

Start at the southern end of the Cowen Park (15th Avenue NE) Bridge.

Ravenna Park is one of Seattle's best loved "natural" parks and its creation is integral to understanding the neighborhoods surrounding it, including of course the Ravenna-Cowen North National Historic District bordering the park on the north.

But first—a little background history.

The first people to inhabit the immediate area were the members of the Duwamish tribe, which included the "hah-choo-AHBSH" or "People of the Large Lake." During the period of native inhabitation, the use of the area surrounding the subject site was seasonal or migratory, with the major village located to the south at the entry to Union Bay called "hehs-KWEE-kweel" where the Duwamish leader, Lake John Cheshiahud, lived. Chief Si'ahl (also known as Chief Seattle or Sealth) was the first of the Duwamish chiefs to sign the treaty of Point Elliot in 1855. The treaty ceded 54,000 acres in King County to the United States Government, and was ratified by the Senate in 1859.

University of Washington Digital Collections



1. *Lake John Cheshiahud and Others, ca. 1885*

The Port Gamble based Puget Mill Company, founded by Andrew Jackson Pope and Frederic Talbot, filed and obtained title to most of the land along the northwestern side of Lake Washington beginning in 1855.

Between 1885 and 1892, the Seattle Lakeshore and Eastern Railway built routes from downtown Seattle up along the northwestern shore of Lake Washington to the Bothell Depot completed in 1888, where it branched to three routes: one leading north toward Canada, another east along the North Cascades, and a third leading southeast to Snoqualmie Pass.

The Puget Mill Company had previously granted the railroad a right-of-way deed in 1887, after which they actively began logging off the first-growth timber of their portions of the northern shores of Lake Washington and inland areas. The company used the railway to transport logs to downtown Seattle where they were transferred by tugs to Port Gamble or Port Ludlow where the major sawmills of the Puget Mill Company were located.

Ravenna Park is tied to the development of the small settlement of Ravenna. Around 1887 George (1851-?) and Otila (1865-1948) Dorffel purchased approximately 400 acres north of the shallow bay area that now is University Village area. Much of the area had been originally claimed by Seattle pioneers William (1817-1887) and Sarah Bell (1819-1856). The Bells were members of the Denny Party that arrived on Alki (present-day West Seattle) on the schooner EXACT in 1851.

George had immigrated from Germany and had married Otila Ulin, the daughter of immigrant parents, in 1883. George was one of the first professionals in business selling real estate in Seattle. It is likely the couple purchased the land from the Bell's estate after William passed away in 1887.

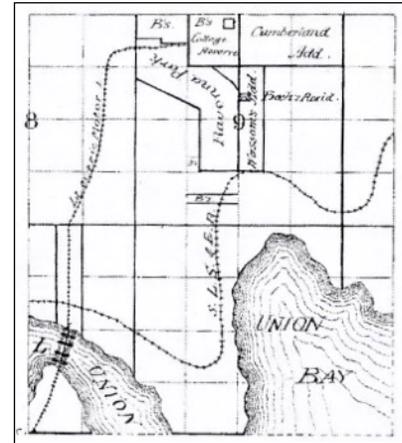
The Dorffels purchase was purely speculative as they only owned the property for two years, but not before filing the Ravenna Springs Park plat in 1887 and the Ravenna Park Supplemental plat in 1888. The Dorffels named the ravine and creek that was fed by Green Lake after the Pine forests of Ravenna, Italy.

Many of the first growth Douglas firs and red cedars were easily accessible from Lake Washington, and had already been harvested. A few amazingly tall evergreen trees remained on the slopes along the ravine as they were more difficult to log.

In 1889, William Wirt (1851-1944) and Louise Beck (1851-1928, ne. Coman) purchased the land included in the plats from the Dorffels. William was a Presbyterian minister from Kentucky and Louise was from Athens, Georgia, the daughter of a wealthy lawyer and who had graduated from the Athens Female College and then studied music in the Northeast. In 1889 the Becks filed a partial re-plat of the Dorffels' Ravenna Springs Park, the Wade Addition, covering a few blocks south of what would become NE 65th Street, and the Cumberland Addition immediately east of the Wade Addition.

In 1890, the Becks filed another plat, the Wassom's Addition, that covered the area east of the Ravenna Springs Park plat running from Lake Washington north to what would become NE 60th Street and east to the future 27th Avenue NE. The Beck's built their first house here near NE 57th Street and 25th Avenue NE.

King County Assessor



2. Town of Ravenna, 1890

Northwest Railway Museum



3. Town of Ravenna, Flour Mill in foreground, ca. 1890

By the beginning of 1890, there were enough people living in Ravenna to justify a post office, run by one of William Beck's brothers, and a train station serviced by the Lake Shore & Eastern Railway. At that time a flour mill (now the site of Blakey Manor) owned by William Blakely was located just south of the station located near the present 4th Ave NE just west of 25th Ave NE. Some mill worker's housing still remain west of 25th Avenue NE.

Obviously under the influence of Louise in 1890, the Becks established the Seattle Female College (the site now located southwest of the intersection of 25th Avenue NE and NE 55th Avenue Street) in a large shingle-style building. The first year the college enrolled approximately 40 students, but due to the financial panic of 1893, the school was forced to close by 1895. The building was first used as a rental, then a community gathering place, as well as a local landmark until it was destroyed by fire around 1912.

Seattle Public Library



4. Seattle Female College, ca. 1893

In 1892, the Rainier Power and Electric Company, owned by David T. Denny, extended a streetcar line extending north from downtown Seattle through what was then known as the town of Brooklyn (now the University District) and University Avenue turning east along the southern side of what is now Ravenna Park, terminating at what is now 20th Avenue NE.

The Becks then promoted what would become Ravenna Park as a destination for urban weary city people. They fenced the park and began charging a small entry admission charge.



5. Streetcar running along the southern side of Ravenna Park, ca. 1895.

Courtesy of Peter Blecha



6. War canoe foreground and totem pole to right.

The Becks also constructed paths, planted decorative landscaping, including rhododendrons, and constructed pavilions, picnic shelters, bridges, and other features including a dam at the lower end of the ravine. They also acquired totem poles, and a native American “war canoe,” apparently from British Columbia’s Bella Bella tribe. Over the years the Becks would change the name of the park periodically: Ravenna Park, but also Big Tree park after a few remaining large fir trees that escaped initial logging.

In February, 1907, Louise Beck wrote a half-page article that appeared in the Seattle Daily Times about the park and its glories. She stated that she was willing to part with the park for a value of \$100,000 so that it could be added to the City’s park system then in planning by noted New York-based landscape architect, the Olmstead Brothers.

In 1908, the Becks offered the park land to the City for \$150,000. The Alaskan Yukon and Pacific Exposition (AYP) was still in planning and the Becks thought it would be an ideal location for the exposition. Beck’s proposal was ignored by the exposition planning committee. Nevertheless, the Beck’s heavily promoted the park during the exposition in various newspapers and other publications expounding upon the natural beauties of the park and its various features including the remaining giant evergreens. Beck also published a “Ravenna Park Guide” in 1909 that describes where to find the various features of the park. Since no map of the park is available, this guide remains our only source of where the various features were located.

START the walking tour by crossing 15th Avenue NE and find the path running along the edge of the park, not the one leading to the tennis courts.

So—let us imagine it is 1909 and we are taking the Eastlake streetcar near the AYP entrance at NE 40th Street and University Avenue and continuing north to Cowen Park where the car turned to the right (east) and continued along the southern edge of the park.

1 Streetcar Stop. As you walk along you can find the remains of a streetcar stop overhanging the slope at 17th Avenue NE. This is one of the few artifacts remaining from that era. Continue walking along the old right-of-way until it merges with NE 58th Street. Eventually you will cross 20th Avenue NE.

Courtesy of Peter Blecha



8. Ravenna Park Bridge, ca. 1909

2 Bridge. In 1909, you would have seen a path leading to a wooden pedestrian bridge rather than the current steel bridge that was constructed in 1912 and is listed on the National Register of historic places. Keep walking down (east) NE 58th Street. about 100 feet from the 20th Avenue NE you might have got a glimpse of Louisa Beck on the front porch of their home bordering their park. The house was demolished in the 1920s when one of Beck's sons developed what we now know as Candy Cane Lane.

Courtesy of Peter Blecha



7. Streetcar stop, ca. 1934

3 Gate. Near the streetcar stop near Ravenna Avenue NE you might have found William Beck welcoming you to his private park at the northern end of the street.

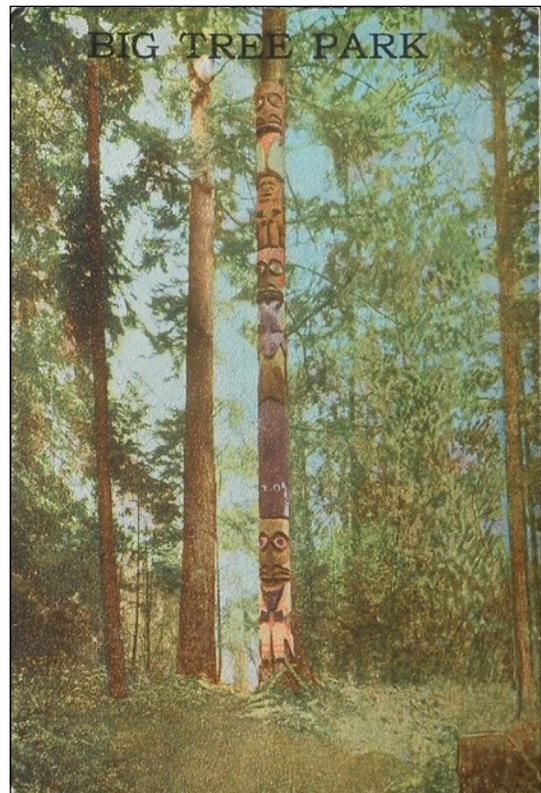


9. William W. Beck at the park entrance gate

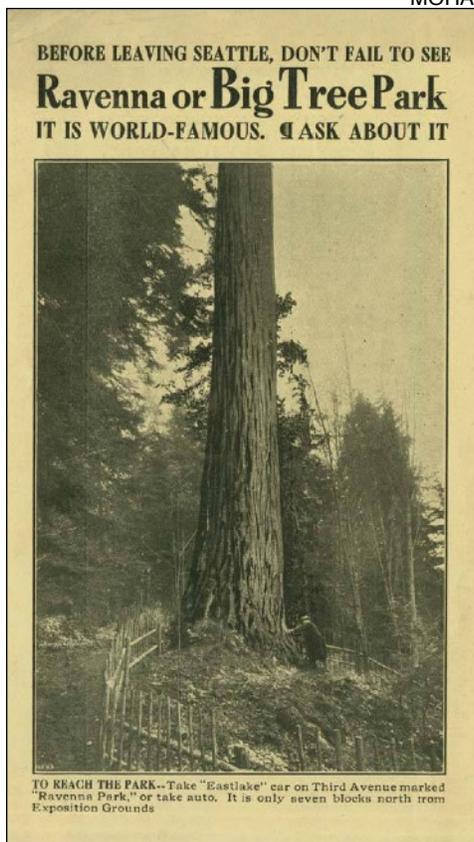
At the gate you would have paid Beck or an attendant the 25 cent admission fee. According to the 1909 *Ravenna Park Guide* if you wanted to see the Big Trees that were the big draw you took the "left hand path from the entrance by 'Crooked Fir' to Auto Road through Indian Village beside the Baby (?) trees (20 feet in circumference and 300 feet high) to the Roosevelt, Paderewski and Lee, the giants of the Forest—36 to 60 feet in circumference."

Veer to the right behind the tennis courts to the edge of the ravine. Other park features such as the "War Canoe" and totem poles, reportedly commissioned from British Columbia's Bella Bella tribe, would probably have been scattered around the "Indian Village" that was actually an anachronistic group of American Plains tepees. Beck was a promoter, not a cultural anthropologist!

Vintage Postcard



10. One of Beck's totem poles



11. AYP Park Advertisement

Scandal. But what happened to the Big Trees? All of the big trees and most of the other smaller trees vanished by the late 1920s, cut down ostensibly because they were diseased and presented a danger to the public. A letter from the Two Lakes Mill Company dated January 30, 1913 offered the City \$1.00 per measured cord for wood cut from the park. Unlike wood cut for timbers, cord wood is short length and could be cut down to the ground, one possible explanation as to why no stumps remain.

A 1972 article¹ in the Seattle Post Intelligencer attempted to clarify how the trees disappeared. Between 1909 and 1920, J. W. Thompson was the City's Park Superintendent. He is remembered both as a dedicated civic servant and nature lover, and as a "hard talking, hard drinking engineer ... who wouldn't care much what happened to the trees." In fact, Thompson was asked to resign shortly after the last of the big trees was down, being charged with abuse of the entire park system, abuse of equipment, abuse of personnel, abuse of funds, intoxication and unauthorized sale of department property." The period between 1910 and 1920 is considered one of Seattle's most corrupt, a time when Mayor Hiram Gill used his influence and City revenue to build the world's largest brothel. So—it seems it was a common practice then for park personnel to cut park trees illegally for cordwood—what a shame! Beck's majestic trees are gone forever and all we have left are a few photographs to mourn them.

4 Ghost Trees. So where were the "Big Trees" located, why have they disappeared, and why are there no telltale stumps that would let us know where they would have been?

Contemporary photos of the trees seem to show them at the edge of the ravine. So as we get to the top of the path, the trees would have probably been to your right scattered among smaller trees. It appears that most, if not all, were first-growth native Douglas fir trees (*Pseudotsuga menziesii* var. *menziesii*).

Coast Douglas firs can exceed 400 feet in height and be up to 34 feet in circumference. A Douglas fir on the shore of Lake Quinault on the Olympic Peninsula is 294 feet tall. Douglas fir trees can also be long lived, with at least one tree having lived for 1,300 years before it was logged.

Courtesy Paul Dorpat



12. Signs led visitors to various features

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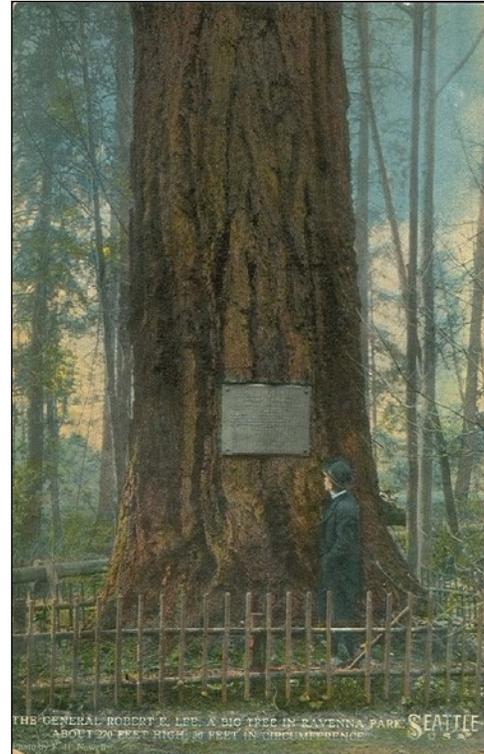


13. Douglas Fir Trees on the edge of the ravine

Continue walking along the path looking for the various trees the Becks named, including the Roosevelt Tree, which stood where the current tennis courts are, christened in honor of president “Teddy” Roosevelt. Also the General Robert E. Lee Tree, and Paderewski Tree, named after Ignacy Jan Paderewski the Polish pianist and friend of Louise Beck.

Now head west to the present meadow with the picnic shelter.

5 Upper Glen. You will enter into a partially wooded meadow. Today, this area is much more open than it was in 1909. Back then it was called “Emma Eames Hill” and the “Mall” and was a favorite place for picnics and outdoor meetings for clubs, churches, and school activities. There was likely a rough log pavilion located near where the current picnic shelter is sited. The Becks placed log benches so visitors could rest and contemplate the park’s features. They are gone now, as are all of the other Becks’ amenities. The existing picnic shelter was probably completed in the 1930s as a Works Progress Administration (WPA) project. We know the WPA did work within the park, including clearing this area of trees to create the meadow. Aerial photos from 1936 show many more trees in this area. The comfort station at the western end of the meadow was probably completed in the 1920s.



14. General Robert E. Lee Tree

Turn around and head back on the trail to the original park entrance along what was called “Rhododendron Way” The existing comfort station below the tennis courts probably dates to the late 1920s.

“Big Tree Park”, Courtesy of Lani and Larry Johnson



15. Upper Glen, ca. 1908.

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16. Rustic Pavilion. ca. 1898.

6 Squirrel Inn. Continuing from the Guide: *“Thence to the “Squirrel Inn and the Rustic Pavilion —a remarkable structure and as remarkable for its old fashioned meals: Hickory rocking chairs, cheery log fire offer a welcome to all.”*

We are not sure where this group of buildings was sited, Beck probably have placed them near where the comfort station is located.

The photo to the right (figure 17), was labeled as the “Merrie Maker Inn” in a contemporary guide book, another example of Beck predilection to change names. The caption reads “*To this pavilion, 40 x 90 feet, has been added a large kitchen, two dressing rooms, a check room, and an open fireplace.*” The changing rooms would suggest it was located near another feature of the park—the pond.

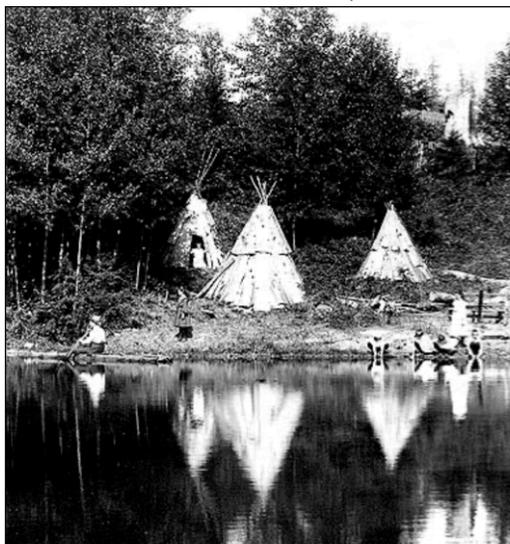
CONFECTIONERY, ice cream and grocery bungalow store, with living rooms, doing good business. Ye Ravenna Inn, end of Ravenna Park line. Price is right.

18. Ad in the Seattle Times, September 18, 1909.

7 Pond. The Becks dammed the creek near the southern end of the park near where the current creek drain is located. The image to the right taken after a snow fall is the only known photo of the dam. It appears the the pond was four to five feet deep at most. It was deep enough for small boats, like the canoe shown in the photo below. The Becks later added a fish ladder to allow salmon to return up river. Also note that some of the American Plains teepees seem to have moved eastward to the the shore of the pond. The street to the south of the pond (now NE 55th Street) was called originally call Bridge Street as it had a bridge crossing the creek.

8 Wading. The image below with the wading children appears to have be taken near where the stream fed into the pond. Walk along the stream to the beginning of the ravine.

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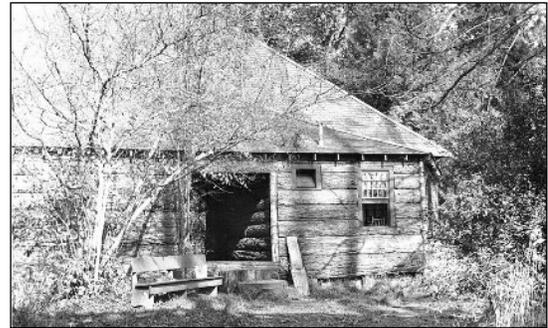
21. Pond viewing northwest, ca. 1903.

“Big Tree Park”, Courtesy of Lani and Larry Johnson



17. Ye Merrie Makers Inne, ca. 1908.

MOHAI



19. Addition to “Inne”, ca. 1912.

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20. Wooden dam, ca. 1893.

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22. Children wading, ca. 1908.

9 The “Canyon.” Again from the *Guide*: “*The Canyon begins at the Inn and extends up the Little River a mile. You should walk up one side and down the other. The vastness of the of detail in Fern, Leaf, Waterfall, Tree, Flower, Bird and Bridge will Rest you and repay you a hundred fold for the small fee charged by the owner who pays the city \$15,000 taxes this year.*”

Start walking up the ravine along the creek.

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23. Children wading in Ravenna Creek, ca. 1908.

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24. Ravenna Creek falls and fountain, ca. 1900.

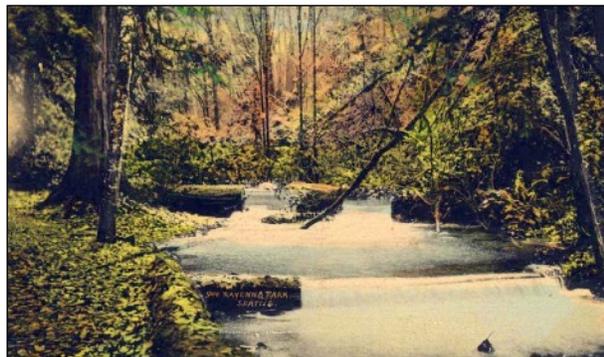
10 **Creek and Springs.** Prior to 1911, Ravenna Creek had a much larger flow as it was the outlet for Green Lake to the west. The lake was lowered in 1911, and much of the water was diverted into a sewer running along Ravenna Boulevard. Natural springs continue to feed the now much smaller stream.

The most well-known spring was called the “Mineral Spring” was located here and noted for its medicinal properties. Other springs included the “Wood Nymph’s Well,” and there were at least another three or four that were un-named.

Under the urging of several groups including the City Federation of Women’s Clubs, and prompted by a petition submitted to the Parks Board by dozens of nearby residents, the City of Seattle Park Board voted in May 1911 to acquire the “55 acre park” by condemnation for \$131,420, a lesser fee than the \$150,000 Beck had offered. Infuriated the Reverend Beck urged the City to reconsider, stating that “some in there (the City staff) are as black as Hell and I think I know them.”

After the City took over the park, the Becks continued to live on the adjacent property. Their son, Broussais Beck re-platted his parents house site in 1922 and hired architect Carl Gould to design several small Tudor Revival houses for what is now known as Candy Cane Lane. The Becks moved into one of the houses at the eastern end (now demolished). Louise passed away in 1928, and William in 1944.

Seattle Public Libraries



25. Ravenna Creek, 1912.

MOHAI, LaRoche



26. Mineral Springs picnic, ca. 1893.

Continue walking upstream (west) along the creek and under the 20th Avenue NE Bridge, enjoying the shady pathway until you reach the small bridge adjacent to the large granite rock. The rock is what is known as a glacial erratic, dropped off here by the Cordillian Ice Sheet that covered the Puget Sound area 17,000 years ago.

Several Western Washington native tree species occur in the park, including Douglas fir, western hemlock, western red-cedar, sitka spruce and pacific yew, big leaf maples, and alders. There are at

least 85 species of birds in the park. In addition, there are at least five species of mammals including American opossums, coyotes, eastern cottontail rabbits, eastern gray squirrels, and raccoons.



27. Children playing at Mineral Springs, ca. 1900.

11 Covered Bridge. Where this wonderful feature was actually located is unknown, but it may have been near the center of the ravine and this as likely a place as any. It was used for auto traffic within the park. It was probably removed because it was a hazard after falling into disrepair. Wooden bridges are covered to protect the support timbers from wood rot. The bridge would probably still be here if the roof had been maintained.

12 Cowen Park Bridge. Cross over the existing foot bridge and continue up the ravine passing under the Cowen Park (15th Avenue NE Bridge). This is the third bridge constructed over the ravine at this location. A wooden footbridge was constructed across the Ravenna Creek ravine as early as 1915. A streetcar trestle was built across the ravine between Ravenna and Cowen parks in 1924. The former Denny streetcar line was extended north to NE 80th Street near the then city limits along the 15th Avenue NE right-of-way, along the eastern side of the Roosevelt High School that had been completed between 1921 and 1922, spurring additional growth in the neighborhood. The current bridge was built in 1936 under the authority of the Works Progress Administration. The structure is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, and it is a designated City of Seattle Landmark.

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28. Covered Bridge, 1910.

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29. Second Bridge with Upper Street Car Line, ca. 1924.

MOHAI



30. Third Bridge, ca. 1936.

13 Cowen Park. A short history of this park is included in Walking Tour 1, but is summarized here as we return to our starting point near the Cowen Park Shelter.

In 1906, Englishman Charles Cowen acquired several acres of land between 10th Avenue (later Roosevelt Way NE) and 15th Avenue, platting the area for residential use.

He dedicated a large area for park use, located in the southeastern portion of the property at the upper end of the Ravenna Creek ravine and adjacent to the then private Ravenna Park. Early views of the park show a much more natural wooded landscape with Ravenna creek meandering down to the ravine. There was no playground or ball field. In the mid-1960s, the Cowen Park ravine was largely filled using freeway construction spoils, creating level land for a ball field and playground.



31. Cowen Park before 1911 viewing southwest.



Later Developments. Before walking back to the starting place we should mention some later news and events that occurred after the City acquired Ravenna Park. Many of its features were neglected, with many left to rot and then removed, or in the case of the totems poles and war canoe, just disappeared never to be seen again. The large Pavilion was converted to a City stables. The City also removed the dam draining the pond, diverting what was left of the stream to a sewer.

In April 1923, the Parks Board approved the construction of six tennis courts, handball courts, an archery range, and a community house. A baseball diamond was built on the lower former pond area.

In June, 1928, The City had the “Mineral Spring” analyzed and declared it to be “unsafe for potable and drinking purposes.” The spring was then capped off to prevent further use. Around this time the City renamed the park “Roosevelt Park.” Its name was later returned to “Ravenna Park after local residents objected.

City of Seattle



32. 1923 community house.

City of Seattle



33. Wading pool, ca. 1944.

During the 1930s, WPA funds were used to clean up the park and construct the upper picnic shelter. Many of the trees in the upper glen were removed to create what now appears as a meadow.

In 1944, a concrete lined wading pool was constructed at the beginning of the ravine at the request of the neighborhood. It was later removed as it silted up.

A smaller wading pool is now located near the community house.



34. Temporary Sewer running through the park.

project would hinder their ability to further develop their property, the project scope was reduced and limited to the Park Boundaries.

The current lower stream bed and its landscape features including pathways, native planting, and artwork was installed in 2005. with the creek outlet located near where the Beck's had constructed their wooden dam.

Thank you for your interest in our neighborhood as well as our beautiful Ravenna Park and its companion Cowen Park. The Friends of Ravenna-Cowen was created “to preserve and protect the history and natural environment of the Ravenna-Cowen neighborhood as a shared community resource for all, and to support other like-minded neighborhood and not-for-profit groups.”

Sources and Suggested Reading:

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Wilma, David. “Seattle Neighborhoods: Ravenna - Roosevelt - Thumbnail History,” HistoryLink Essay 3502. <https://www.historylink.org/File/3502>.

1. Seattle Post Intelligencer, “The Great Mystery of Ravenna Park,” Sunday, December 17, 1972, p. 125.

In mid-1950s after the sewer trunk line running under NE Ravenna Boulevard collapsed, a temporary line was run through the ravine that greatly disturbed trees and vegetation.

In the 1990s, Metro/King County proposed a pipe conveyance to separate Ravenna Creek from the sewer system. A group of dedicated volunteer, the Ravenna Creek Alliance proposed an alternative plan that would have day-lighted the creek from the park to Lake Washington. After objections from the University of Washington and the owners of University Village who feared that the the



35. Kids with “Big Tree.”