

Once Upon A Time in North Park

Morley Field, North Park's Backyard

by Donald Covington

"The oft-berated depression has accomplished one new step in carrying to a conclusion the intricate Nolen plan of city development that a decade of prosperous years was unable to bring about - the building of a swimming pool and recreation center at the foot of Texas Street in Balboa Park."

(San Diego Union, October 9, 1932.)

The decline in residential and commercial building activity in the early months of 1932 was offset by a city-sponsored project in Balboa Park. At North Park's back door, the northeast corner of the park had historically lacked the development given to the central and western mesa areas. The rough chaparral-covered corner of the park had remained in its original condition as late as the early 1930s. In 1931, the city's focus began to shift with a special project for unemployment relief that resulted in a municipal golf course on the eastern park boundary. That was followed in the winter of 1932 by discussions between the City Council and the North Park Business Men's Club concerning the development of a "North Park Recreation Center" (later renamed Morley Field) in the northeast region of Balboa Park.

In March 1932, at a special election, San Diego voters approved a \$300,000 bond issue for unemployment relief. On March 29th, a project committee of North Park businessmen including William Miller, George Klicka, Paul Hartley, and Arthur Jensen revealed plans for a center of approximately ten acres. The plans included a swimming pool, heating plant, clubhouse, two baseball diamonds, eight double tennis courts, ten shuffle board courts, children's wading pool and sand pits. The swimming pool was planned to be 130 feet long by 65 feet wide with depths of two and a half to nine feet. A budget for the construction of the center was estimated at \$75,000. Following approval of the project by the City Council, a crew of twenty-five men began grading the site on Monday, April 4, 1932.

The recreation center had been of plan of park superintendent John Morley since 1914 in his early days of responsibility for park development. In that year, Morley had set aside the northeast corner of the park for major outdoor recreation grounds. Supported by public desire to provide relief work for the growing number of unemployed families in San Diego, Morley's project was finely funded by the City Council. Plans for a summer opening had to be postponed as completion of the large pool kept being delayed. Finally, a spectacular public dedication was held on New Year's Day 1933, a warm, sunny day well suited to the dedication ceremonies. Thousands attended the festivities which included a parade, drill teams of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, a concert by the Scouts band, and a beauty pageant of thirteen competing young women. The chosen beauty queen was Miss Alberta McKellop of North Park.