



Nature in Como Park

Turning a naturalist's eye on Como Park's history

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Six years ago I wrote about the sad condition of the Mannheimer Memorial: one of the many Como Park historical landscape features that are in disrepair. This article was first published in the Monitor in March 2003. Other than weed removal from around the memorials mentioned in this article, no restoration work has been done because sufficient funding has not been allocated for this purpose.

The Cass Gilbert Fountain, which was part of the Mannheimer Memorial, was vandalized a few years ago. The City then removed the damaged fountain and put it into storage for safekeeping until it could be properly repaired. The memorial's empty pergola, now propped up with boards, waits for us to notice and care.

City Parks & Recreation's Design Department as well as volunteers from the Como Woodland Advisory Committee have applied for grants that would fund the restoration costs of a few of Como Park's historic landscape features, and we are still waiting to hear about the success or failure of those proposals. Lack of funding was the issue six years ago when I originally wrote this article in 2003, and the economic climate is even more challenging today. However, these historic restoration projects would employ masons and other construction workers while preserving our local history and local pride. There is still time, but every day and every year we don't take action makes the job of restoration more difficult and expensive.

A Natural History of Como Park's History

Other than an inquisitive nature, what attribute transforms the casual observer into a naturalist? Gerald Durrell, scientist and author of *Amateur Naturalist*, writes that a naturalist "seeks to observe every little variation in nature" and then tries to "discover its origin and function." Drawing has helped me observe those little variations in an intimate way. In order to draw a plant, a shell, or an insect accurately, you must take your visual observations to the extreme.

Whether you think you can draw or not, a simple sketch in your notebook will free you from having to write a thousand complex words. Strive to use all your senses. However, if you can learn to look carefully, you will be more than half way to understanding your subject.

When I draw, I usually get in close and concentrate on the fine details: how is this leaf attached to the branch, does it have stipules at its base, is the underside of the leaf a different texture from the topside? Occasionally my near-sightedness keeps me from seeing the bigger picture. And sometimes my preference for natural subjects keeps me from appreciating manmade features of the park. Wouldn't the broadest interpretation of natural history put people and their behaviors into the natural history category with the plants, shells, and insects?

This question led me to include with this article, not one of my own drawings, but a photograph that my husband, Matt Schmitt, took of a historic Como Park feature: the Mannheimer Memorial. Not grand or exacting, this turn-of-the-century relic stands on a slight hill right off Lexington Parkway and Kaufman Drive. Matt has photographed the memorial from many angles in all seasons, and I have to admit that I had never really looked at it in detail until I saw it through his eyes.

The Mannheimer Memorial consists of a wooden pergola held up by four simple Ionic columns that sit squarely on a white marble base. In its center stands an elegant marble fountain designed by Cass Gilbert, the architect who also designed our State Capitol.

When the memorial was built in 1906, it marked the eastern edge of the formal display gardens that once graced the approach to the park's greenhouses (before



the Conservatory was built). The formal gardens of Como Park can only be seen in photographs now. Weeds grow between the herringbone-laid bricks of the memorial's stairway, and the Cass Gilbert fountain is no longer covered in the winter.

The swish of hoop skirts as they swept across the marble platform, the clicks of walking canes on the brick steps, the voices of our great-grand parents admiring the opening view of the splendid gardens – these sensations are lost to history. Yet, even in its well-worn state, the Mannheimer Memorial retains much of its original dignity and elegance.

If you walk down the brick steps and across Kaufman Drive today, you will find what remains of an even older historical Como Park feature - the “Aquarium” lily pond. For years, mulberry and buckthorn saplings concealed the crumbling pond. A defiantly sturdy fieldstone arch bridge spans the broken concrete basin where giant South American water lilies grew (reportedly large enough to support the weight of a child) during the summer months until 1926. Constructed in 1895, this lily pond has historical significance as one of the first features built for the floral display area. I doubt that tropical water lilies could be grown here in this location again, but the “Aquarium” could be given another chance to fulfill some useful purpose before it disappears into the historical record.

If we fail to value our history enough to assure its preservation, what does that say about us as a society? During the present budget crisis, I have heard some politicians refer to our parks and historical sites as “non essential.” The current budget crisis will pass, as did two World Wars and the Great Depression. If these Como Park landmarks could survive the greater hardships of our past, then we should be able to see that they survive an *economic downturn*.

Yes, eventually all our memorials and historic structures will erode to dust, but we shouldn't let them go too easily - they are the physical record of who we were a century ago, who we are today, and how we want to be remembered in the future. If our government won't muster the funds for the maintenance of Como Park's history (both natural and manmade) then perhaps citizens could do it themselves, possibly by forming a foundation to fund the work or volunteering their time. One way or another, it's essential work that must be done.

Updated Endnotes: *Interested in learning more about Como Park's history? Read Sharon Shinomiya's article posted on the Como Park Alliance website (go to: About Us, Subjects, History of Como Park). Attend the CPA sponsored Historical Walking Tour on June 13, which will start from the (fully restored) historic Como Streetcar Station. And please support efforts to restore Como Park's vanishing historical landscape features.*

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