



## **ONCE UPON A TIME IN NORTH PARK A BRIEF HISTORY OF BIRD PARK**

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In 1902, Samuel Parsons, President of the American Society of Landscape Architects and the Superintendent of Central Park in New York City, accepted a commission to design San Diego's "City Park." When taken for a tour of the vast, undeveloped area that had been set aside, Parsons became lyrical about the view from the northeast corner of the park that subsequently became the corner of 28th and Upas Streets. Standing there, he compared the view of the Coronado Islands to the "stately pleasure dome of Xana Du decreed by Kubla Khan." The corner was for years thereafter called "Parsons' Gate."

Despite Samuel Parsons' identification of the north east corner of what would be Balboa Park as having one of the best views in the entire park, that corner would be one of the last areas within Balboa Park to be developed. It would be 95 years before Parsons' vision would become Bird Park.

In 1992, the East Mesa Precise Plan (EMPP) published by the City of San Diego called for a new children's' park on the land south of Upas Street between 28th Street and Pershing Drive. Questions were raised, meetings were called and the traffic study outline in the EMPP was revised to the satisfaction of the city engineers and the residents of Pershing and 28th Streets. The Pershing Spur was closed in order to prevent fast-moving Pershing Drive traffic from entering Pershing Street at high speed. Additionally, at the five-way intersection of 28th/Pershing/Upas Streets, the entrance to the narrow 28th Street was closed with the same intent. The City then hired Wallace Robertson Todd (WRT) to develop a park plan. WRT hired Robin Brailsford, a public artist, to serve on their design team. Together they "hatched" the idea of Bird Park, inspired by the bird-like lay of the land.

"Pershing looked just like a branch, and the topography looked like a bird," Brailsford stated in a 2002 interview with the *North Park News*.

The Park was designed to resemble a bird as seen from the air. The porcelain enamel map created by artist Wick Alexander that is mounted on a utility box by the swing set in the park (see photograph at right) illustrates the concept. "Every element to make it look like a bird is there: wing, tail, foot, beak, gizzard and a nest," Brailsford explained in the 2002 *North Park News* article. The WRT team carried the avian theme further by having the complete list of Perchiform (perching) birds of San Diego County sandblasted into the sidewalks.



*Photograph courtesy of Steve Hon*

The WRT team began designing the six-acre park in 1994, and Bird Park opened officially in September of 1997. It was immediately popular with the community as it provided sorely needed additional developed park space and two more children's play areas. The community also quickly identified that Bird Park was an excellent area to view 4<sup>th</sup> of July fireworks displays from San Diego Bay.

In 2002, the North Park Community Association (NPCA) began exploring the idea of holding community concerts at Bird Park. Based upon the Friday night concerts held at Trolley Barn Park in University Heights, an NPCA committee that included Beth Swersie, Lorraine Halac, Nellie Harris, Maureen Westfall, and Lorrie Moore began work on holding one or two concerts in the Summer of 2002. Nellie Harris was the driving force behind the effort. Ultimately, two concerts were held that summer. The first concert was held on July 12<sup>th</sup> and featured the Tami Thomas Big Band; the second concert was held on August 30<sup>th</sup> and the Bill Magee Blues Band performed. The first concert also featured a comedian, Wally Wang, who performed at intermission. By the time Wally Wang took the microphone, the size of the crowd had doubled.



*Photo courtesy of Lynn Elliott*

The two concerts in 2002 were incredibly well received by the community and have become a regular staple of the summer scene in North Park.

The final aspect of the development of Bird Park was the completion of the Pershing Portal on the north side of Upas Street at 28<sup>th</sup> Street to replace the temporary barriers installed years earlier when 28<sup>th</sup> Street at Upas was closed off. In late 2003, the Pershing Portal Project was completed, forming an attractive pedestrian entry into the heart of this unique historic North Park neighborhood from Pershing Drive and adjacent park areas. The entry plaza permanently terminated 28th Street, and provided a continuous curb line along Upas Street from west to east. The landscaped plaza is at the same level as the existing sidewalk and contains stamped and colored concrete including plaques commemorating David Dryden and his wife. Concrete towers 7 1/2 feet high with copper roofs mark the entry, and a quote from the late North Park historian Donald Covington is stamped into the pavement between the entry towers.



*Photo courtesy of Katherine Hon*

This project was years in the making. Mark Weis, City project engineer and North Park resident, said, "I believe the Pershing Portal Project is a realization of the community's efforts to commemorate the uniqueness and historical significance of North Park." A plan to close 28th Street at Upas was initiated in 1987 and championed through the years by many North Park residents. Homeowners gathered traffic data in 1992 to substantiate the heavy traffic on 28th Street from Pershing. In 1993, the City agreed to close 28th Street at Upas if homeowners agreed, and in May of that year, a petition circulated among residents convinced the City to create the cul-de-sac. The original conceptual design of the entry portal was conceived in 1995 and ardently supported, but funding was an issue that took more than 8 years to solve completely.