Once Upon A Time in North Park

How Pershing Drive Came To Be

by Karon Covington

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."

1907: George Cook, in his new capacity of Park Superintendent, proposed a road from Parsons' Gate that would wind down to 18th Street. A 1908 bond issue provided the funding for a narrow dirt road that served as the main thoroughfare between North Park and downtown San Diego for fourteen years. Emma Schnug, born1903, in an oral history taken by members of the NPCA History Committee, described what it was like to travel down that road in a horse and buggy. She concluded her narrative with a harrowing description of a trip down that hill with her mother after she lost control of the horse and regained it just before reaching Powder Canyon Road (Florida Street).

1918: On November 11th, Armistice was declared, ending World War I. On that very day, the 400-year-old Boulevard Lucca in Italy was re-named for U.S. President Woodrow Wilson. That began a flurry of renaming buildings, bridges, etc. to commemorate the Armistice. In San Diego, an idea brought forward by R.A. Chapman caught the imagination of the Board of Park Commissioners. Chapman proposed that a conscription road through Balboa Park from 18th Street to the northeast corner of Balboa Park at 28th Street be built and christened "Pershing Drive" after General John Joseph "Black Jack" Pershing. The previously built dirt road was approximately two miles long and 24 feet wide. The 1918 proposal called for a paved road to be 36 feet wide. Pershing Drive was to be financed by donations limited to five dollars per person. By that time, the parklands north and east of Balboa Park had become the neighborhood of North Park. The Thurston family (who owned my home in 1918) and their neighbor, Theresa Kline, appeared on the first short list of contributors published in the San Diego Union. In 1922, the city matched the funds that had been raised by conscription in order to facilitate the project.

1992: The East Mesa Precise Plan (EMPP) published by the city 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.

LATE 1990s: Construction began on Bird Park (Robin Brailsford, Artist) situated on 28th Street south of Upas. There are as-yet-unfunded aspects of Brailsford's plan that will be implemented in the future. The Pershing Portal, designed by Janene Christopher, will be erected in the near future at the closure point of 28th Street on the north side of Upas. That portal will be the first view of North Park to greet drivers who drive up the Pershing hill to our community from Freeway 5 – the only exit from that freeway to North Park. The present view is not a pretty sight.

2002: When the Pershing Portal is erected at Parsons' Corner, the ugly cement alterations man has made to Samuel Parsons' vision of Xana Du will be overshadowed by the beauty of the work of North Park's artisans.

Note: Funding for the Portal Project was obtained by 2003 and construction began. The Portal Project was finished by 2004.