play area. One approved it was anticipated that all of this would be finished in the spring of 1940.

In 1939 the Board of Trustees which governed Craighead Forest was composed of all past and present Presidents of the YMCC, certain appointees by the City Council and Mayor Herbert J. Bosler, ex officio. Board Members were Charles Frierson, Jr., Alan Patteson, Joe Martin, Clarence Freeze and Caleb Watson from the UNCC and Donald Murray and Julian James who were

appointed by the City Council.

Donald Murray became President of the Young Men's Civic Club in 1940 and presided at a gathering at Hotel Noble of about 75 supporters of Craighead Forest to inaugurate a drive for funds to complete the park project by June of 1940. It was announced that a total of \$600.00 had already been pledged by that date and only \$3,000.00 was needed to complete the work. Among other activities the Business and Professional Women's Club scheduled a bingo party to raise funds for one of the recreational areas in the Forest.

So, the initial plans for development were realized in the year 1940. They included completion of two marvelous structures made out of large logs. One of these was a meeting building or clubhouse. The other was a combination boat dock and dance floor on the water's edge.

Many things did not survive World War II and the YMCC was one of them. The people of this area had about a year to enjoy their newly constructed and improved Park when the war took away most of the people who had planned and worked and supported it. The Park languished throughout the war years and lack of proper maintenance was quite evident at the end of that

time. It was not necessary to reorganize the YMCC because a broader based organization known as the Junior Chamber of Commerce, or Jaycees, was organized and captured the attention of young local leaders. This group assumed the job of maintaining the Park for the next several years. They did it on a very minimum budget and put mostly sweat labor into maintenance rather than having the necessary source of funds. The Craighead Forest Park Commission appointed by the City Council for several years consisted of members of the Jaycees.

In the latter part of the 1950's, the Jonesboro Boating Club, through the leadership of Ralph Mattix, became interested in the Park and asked to become involved in its administration. The Park Commission was reorganized to include members of the Boating Club as well as members of the Jaycees. To better serve their purposes, the Boating Club and the Park Commission agreed to increase the size of the lake. It was increased twice, once in 1959 and again in 1962. The latter was the improvement which increased the lake to its present size of 110 acres. Serving with Ralph Mattix were Charles Frierson III and Bob Gibson. Through the personal dedication of Mattix and others some projects were completed. These include: digging a new well, constructing a pavilion, building a swimming area on one side of the lake and other improvements.

This was not an easy task. City leaders such as Joe Martin and Charles Frierson, Jr. contacted Governor Orval Faubus who directed the local National Guard Engineering Battalion to begin construction of a new levy. However, an engineering plan did not exist for approval. Ralph Mattix was manager of the Comet Rice Mill in Harrisburg. Employed there was a young man who had two years of engineering study. His name was Danny Collins. He drafted an acceptable design and work began. Two additional problems arose. First, construction was slow because the National Guard Reserves only worked on weekends. Second, there were not funds for fuel and cables broken on the dozers. The Boating Club raised \$8,000 to cover the cost of fuel and cables. This was achieved through the Boating Club holding special Fourth of July and Labor Day boating shows and charging entrance fees to the Park on those occasions. Charges were \$1.00 per car and on occasions over 5,000 cars passed through. Outside of special fund-raising events, for many years the Park had received \$50.00 a month from the City Council of Jonesboro and \$300.00 a year from Craighead County sources. While National Guard Reservists had become so involved with the project that they came through the week and worked on their off days. Thus, the levee was completed. However, it was a "dirt" levee holding back over 100 acres of water. Ralph Mattix was driving through the ASC campus one day and noticed



that Cooley Circle was being taken up to make way for new ASC buildings. He immediately thought of the levy and contacted Mr. Martin who was a good friend of Dr. Reng, president of Arkansas State College at that time. Dr. Reng instructed the haulers to take the concrete and asphalt debris to Craighead Forest where Ralph Mattix was waiting with a tractor and blade to place the material on the water side of the levy. This created the levy we have today.

In January, 1972 the City Council of Jonesboro passed Ordinance No. 1326 creating a new Jonesboro Park Commission to supervise all parks within the City of Jonesboro, including Craighead Forest. Since that time, based on plans of improvement developed and promoted by the Park Commission, the Mayor and City Council have funded many such improvements gradually over the years to the point where the present Park is one in which all persons in this area can take pride. The list of these improvements is extensive, but certainly would include the paving of the entire perimeter road, along with various roads down to activity areas, the improvement of the swimming area, the building of several covered picnic and event pavilions, and construction of rest rooms. Various types of athletic fields constructed include baseball fields and volleyball courts. Also, an entire row of sites for recreational vehicles are available for parking/camping.

Other groups have contributed to the present Park's environment. One such is the Jonesboro Rotary Club Park and walkways. And, the Forrest L. Wood Crowley's Ridge Nature Center was determined by the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission to be located in Jonesboro at Craighead Forest. Along with the cooperation of local government and individuals a lease was offer to locate this center on approximately 92 acres. The area is in the southeast portion of the Park, with some lake front in it and extending back to the perimeter road. It was an underdeveloped area of beautiful trees and rolling landscape. Its purpose is to increase public awareness of the fish, forest and wildlife resources of Arkansas and to promote a greater understanding of the complex interaction between these resources and humans. The building itself has facilities for exhibits, classrooms, a large auditorium and wildlife viewing areas. The auditorium has a large screen and a multi-sensory movie depicting the history of Crowley's Ridge. The surrounding area has parking, outdoor activities of various kinds, wilderness trails and botanical exhibitions.

Craighead Forest Park, an idea born in the depression years, is finally taking its proper place as a destination point offering a mix of activity-oriented space and preservation of a natural environment. It is a tribute to the foresight of our forefathers, as well as to those more

recent groups, both public and private, who have devoted substantial amounts of time and energy to its preservation and development.

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