

MYSTERIES OF THE PAST:  
A TOUR OF EPWORTH LAKE PARK

By  
Walter R. Meier

Each year, a multitude of hikers and cyclists pass through a relic-strewn place unaware of its historic significance. On January 19th, 1903, the Methodist Church Epworth League established the site as a summer resort and gathering place. Its location was in a pleasant wooded meadow along Salt Creek three miles south and west of downtown Lincoln, Nebraska. And it was named "Epworth Lake Park".

The principal mode of transportation in those days was by train and streetcar or by horse drawn vehicles. However, a few people sported pleasure cars. So, in the beginning, three entrances were provided off from Calvert Street. The primary entrance, located at First Street, was for street cars. A gate for automobiles was 100 feet to the west. And a team gate was another 200 feet further west. Today, the only evidence of the original entrances is a heavy pipe guard at the automobile gate location. It was for protecting ticket takers from those dangerous contraptions called pleasure cars.

Epworth Lake Park is now part of a wild wasteland along Salt Creek known as "Wilderness Park". Several miles of trail winds through this wilderness. It enters the Epworth Lake Park through a unique brick and stucco gate having no identification markings. Our tour begins at this gate.

1. EPWORTH LAKE PARK GATE

The current gate located at First and Calvert, was constructed in the mid-1920s after electric

# A business district was located just this side of where the path disappears around a bend in Central Trail. Nine buildings housed a grocery store, a restaurant, a half dozen other businesses and a privies.

### 3. McCabe Bridge

Around the bend in Central Trail (Point 2) a modern footbridge spans a dry channel that used to be Salt Creek. The far end of this bridge rests on a concrete abutment that supported McCabe Bridge in Epworth Lake Park days. Remain of the near abutment for the extinct bridge has tumbled into the dry channel.


### 4. OPEN-AIR AUDITORIUM

Immediately beyond the Salt Creek channel bridge (Point 3) a side trail branches westward to the right off from Central Trail. This pathway follows what was Fitchie Avenue. And a 4000 seat open-air auditorium used to front on its left side.

On the right side were eight lots for concession stands that dispensed snacks, drinks and souvenirs. Naturally, the lot next to Central Avenue was dedicated for vending ice cream.

Peering into the scrub on the left side of Fitchie Trail about 75 feet west of Central Trail, a pedestal for a column that once supported the roof of the auditorium can be seen. No fooling. A straight-sided flat-topped stone is visible through the veil of brush, weeds, briars, thorny vines and arbor shadows. Search and you will find it.

trolley cars no longer served the facility. It was renovated in 1985 after the area became a part of Wilderness Park.

Before this site became an automobile entrance,  double streetcar tracks passed through the spot now <sup>occupied</sup> by the large arch of the gate. Incoming tracks curved sharply right on entering the park, then swept leftward in a circle that headed cars back toward the city. But before leaving the park they came abreast of a two part depot.

The depot extended inward from where the small lefthand arch of the gate is located. Passengers disembarked at the first part of the depot and lined up at a booth to pay admission to the park. Then the cars moved forward to the second part of the depot. City bound passengers, restlessly waiting on benches, would rise ~~en masse~~ <sup>insert</sup> and jostle ~~aboard~~. Eventually, the conductors would signal motormen by jirking a gong cord. The cars would lunge forward and go swinging and swaying into the obscure distance.

Now let's pass through the gate and see what surprises await us.

## 2. CENTRAL TRAIL

The stretch of wilderness trail before us used to be Central Avenue. Extending inward from the Epworth Lake Park gate (Point 1), it passes through what was the north campground. One hundred and seven numbered lots for tents, <sup>and open air, summer cottages</sup> were established along cross-avenues named Asbury, Ames, Simpson, Coke, Strawnridge and Heck. Four such campgrounds (subdivided into a total of 568 lots) made up the bulk of the  $32\frac{1}{3}$  acre park.

## 5. PEDESTAL DETAIL

A companion pedestal to the one featured at Point 4 can be found 30 feet farther down Fitchie Trail. <sup>But</sup> to reach it, one must conquer a fallen tree and bushwhack through tangled wilderness as described under 4.

A square impression in the top of the pedestal testifies that 8"x8" wood shafts once supported the heavy roof of an expansive building.

## 6. A TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY STRUCTURE

The size of a tree whose base embraces the third pedestal in this cluster, tells us the building was constructed early in the 20th century. This stone is located inward and a bit to the right of the one at Point 5.

## 7. AN IMMENSE BUILDING

Let's go ~~to what was~~ the back of the auditorium. To get there we'll continue a little farther west on Fitchie Trail to what I'll call "Esplanade Trail". It extends to the left southward through a level strip of land that was the heart core of Epworth Lake Park. The strip interconnected five principal buildings, a large parking lot, the lake and three campgrounds.

We will travel southward on Esplanade Trail to <sup>Re-entrance</sup> a loop trail that leads eastward back to Central Trail. We'll step off six or eight paces down the loop trail, then look back northward from where we came. There in tall grass and forest shadows we should find another auditorium pedestal. It tells us the structure was 130 feet square.

## 8. SYCAMORE AND PINE TREES

Wayfarers who have scanned the woodland canopy on the way to Point 7 may have discovered a secret. It is a wilderness-hidden long forgotten rectangle of 90-year-old sycamore<sup>and pine</sup> trees that once encompassed the auditorium. If these sentinels of the past could talk, they could tell about famous religious speakers-- such as William Jennings Bryon, Billy Sunday and Carrie Nation--addressing<sup>standing room</sup> audiences of up to 5,000 people. There were indeed great voices that shouted into this wilderness.

## 9. POWERHOUSE

Evidence of a power house is situated about 50 yards on south from Point 7 on Esplanade Trail. There stands a concrete pedestal on which stationary machinery once was anchored. It is guarded by a cluster of trees on the right side of the trail.

## 10. FOUNTAIN

On the left side of the trail, just over the bank of the now dry Epworth Lake, rubble<sup>or track</sup> from a fountain can be seen. The fountain provided the only running water in this place of rustic repose. (Hand pumped wells were expediently located throughout the park.) The fountain was a horizontal length of pipe mounted about 30 inches above a concrete slab. Water flowed from a row of holes to provide drinking places. Waste water ran into the lake to stabilize its level. And the fountain provided entertainment for children who pressed fingers on some holes

to make water squirt higher out of others.

#### 11. BOAT DOCK

A commercial boat dock (of which no evidence remains) was located on an island in the lake across from the fountain. At this point we are on the west end of the lake.

#### 12. JUNIOR PAVILION

About 50 feet south of the powerhouse (Point 9) a remnant of the Junior Pavilion may be found. It is a well hidden portion of foundation located on the right side of Esplanade Trail.

#### 13. HOTEL AND EPWORTH HALL

I have found no remains of the 150 bed hotel, which was located between the auditorium and the powerhouse. Nor have I found a trace of Epworth Hall in the dense wilderness south of the trail. It enhanced the YMCA camp about 100 yards south and east of the Junior Pavilion (Point 12).

#### 14. EPWORTH BRIDGE

Let's follow the meandering trail around to the south side of the lake to where Epworth Bridge was located. Along the way, let's scan the contour for grade lines of once proud Hamilton Avenue. Also keep an eye out for drainage tubes running across under it. When we get <sup>where the trail turns sharply right to follow the lake bank,</sup> about 70 yards from the Junior Pavilion (Point 12), let's peek over the rim of the lake and look for three parallel concrete footings spaced out across the dry bed. Wooden piers that once supported Epworth Bridge rested on these

footings.

Originally, the lake had been a gooseneck in Salt Creek. But after the stream had cut a shorter path, men converted the gooseneck into a racetrack-like lake with Oxford Island at its center. Epworth Bridge carried Central Avenue foot traffic accross the south stretch of the lake onto the island. And Wesley Bridge shuffled the traffic on over the north stretch back to the mainland.

#### 15. REST STOP

~~A rustic split log bench and a couple of large logs are provided for resting at the junction of Hamilton and Central Trails. These heavy objects also serve as barriers for preventing~~  
casuals <sup>on Central Avenue Trail</sup> from becoming casualties. Just beyond them is a 20 foot vertical drop into Salt Creek Ditch. The ditch was dug early in the 1940's to put an end to desasterous flooding. And it is the reason for the old Salt Creek channel being dry accross Epworth Lake Park and on northward a half-mile through Wilderness Park to Van Dorn Street.

#### 16. LOG CABIN

In crossing Epworth Lake, Central Trail dips down sloping banks, crosses dry lake beds and ascends the opposite banks... kind of like the Isrealite's Red Sea crossing. On Oxford Island, the trail passes near scattered rubble. This rubble is from a fireplace that had warmed many a heart in its day: it was in a log cabin that was rented to small groups of teenagers and young adults



for wienie roasts and storytelling parties.

In those days, boys wore knickerbocker suits outfits... to church, to school and even on camping trips. I hated them! The stockings faded to an ackey green because World War I had deprived the USA of quality dyes from Germany.

Visitors touring the park who have a full tank of energy, might take a side trip to Oxford Island to examine the log cabin remains. Those less venturesom might opt to sit on the rest stop bench and take in the awesomeness of Salt Creek Ditch. Or they might explore nearby for evidence of a second tier of Epworth Lake Park history.

#### 17. SECOND HISTORICAL TIER

A mysterious tile-lined pit can be found along the bank of Epworth Lake near the intersection of Hamilton and Central Trails. The pit no doubt had been established beneath a yearround cabin home... possibly for accomodating an underfloor furnace. Similar pits and other incongruous objects can be found throughout the park. These relics testify of a second tier of Epworth Lake Park history.

On May 3rd, 1930, title to the land was returned to former owner, Allen Fields. This ended 27 years of tenure by the Nebraska Conference of the Epworth League and began a period of leasing lots for yearround living. It has been said that 90 cabin homes were built before a disastrous <sup>1935</sup> flood

put an end to living there. I have located remains of possibly a dozen cabins and found a few that survived the flood relocated over on First Street between Calvert and Pioneers.



It would require another tour to explore second tier sites. So let's get on with this one.

### 18 SLUICE GATE

From the convergence of Hamilton and Central Trails at Point 15, a single Wilderness Park Trail leads on around the east end of Epworth Lake. The next point of interest is where the trail dips into a depression. This depression is a sluice for draining the lake. Abutments for its gate can be found hidden in a dense thicket of scrag, weeds, stickery bushes and fallen trees off the left side of the trail.

Close scrutiny of the abutments will reveal verticle slots for holding the gate... like slots in window sashes hold sliding windows. But the sluice gate consisted of short sections of thick planking standing on edge, <sup>with</sup> one slid down on another to develop a desired depth of water in the lake.

### 19. SALT CREEK DITCH BRIDGE

Wilderness Park Trail continues northward from the sluice (Point 18) to a unique modern bridge over Salt Creek Ditch. The trail crosses this bridge and extends southward six miles or so through wilderness to Saltillo Road.

The bridge not only is a long wooden arch spanning a wide deep man-made gulch, but one must climb a steep stile to reach its deck. No doubt this obstacle is to discourage taking horses or motor vehicles across the bridge.

20. THE HOMESTRETCH

The homestretch of our tour continues on northward on a well worn path. The path dips as it crosses the dry Salt Creek channel. Then it skirts around outside the extinct north campground back to the gate where the tour began.

But the thought of finding second tier relics in the trackless jungle that was the north campground, might lure venturesome tourists. The relics may be found there in the trees and on the terra firma. But the journey will be more firma with less terra if a watchful eye is kept out for sticky bushes and fallen tree limbs. Bushwhackers will come out onto Central Trail and can exit northward accross the <sup>trail</sup> bridge and out through the Epworth Lake Park gate.

Thank you for allowing me to be your guide.

Walter R. Meyer

1891- Epworth started

1896- Full Fledged assembly

1897- Lincoln Park 200 acres. 2000 people

1898- Jumbo tabernacle 120' x 170'. Seats 5000.  
Center of Camp. Will seat more than the  
Amphitheatre, Epworth Hall seats 1,000. New  
bridge south of Epworth Hall, large assembly  
restaurant

1901 - 15 ton of straw for beds. Water  
came from Asylum wells. New Vast Pavillion  
assembly made from 10 ounce army duck.  
10,000 people, police patrol the grounds  
day and night.

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1903- 34 acres. new home with Oak, walnut,  
ash, elm, new Auditorium. largest in state,  
24' in the center section, outside post 11'.  
Plus overhead ventilation. Seats 4000. Audiences  
filled the auditorium with people standing  
surrounding it

1904- Epworth Hotel built a frame, shingle roof  
structure with accommodations for 150 guests.  
\$.25 - \$.50 a night. Cottage built for caretaker  
of park. All streets have been named and  
signs mark their intersection with Central  
Ave. East end of auditorium raised 2 feet.  
(The seats there more desirable). Wells of

pure water on all parts of ground. Steam laundry, 700 tents, Hotel Epworth, lighted, electricity, water, screened windows. Nov. water was drained from lake into Salt creek and was found that the Springs that fed the lake were missing, the lake was dredged and enlarged, its east boundry so it matches the west. New power pumping plant was installed at the west end and kept in Operation all summer. The <sup>planted</sup> park forest had 300 young elms. The making of a new and more desirable camping ground on the east shore. A house was built 20' x 40' (800 sq ft.) for storage of assembly furniture.

1906 - Purchase 6 acres of ground west edge of park to remove the tying grounds for horses farther from the auditorium and camping tents. The space formerly used for horses have been planted by 500 forest trees. Auditorium has been remodeled, placing the plat form south and raising the rear seats, this will improve the accoustic for the speakers. As of June 2 the 2nd smaller auditorium (Epworth Hall) will be constructed prior to the opening of the assembly. Arrangements have been made to build and conduct a bathhouse on the grounds, with accomodation for both shower and tub bathing, with seperat apartments for men and women. Garbage co will be provided. Resturant meals cost \$15 to first class grocery stands, meats, melons,

Fruits, bakery stands etc.

1907 - 2 Auditoriums only one in the United States

1908 - All streets cindered, good fishing, Oxford Isk is the play spot of the assembly. hammocks, numerous swings, 20<sup>th</sup> Century slide. More people than any other year attended.

1909 - Tennis and baseball available. Trees hundreds of thousands of them. The Kindernook offers a safe play spot for tots age 2-7 with nurses (no fee)

1911 - 40 Acres, no mosquito's, 200 more tents than in 1910.

1912. Boy Scout camp tents in groups, all eat in a common tent. \$2000 spent on installation of sanitary sewage, 100 large galvanised trash cans with lids, 12 wells with water, so cold that it does not need ice. Water analysis by chemist every camp meeting. Mosquito's and gnats are rarely evidence and never the least troublesome

1913 - Post office mail twice daily, 700 tents. Oxford Isle a block in length with swings, slides and Kindernook. New steel bridge across salt creek.

1914 - Tent cottage to be erected in the south and west section of the park, standard size is 12' x 20', 240 sq. ft., with lower and upper pullman berths part of the construction, quite a number have been constructed and others being built. Price

of good materials, including rain proof roof, match floor, canvas and screened sides is \$118 with labor \$150. Rental of ground is \$2 for assembly, \$5 all summer. Large parking spaces for cars. Roberts Cave less than one mile due east. You can see signs for the cave from the park.

1915 - V.P. Thomas Marshall (2nd time vice president visited Epworth). Governor of Tennessee. Malcom Patterson was there too.

1916 - Rich blue grass sod, fine drainage, modern toilets, <sup>grounds</sup> valued at \$35,000. Hastings and Lincoln districts, have headquarters buildings on the property.

1926 - Shall Epworth continue? There is considerable debt on the property, about one half of the debt is from the original purchase price. The rest is due from the lean years, suffered after the war. The buildings needed repair.

1930 - Land quick deeded back to original owner.

1931 - There are 80 privately owned cottages on the ground. A cottage can be built for less than \$200. Paved and graveled roads lead directly in the grounds.

EPWORTH LAKE PARK

THEN AND NOW

by

Walter R. Meier

October 23, 1987

Come 'round my friends

I'll spin a tale

'Bout a ghostly place

'Long Wilderness Trail.

I remember family outings in the 1920's on which we kids clung to our seats as trolley cars pitched and rolled at full speed southward down First Street from Van Dorn. They decelerated abruptly on approaching Epworth Lake Park at Calvert Street. Then, while they ground through a turnaround loup, eager passengers filled the isles before the cars reached the depot. The moment the last foot touched land, conductors jerked gong cords twice to signal motormen. And the lonely street-cars would take off to the north and gradually disappear toward Lincoln in search of another load of jolly friends.



We'd skip and dance a city-block distance south-southeasterly along Central Avenue to a mall made up of a half dozen buildings. (Food and other visitor needs were dispensed there.) Then we'd head southward across McCabe Bridge over Salt Creek to the midway.

The midway branched off from Central Avenue to the right in an arc following the northwest shore of Epworth Lake. It featured an auditorium, a hotel, a post office, a powerhouse, a junior pavilion, a fountain and a dozen or so concession booths for dispensing soft drinks, ice cream, souvenirs, etc. The midway was about a city block long.

Central Avenue veered slightly leftward away from the midway. It made a beeline approach to Epworth Lake. This body of water surely was a gooseneck in the course of Salt Creek at one time. But in Epworth Lake Park days the creek snaked around the east end of the oval shaped lake. It served as the east boundary of the park and part of the south boundary. And it outlined a "lazy U" shaped strip of land roughly three hundred feet wide that embraced the north, east and south shores of the lake.

Centrally located Oxford Island gave the lake a racetrack-like configuration. Lovers, families and loners paddled rowboats and canoes around it. Other people strolled to-and-fro across Wesley Bridge--the Central Avenue access to the tree shaded island. And many a good time was had there: renting boats, picnicing, bench chitchating or playground frolicking provided festivity for all who visited the island.

Chautauqua era campers lived in rows of tents and screened summer houses that

STOOD IN CHUMMY ROWS LIKE CHAR-  
ACTERS IN CAPITAL LETTER COPY.

Five hundred and sixty street numbered plots were divided among four separate compounds. One was associated with the mall north of Salt Creek. One was located north of the lake and one south of it on the "lazy U" strip of land. And the fourth was sandwiched between the midway and a long narrow automobile parking lot that stretched out along the west boundary of the park.

Automobiles did not own people in those days. In fact, a person could stand at 33rd and "O" Street for fifteen minutes and not see one go by. And space for only a few over 500 of them at Epworth Lake Park was adequate...even though 5000 visitors reportedly gathered there at times. The main entrance was dominated by the streetcar depot. And automobiles were obliged to use the Team Gate located about 400' west of First Street--just west of the Salt Creek bridge on Calvert Street. This gate was named in the late 1890's during the horse and buggy days.

A men's dormitory known as Epworth Hall and a YMCA camp occupied a nitch between the south and the west camp grounds. The camp shared the west half of the south boundary of the park with the ends of the west camp ground and automobile parking area. Salt Creek came directly north to the boundary midpoint then turned abruptly eastward to become the other half of it. The sharp curve in the creek marked the east line of the YMCA camp and provided a spot where young men could fish.

Nine hand pumped wells and three pairs of outdoor privies complete the list of utilities that served visitors at the park.

Several year-around homes were constructed late in Epworth Lake Park history. People lived in them into the 1940's after the park ceased being an assembly place. And a few of those cottages can now be found along First Street north of Pioneer Boulevard. They were re-located because of flooding problems.

It has been mistakenly reported that Epworth Lake was erased when a dam was dynamited. In truth, a 12' long, 4' high and 2' thick concrete penstock which controlled the level of the lake is still in place. It is in a shallow drainway at the east end of the lake bed. A wooden gate for impounding water no longer is kept in grooves provided for holding one in the penstock.

The dynamited dam was on Salt Creek a half mile north of Epworth Lake Park. It held water in the creek channel for a Burlington Railroad pumping station. The station was located a bit south of Van Dorn on the west side of First Street. Yet water which was backed up in the gully through Epworth Lake Park made Salt Creek more interesting to visitors. Many a photograph was taken of people crossing McCabe Bridge on their way to the midway area.

Anyone wishing to see physical evidence of things I have told might drive the half mile south from Van Dorn on First Street. There an unusual brick and stucco gate will be found. Leave your car in a parking lot provided east of the gate.

Examine this main entranceway to Epworth Lake Park. It has been beautifully restored as a monument for helping posterity find the historic spot.

The gate was built during mid-park history. Streetcar service had ended. And a small automobile parking lot adjacent to the turn-around had been enlarged to accomodate all visitor automobiles.

A well maintained trail--integrant of Wilderness Park--begins at the gate. It heads south-southeasterly along what was once Central Avenue. Proceeding beyond what was the north campground it passes through what was the mall. Then it crosses a modern version of McCabe Bridge over what used to be the Salt Creek channel that contained impounded water.

The north abutment of the original bridge has tumbled into the dry creek bed. But the south one is being used for the present bridge.

Trodding on sacred ground where thousands upon thousands of Epworth Lake Park visitors once walked, the trail leads sightseers past the location of the auditorium on the right where William Jennings Bryan and Billy Sunday once spoke; and on the left the central campground where a forest of tents once stood seemingly as thick as the wild growth that now inhabits the park.

Evidence of the auditorium can be found by walking 110' westward down a side loup trail. It leads to the right directly off the south end of McCabe Bridge. Search in the wild growth 35' to the left for a pair of concrete frustums. And 45' further in and to the right for another one. It is at the foot of a scrub oak bush. The frustums were foundations for 8"x8" posts that supported

the roof of the open air auditorium.

Tiptoeing forward on the main trail down Central Avenue, the path soon dips into the north bed of Epworth Lake.

Imagine yourself in a rowboat looking up at people on Wesley Bridge watching you float by underneath.

While crossing Oxford Island, watch for a pile of rubble on the left near the south shore. This rubble was once a fireplace in a log cabin where many a wiener was roasted over live coals on its hearth.

The trail dips again where Epworth Bridge once kept feet dry as people crossed the south channel of the lake to reach the south campground. And a bit further down the trail a rustic bench straddles the path. It is the only barrier between travelers and a vertical drop into the present Salt Creek canyon.

Sit a bit and enjoy the spectacular view. The curve in Salt Creek on the right is where YMCA men fished in Epworth Lake Park days. But the drainway was less than 100' wide and not more than 15' deep at that time.

On the trail again, follow the path eastward along Taylor Avenue. Then turn northward on Herben Avenue skirting the east end of the lake. A watchful eye will help locate its shallow drain flume.

A bold heart might encourage a sightseer to slash through weeds and brush 80' to the left. The penstock which once held water in the lake should be found there.

Continuing northward on the trail, trekkers pass through the east end of the central campground on Embury Avenue. And along the way,

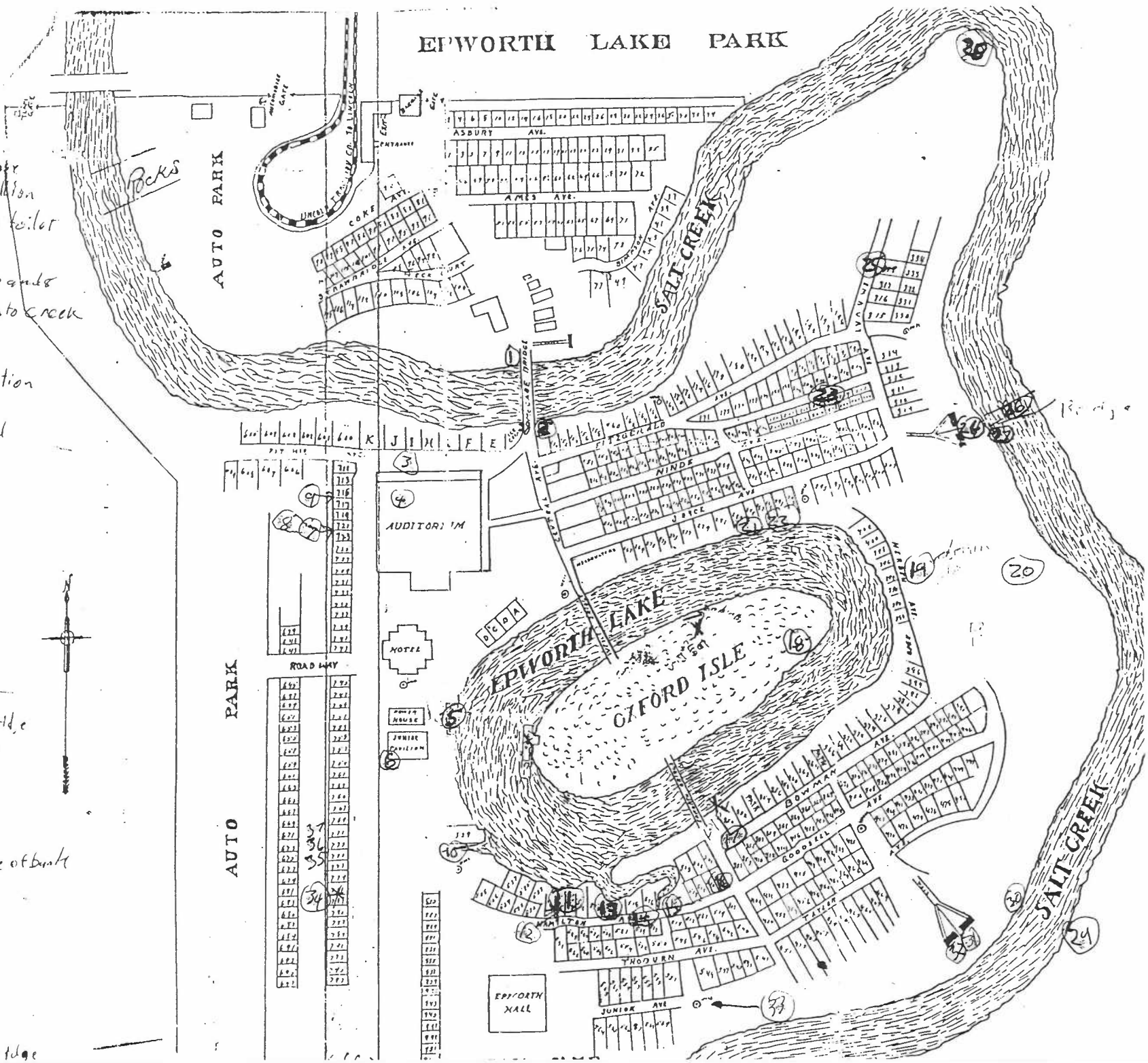
the romance of the occasion is sure to be broken by a short side trip out on a unique arched wooden bridge over Salt Creek. One will peer with awe into the depth of the artless chasm. And back on the trail it will not be possible to return to the excitement of adventure. However, this should provide an opportunity to place time into proper prospect. While walking along the north bank of a shallow dry hollow that used to be the bed of Salt Creek, the past can be compared with the present way of draining a watershed basin. But your reflections soon will be shattered by the surprise of arriving back at the parking area where the journey began.

Employers on this  $1\frac{1}{4}$  mile adventure might want to take along an Epworth Lake Park map #170929 which can be ordered from the Lancaster County Engineering Department. Allow a couple of days for its production. Contact Rick Shaffer or Ken Sherwood. And when picking up the map try to get Ken to talk about the park grounds. He grew up in the neighborhood and was helpful to me in pinning down factual information about it.

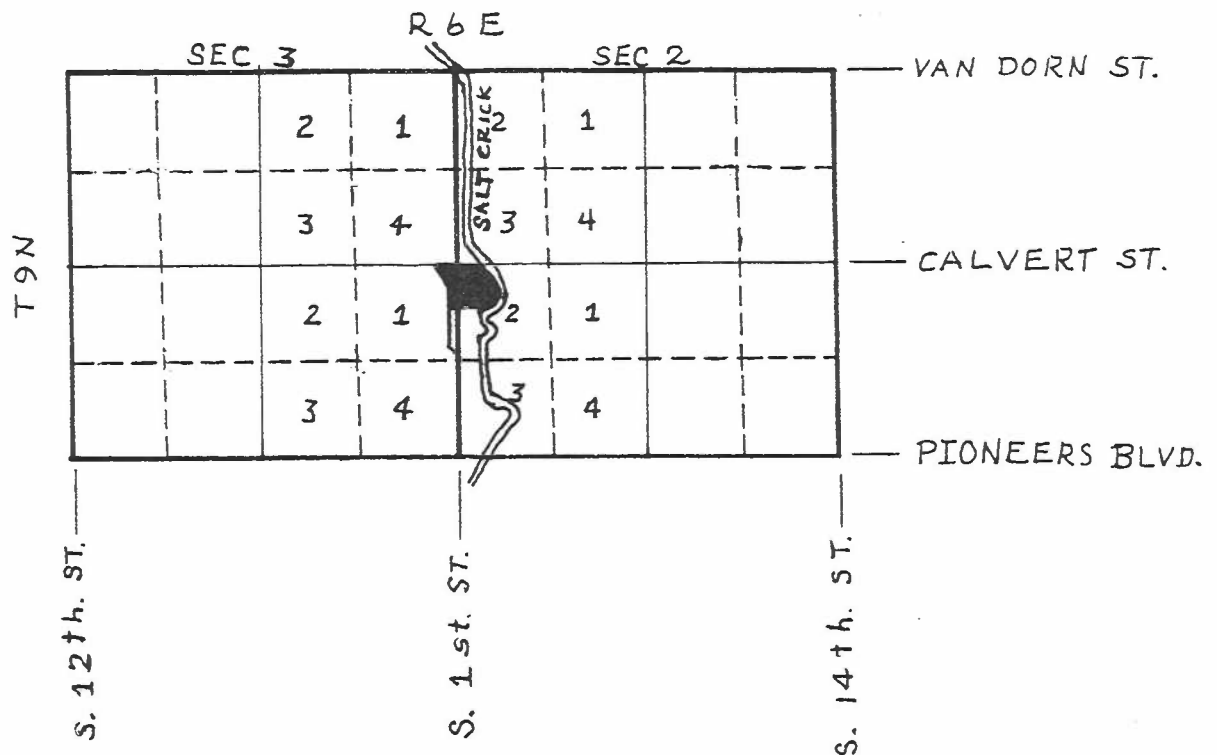
Visitors concerned about the environment might take a bag along and pick up some of the beer containers that clutter the park.

  
Walter R. Meier

1. Bridge over salt creek
2. Footings
3. S. camera and pipes
4. Sewer line on trail
5. Foundations across park
6. corner footing of jr. pavilion
7. Foundation dump and 1940 toilet
8. 1940 toilet
9. foundation ~~hunk~~ of tanks
10. Culverts dumping into creek
11. big foundation
12. brick in 11. foundation
13. foundation
14. Sewer line under road
15. footing
16. footings small privy
17. footing
18. log house remains
19. water gate
20. corner block
21. Old water pipe
22. pit with garbage dump
23. foundation - slab
24. foundation - straight from bridge
25. large foundation, tile here
26. foot bridge over creek
27. slabs by bridge
28. Culvert, street?
29. slabs dump on bank
30. pipe coming out of side of bank
31. foundation
32. #
33. well
34. slab on 1 str.
35. water pump
36. water pipe
37. telephone pole
38. culvert by creek bridge







### EPWORTH LAKE PARK

Lot 65	Lancaster County
Lots 38, 65, 88 & 89	Register of Deeds
SW 1/4 SEC 2 T9N R6E	24.05 Acres
SE 1/4 SEC 3 T9N R6E	8.31 Acres
	<u>32.36 Acres</u>

Assignment Book M Page 443 Jan. 19, 1903

Nebr. Conf. Epworth League ← Charles T. Boggs & A.W. Fields

Deeds Book 122 Page 329 October 12, 1904

Nebr. Conf. Epworth League ← Charles T. Boggs & A.W. Fields

(The property was purchased with the financial help of the Nebraska Wesleyan University.)

(A portion of the track was deeded over to the Lincoln Traction Co. for their turn-around loop for streetcars. } Deeds Book 122 Page 574  
A quit deed for this land, returning ownership to the Nebr. Conf. Epworth League was negotiated on May 3, 1930 -- Deeds Book 285 Page 103)

The property was returned to the Fields family with a quit deed:

Deeds Book 285 Page 102 May 3, 1930

Allen Fields ← Nebr. Epworth League

# EPWORTH LAKE PARK

LOT 38  
0.13A

LOT 65  
0.61A

LOT 88  
3.80A

LOT 65  
24.05A

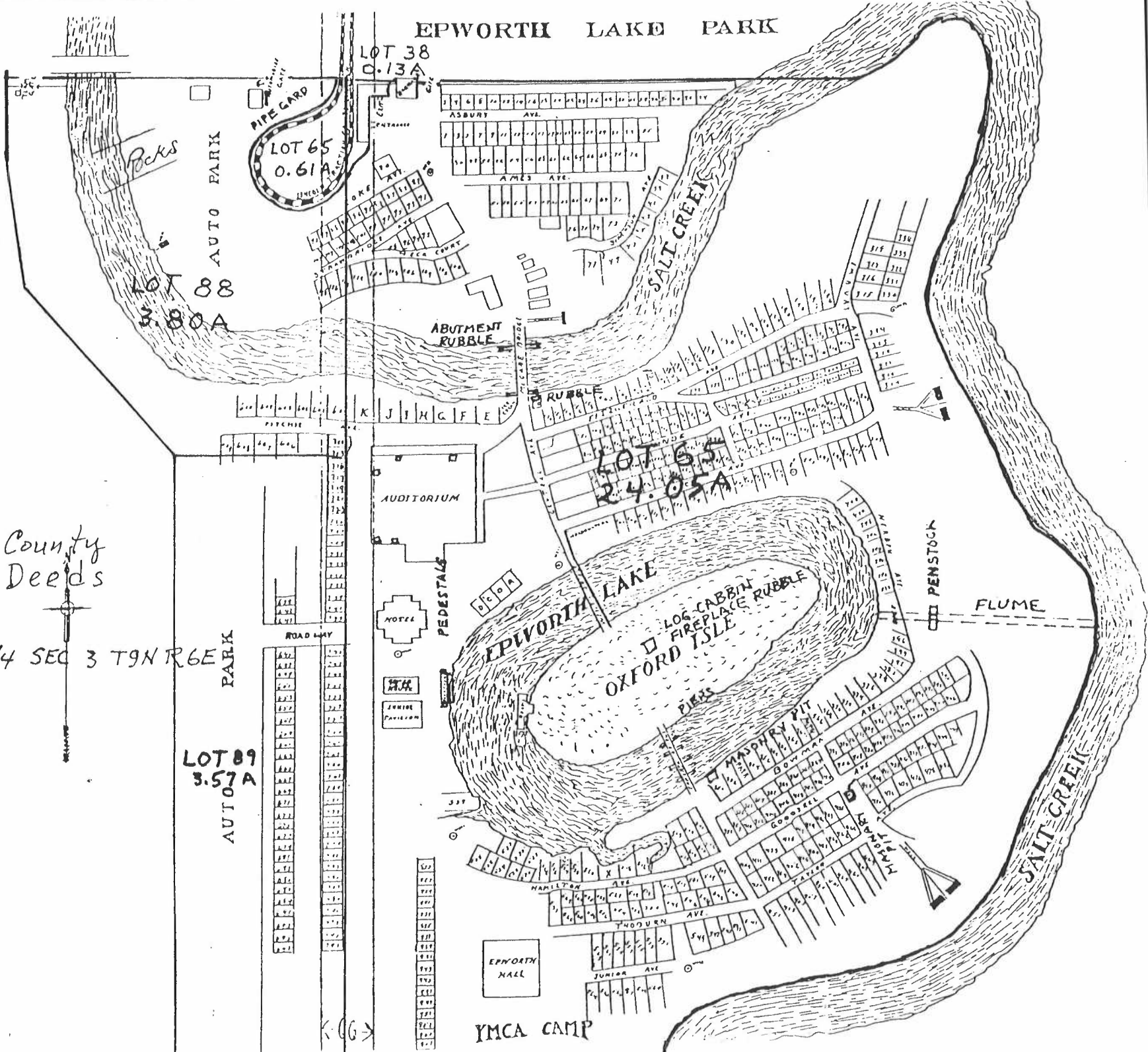
LOT 89  
3.57A  
AUTO PARK

Lancaster County  
Register of Deeds

0.13  
0.61  
3.80  
3.57

SE 1/4 SEC 3 T9N R6E

8.31  
24.05  
32.36



## EPWORTH PARK

Lot 65

S 1/4 2 T9N R6E 24.05 Acres

Lot 65, 38, 39 & 40

S 1/4 3 T9N R6E 8.31 Acres  
32.36 Acres

(see map on reverse side)

Ken Sherwood (County Engr. Office)  
2011 W. Rokeby Road (21)  
told me, "Arnot Folsom owned  
the log cabin on the island  
of Epworth Lake Park for  
some time after the park  
closed. He rented it for  
weekend stays, but allowed  
me to stay there free of  
charge. I do not know how  
to reach him now-a-days."

Lincoln Journal  
1-1-87 "Memories  
of Old Parks"  
by David Swartz-  
ander  
says Epworth  
park opened  
in 1898  
Incorrect

Correct  
The deed  
file shows  
a 1903  
assignment  
A deed was  
granted in  
1904.

Clipping in Library Ref. Dept.  
Capital City Sun, Thurs Apr. 14, 1966,  
"Old Park Recalls Grand Era,"  
by Arthur B. Case.

"The 40-Acre park, established  
in 1903 no longer is in use."

One can see the brick and stucco  
entrance at 1st and Calvert  
with a remnant of its electric  
lights which which once shined  
in the twilight, spelling  
out the name of the park."

Dan Meier copied an article  
at the Historical Society without  
marking where it came from.  
The title is "Great Camp Meetings  
of Epworth Park." Several errors  
appear in it. However some light  
is shed. (1) In 1896, the Nebraska  
(It was determined to establish Epworth Park)

## Epworth Park part of series

The history of Lincoln continues  
with a close-up on Wilderness Park,  
which includes the former Epworth  
Park. The city of Lincoln's Citizen In-  
formation Center and Community  
Lincoln Video, support group for citi-  
zens using the cable access channels,  
will present the videotape history of  
Epworth Park at these air times:

Next Sunday, 7 p.m.; Jan. 18, 10 p.m.;  
Jan. 19, 5 p.m.; Jan. 20, 7 p.m.; Jan. 21, 8  
p.m.; Jan. 22, 9 p.m.; Jan. 23, 4 p.m., 9 p.m.

Few Lincolnites remember when  
the area was a great amusement  
park (Electric Park) or when as Ep-  
worth Park it hosted the largest as-  
semblies of people in the West. Hun-  
dreds of tents covered the grounds  
that included a pavilion seating up to  
5,000 people. Two shows a night were  
needed to entertain 8,000 people with  
such distinguished speakers as Billy  
Sunday, William Jennings Bryan and  
Carrie Nation. A large lake (now  
gone) provided other recreation in  
the early part of the century.

The story is told by Henry Filbert  
and Ardell Endorf and is based on  
recollections by Claybourne Waggon-  
er, Vesta McKinney and many  
others.

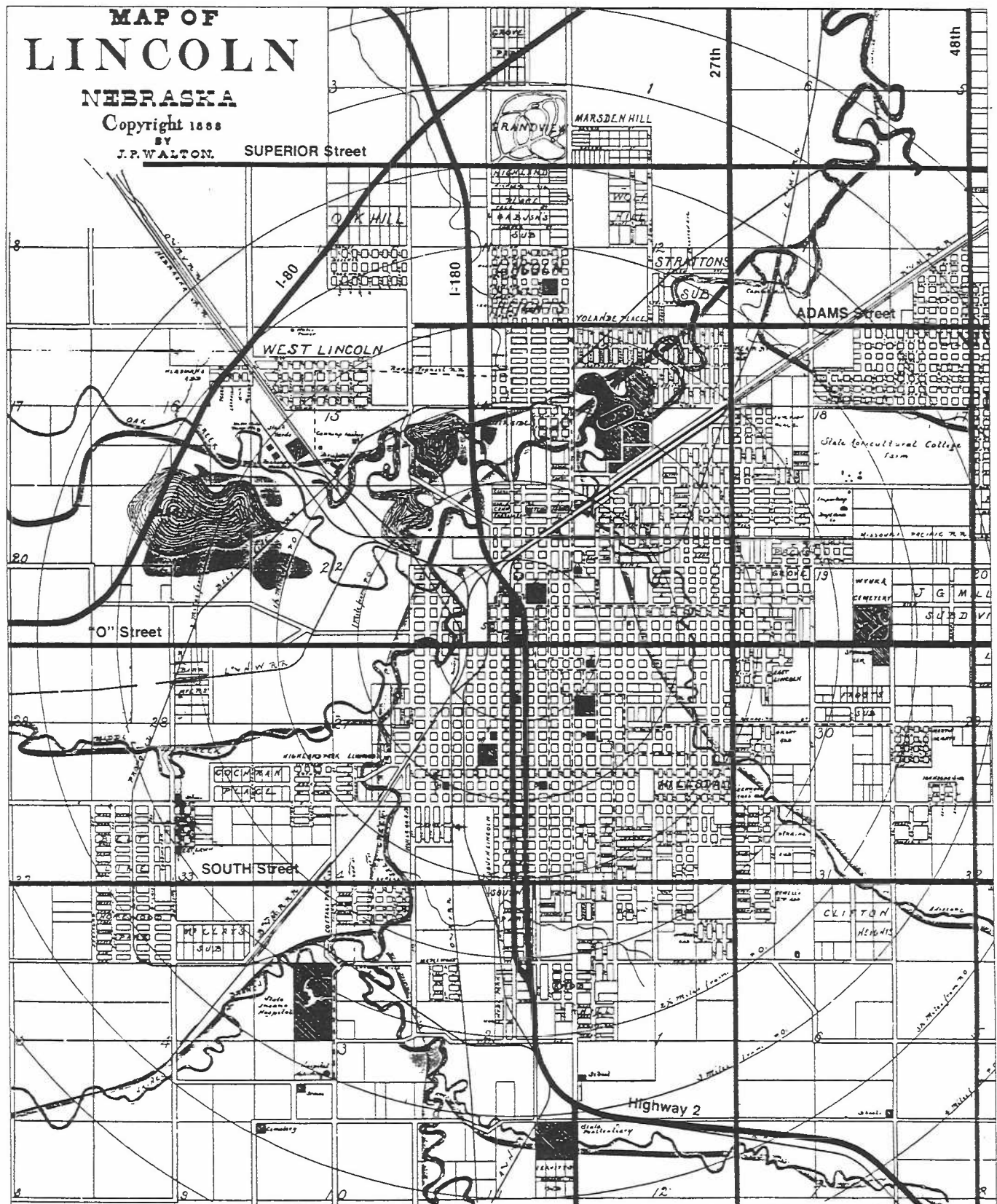
Epworth League met in  
Lincoln Park, bounded  
by VanDorn on the north,  
Calvert on the south, First  
St. on the east and about  
what would be SW 6th St.  
The land description would  
be NE 1/4 3-T9N-R6E  
The park was laid out by  
H.C. Holt.

In 1916, 450 incandescent  
lights and 12 arc lights  
were added (at the  
corner of 1st and VanDorn  
between 1st St. and Salt C.  
and (this corner) was  
named "Electric Park."

Later, under the ownership  
of the CB&Q (who dammed  
the creek on the south  
side of VanDorn and  
pumped water from it  
for locomotives) it was  
leased to the Boy Scouts  
for "Camp Minus Ruya"  
(at least a portion on  
the west side of the  
creek.)

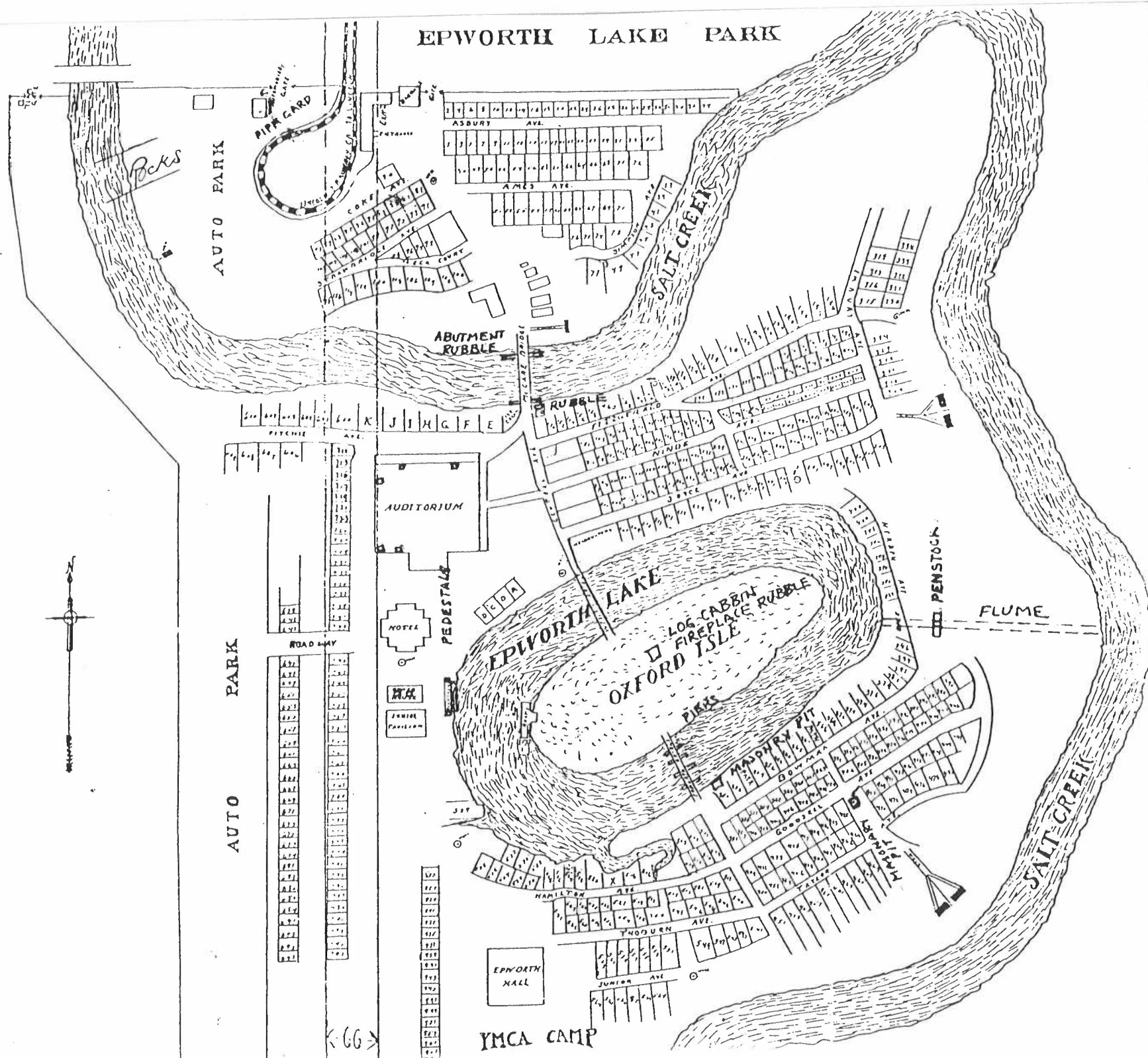
Epworth Lake, Lincoln & Elec  
parks are scrambled in mind.

An 1888 Lincoln map shows existing and proposed divisions of the city, original stream courses and larger wetlands. Most wetlands have been filled and streams channelized. Stream courses and standing water today are shown in blue. Several principal streets and highways are indicated in red. Salt incrustations, opposite, form on seasonally dry wetlands as saline water evaporates.



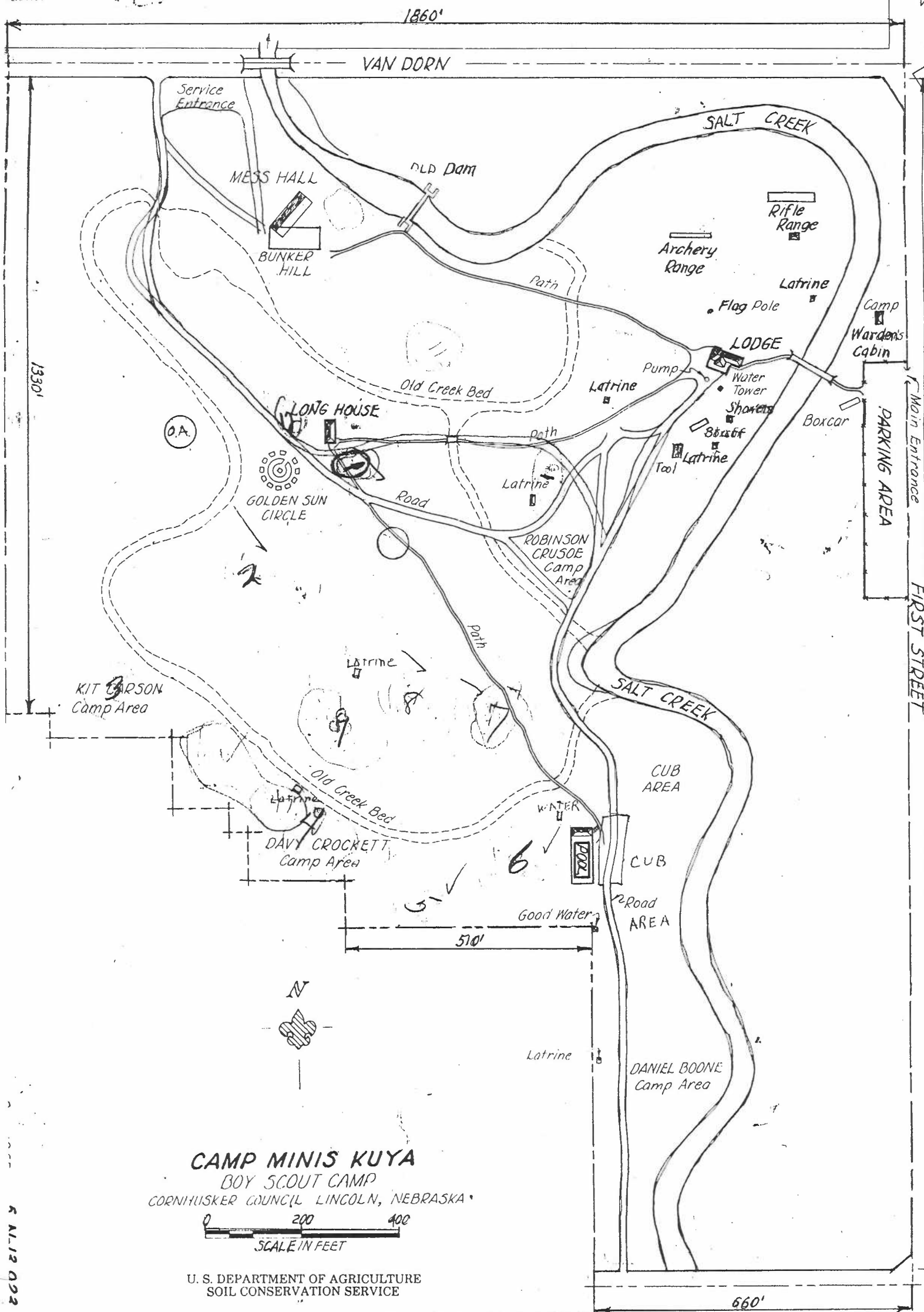
COURTESY OF NEBRASKA STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

# EPWORTH LAKE PARK



from  
Dan Meier





# CAMP MINIS KUYA

BOY SCOUT CAMP

CORNHUSKER COUNCIL LINCOLN, NEBRASKA



U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
SOIL CONSERVATION SERVICE

From Cornhusker Council

Dec 1955 -  
S, N -13,923

# Memories of old parks linger

By David Swartzlander  
Journal Writer

**T**ake a walk through Wilderness Park and perhaps you can still hear the echo of famous voices in the breeze.

Gaze at the lake at Capitol Beach and you can almost hear the screams of the kids, blown to you on an ageless wind, on the roller coaster as it careens downhill.

Epworth Lake and Capitol Beach parks — once the entertainment and resort centers of Lincoln, drawing thousands of people — are long gone now, washed out by floods and driven out by the automobile.

But look closely. The telltale signs of their existence still are there.

Enter Wilderness Park at First and Van Dorn streets and you'll walk on old Epworth Park, the sylvan spot of thousands of Methodists for more than 40 years. Can't believe it? Look at the ground. They're there, you

just have to search through the weeds to find the foundations of scores of park buildings. Epworth's lake is gone, but you can still stumble upon the pilings of bridges that crossed the water in one of the nation's most popular summer gathering places. Lincoln historian James McKee conducts a tour each spring to show disbelievers.

**I**n fact, Epworth Park once was noted as the largest gathering place of people in North America, at one time even exceeding the original Chautauqua at Lake Chautauqua, N.Y., McKee said.

Visitors came from Nebraska and neighboring states to hear William Jennings Bryan, Vice President Charles W. Fairbanks, Sen. Robert M. LaFollette of Wisconsin, Booker T. Washington, Billy Sunday and various other senators and dignitaries.

Epworth Park opened in 1897. It was capable of accommodating more than 2,000 campers and had a

lake with an island large enough for a picnic and playground area, a boys' dormitory with a capacity of 60, a summer hotel with accommodations for 150 guests, four restaurants, a grocery and a bakery. The 40-acre park first was meant for religious camp meetings but evolved into a site for Chautauquas. At the height of its popularity, about 8,000 season tickets were sold and two productions an evening were needed. The park's Great Hall held more than 5,000 spectators for lectures or concerts.

**M**ethodist families made it a practice to spend their vacations at Epworth.

It had all the frills of an up-to-date summer gathering place, including a nursery to allow mothers to attend services without worrying about their small children falling in the lake.

The lake was an idyllic spot, and would have been

See OLD PARKS on page 4

SAT AUG 1 1987 J

From  
page 1

## Old parks

perfect this summer for cooling off. In fact, it once was called an "ideal place for inquisitive children to fall in; it was a passable body of water for canoeing; (and) it was a concert hall for the most raucous choir of bullfrogs in the U.S...."

Amusement was allowed, but evangelism was stressed, unique among assemblies of its time. That note of religious fervor brought huge crowds from the surrounding territory. Billy Sunday drew rousing, record crowds both times he spoke there. Carrie Nation, the barroom smasher from Kansas, brought her anti-liquor campaign there.

**A**t the same time, a more commercial resort was cropping up a few miles to the north.

In the 1890s, it was called Burlington Beach because it was

built on land of the Burlington Railroad. Its mineral waters drew people who felt they could benefit from the "medicinal" properties of the water.

Steamboat rides on the Queen of the Blue carried 50 people on the lake. The pleasure resort, which once drew 150,000 people in a summer, was the scene of a presidential campaign speech by William McKinley in 1896.

The beach arose out of the failure to mine salt from underground springs. In 1906, the name was changed to Capitol Beach Park and it became Lincoln's Coney Island. Carnival rides, a saltwater swimming pool, a park area and a ballroom were the main attractions.

A magnificent wooden roller coaster dominated the park

in the 1930s. Electric bumper cars clattered. Squeals from the Fun House pierced the air. Neon lights brightened the night sky.

**N**ow, the Capitol Beach housing development stands there. The amusement park was closed in 1962.

It and Epworth Park succumbed to much the same problem — progress.

The radio put an end to Epworth Park. Chautauquas no longer drew inland dwellers who could turn a knob or press a button and listen daily to what they went miles once a year to enjoy. Crowds dwindled. Debts dogged the management. Finally, a flood wiped out Epworth Park in 1942. High water lashed at the buildings. The 90 cabins that supplied lodging were damaged. The grounds were covered with silt. The

auditorium was sold for lumber for a defense installation.

At Capitol Beach, it was the car, not the radio, that sank the amusement park. With the car, came freedom to travel farther for entertainment. Cars made it possible to go to Omaha's Peony Park, which was a more professional amusement park, or to other more distant attractions — even Disneyland.

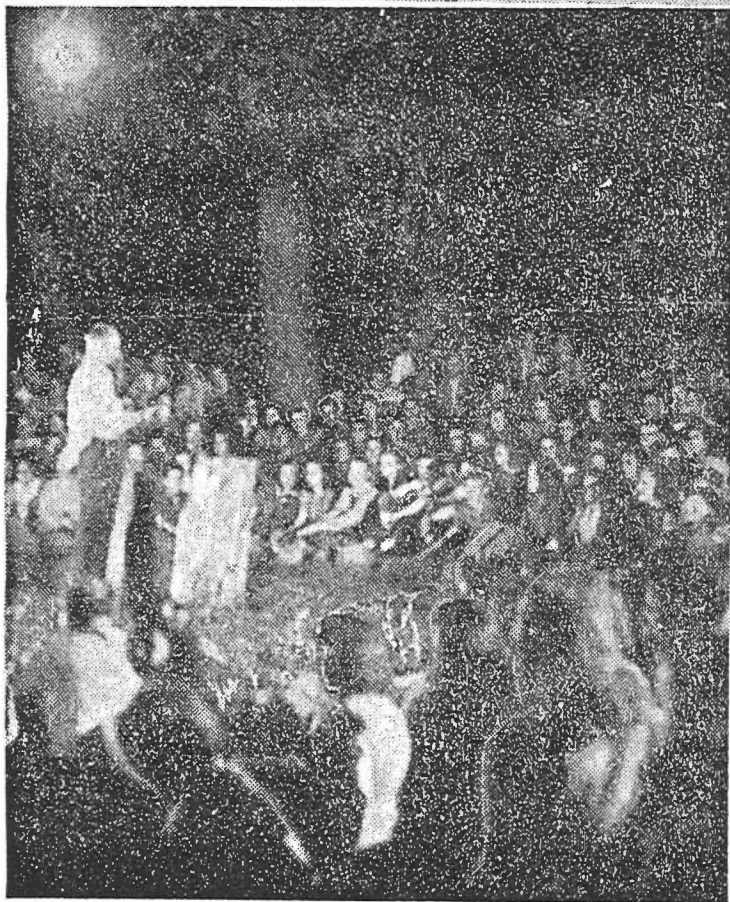
Television came along, too, and families watched it rather than spend a night at the amusement park, McKee said.

In 1962, the S.E. Copple family bought the land to build a residential development.

The Fun House, the skating rink and all the rides came tumbling down, lost forever. But the memories for many Lincolmites remain.



# 'Gone Are The D



By GEORGE FISHER.

**EPWORTH PARK** may be sold.

Nebraska's annual Methodist conference voted permission to Epworth board of control a week ago Saturday to dispose of it.

The sylvan spot southwest of Lincoln, mecca of thousands of Methodists with their families for more than forty years, has no further place in the present program of the church that sponsored it.

The annual assembly of Nebraska conference Epworth league grew to be for a time second only to one or two summer gathering places in the whole United States. Place on its platform were coveted by renowned speakers and artists of this and other nations. Presidents, generals, prelates, senators, great evangelists brought messages from the outside world to great crowds in its auditorium.

But conditions changed. Glorified chautauquas no longer drew inland dwellers who could turn a knob or press a button and listen almost daily to what they once went miles once a year to enjoy. Families who formerly

plague officers with the park on their hands. But there is no mortgage. The board of control is thankful for that.

## Tremendous Crowds

Epworth assembly in its heyday, a going concern for whose annual sessions six to eight thousand annual tickets were sold, had permanent improvements valued one time at \$35,000. In 1931 friends of the assembly raised \$16,000 more to clear it from debt caused by the depression.

The assembly supplied instruction, amusement and evangelism for a great throng of supporters. It was unique among assemblies of its time in stressing evangelism. That note of religious fervor brought huge crowds from the surrounding territory.

Evangelism may save it yet from being sold into hands that

would make the only remaining park property adjacent to Lincoln an ordinary recreation spot, some say a desecration.

Through efforts of old time assembly sponsors the Nebraska conference specified in granting permission for the sale that the board of control give preference in a buyer to a religious body.

These sponsors admit the picture now is gloomy but they say Methodism thrives on gloom. Given a debt, and Methodism at once springs to life. Given a problem to solve and Methodism solves it.

## Glories Not Buried

So they insist that all the glories of Epworth assembly are not going to be buried because right now it presents a problem.

"I could go out right now and obtain \$10 subscriptions from more than enough friends of the assembly to put the park in condition as an outdoor meeting place for small church assemblies," said W. Edgar Gates, for seven years assembly president and one who helped rescue it from debt when depression almost had it down.

"There are several such groups in the state. I would favor offering it first to the Methodist city union of churches. The Epworth institute, which kept the assembly alive in its last years, is becoming a living influence in church growth. It might well help build up Epworth park again.

"Then other church groups might like an outdoor camp ground. The Baptist church recently bought a location at Fullerton. The Evangelical church has a fine installation at Milford. The Seventh Day Adventists are using their junior college grounds at Shelton. They might like a more commodious spot. Similar use is being made of Horky's park at Crete by another denomination.

"The war has taken our young men but there is need of these outdoor meetings for those of us who are here and the young generation coming on. The Epworth institute grew as the older assembly faded. Right now it has an opportunity to carry on.

"This isn't a commercial prop-

osition with me, though I do believe restoration of Epworth park would pay its way practically from the start. I favor the move as affording an opportunity for Christian work among the young people of our vicinity.

## Situation Not Impossible

"The situation is not impossible. Epworth park is not out of commission. It has not been damaged so much that a couple of thousand dollars would not put it in shape for a small group meeting.

"Government engineers told us that the flood of 1942 which was the only real inundation the park ever had was caused by a 14-inch rain to the south of us. No other such rainfall there has ever been recorded. It carried silt over the grounds, it is true, but this put the grounds in wonderful shape for a new stand of grass. The trees have not been damaged. The lake could be brought to life again at small expense. A small auditorium would not be an impossibility.

"Epworth park lies just south of Boy Scout park which has been wonderfully improved with a fence costing \$5,000 and good buildings. Salt Creek runs through both parks. Sanitary district improvements are not likely to affect either park. The present project stops at Van Dorn street. Even if it should extend through Epworth park, it would be on the edge not materially affecting the grounds.

"The grounds contain 15 acres of land suitable for some type of cultivation if sold as farm land. The remaining 25 acres of the 40 are rough, suitable only for amusement purposes. The park will go for some type of park purpose. To my mind it should be for the best possible purpose."

Epworth assembly's annual gatherings grew out of the state conference meeting held at Nebraska City by the league in 1892. Several persons suggested then that such gatherings might aid work among young people for whom the Epworth league is most concerned. It is the Christian Endeavor society of

companioning photographs reveal. Adrian Edgar, now field representative of Nebraska Wesleyan university, was dean of the institute for a time and under his direction they flocked to the meetings and many of them took first steps to becoming active church members.

This branch of church effort is being intensively developed over the entire country and the expectation is that at the end of the war returning service men will appreciate the work it has done for the younger members of their families.

The past is gone but out of it backers of the old Epworth assembly hope to salvage ideas and plans that will in some way help them to solve present difficulties.

## Striving Assemblies

Studies made of existing assemblies now conducted in the east reveal that the Presbyterian sponsored gathering at Winona Lake, Ind., the Des Plaines camp near Chicago, and Lakeside camp near Cleveland, the two latter Methodist organizations, have passed successfully through financial worries and are now paying their way.

Gatherings of this type, though sponsored from altruistic motives, must pay out. That is what Epworth found in Lincoln. Eastern camps have a far greater population upon which to draw than does Nebraska. Existing conditions afford no assurance of firm financial groundwork after the war. Hence those who are anxious to preserve Epworth assembly have moved cautiously.

The local board of control of which Charles Saal is president voted unanimously to ask permission to sell yet there was an undercurrent of feeling that

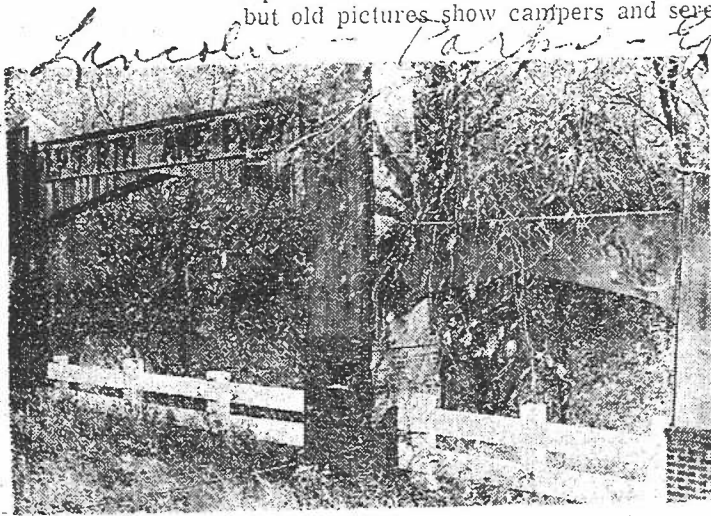


## A black and white photograph of a small, dark wooden cabin with a chimney, surrounded by trees and a fence. The cabin has a gabled roof and a small window. A fence is visible in the foreground, and trees are in the background.

# last Closer



Epworth Lake Park entrance is fenced shut now (below) but old pictures show campers and serene lake of past.



Arnott Folsom

## Epworth: Park With A Past and a Future

By ROGER ELLIOTT

A stroll through Epworth Park today would not be the same pleasant experience it was more than 25 years ago.

In fact a "stroll" through this park, which now resembles a mysterious foreboding forest, would be closer to attempting an African-style safari. It would also be illegal.

The park, southwest of Lincoln, near the camp Minas Kuya for Boy Scouts training center, was the summer camp for thousands of Methodists and their families for more than 40 years. Today it belongs to Arnott Folsom, long time promoter of the Children's Zoo. Because it is ~~private property~~, encroach-

However, it is expected eventually to become a part of Wilderness Park, by action of Folsom.

If you happen to drive by the entrance, you see the remains of a worn, faded sign, hanging over an old, decaying arched gateway.

Epworth Park was born in 1892, when members of an annual assembly of the Nebraska Methodist Conference Epworth League decided they wanted to attract more young people.

Epworth Park, purchased from Allen W. D. Field and C. T. Boggs, grew with amazing speed, becoming the largest of its kind west of the Mississippi and for a time was exceeded only by the original assembly at Lake Chautauqua N.Y.

In its prime, Epworth Park attracted renowned artists and including William Jennings Bryan, Booker T. Washington, evangelist Billy Sunday and prohibitionist Carrie Nation.

Then came the Depression of the 30's and the radio wireless inventions, making it both necessary and easy for people to stay home. Epworth Park began to wane.

In 1940 Epworth Assembly was cancelled, and the Epworth Institute moved to Nebraska Wesleyan. The Institute has since gone the way of the Assembly.

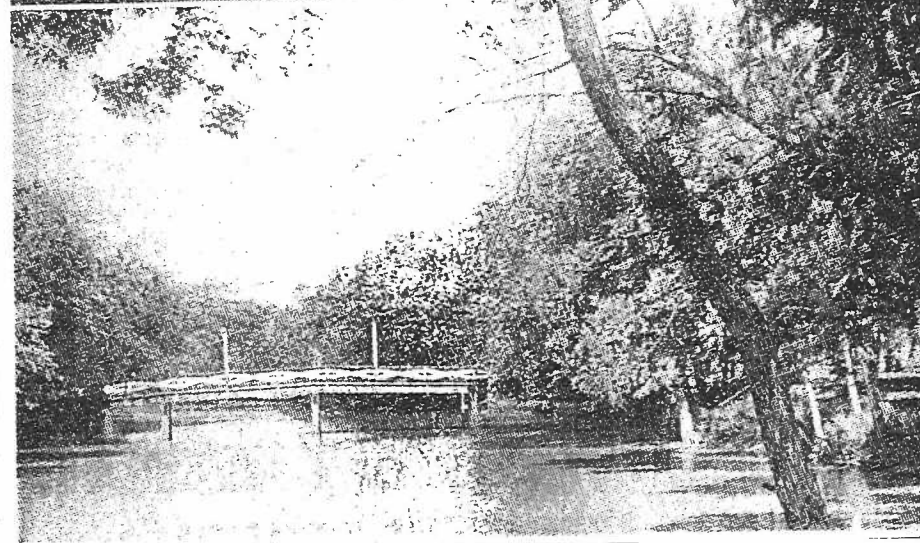
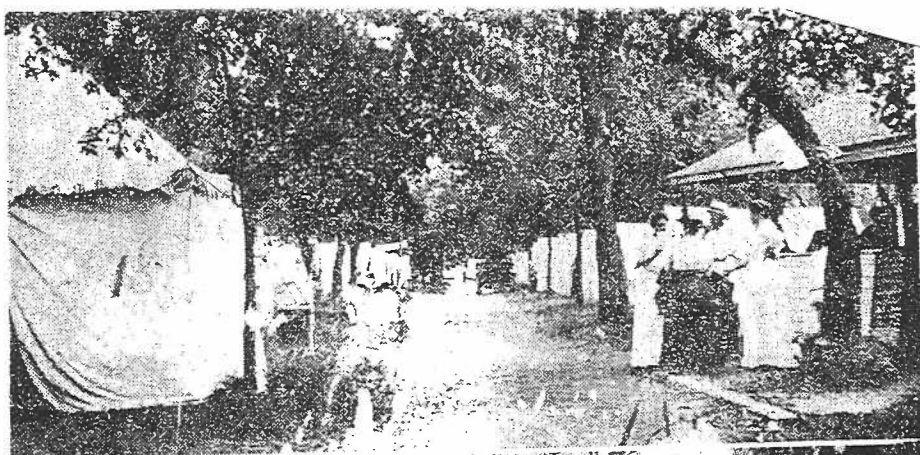
The final chapter to the park began in 1942 when a massive flood inundated the grounds, destroying most

buildings. In 1943 Epworth Park, which had pulled in as high as \$15,000 a session, was officially closed by the Methodist Conference and sold.

Although the park today is just a memory with a dried up lake and a single delapidated old cabin, its future may hold new usefulness for the people of Lincoln as a part of the Wilderness Park area, according to Larry Flighter of the city county planning department.

"Epworth Park has been willed to the county by its present owner (Folsom) and will definitely be a part of the Wilderness Park system" said Flighter.

Flighter, who feels urban people need areas such as this to explore and enjoy, said, "all details of the Wilderness Park plan for this area are not complete, but it will be a place where nature and wild-life will be preserved, and people can hike, horseback ride, bicycle, camp, picnic and study nature."



*Journal/Star library*

What is the history of Epworth Park located near 1st and Van Dorn just south of the scout camp?  
—Sue Harrold, Lincoln

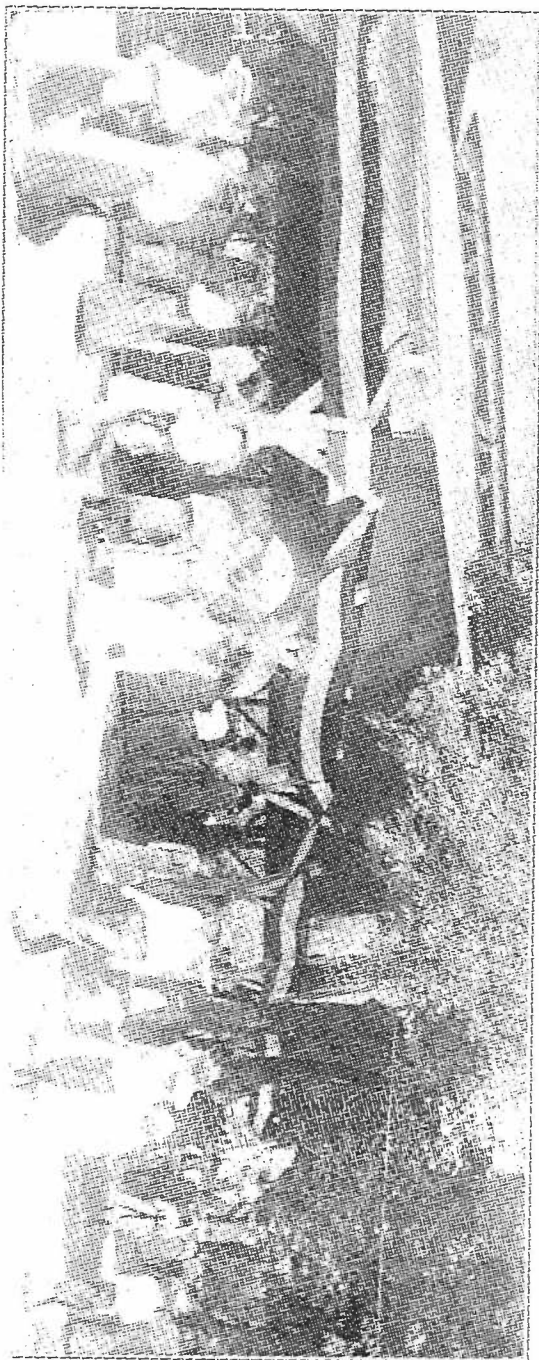
**ACTION LINE:** Epworth Park has a bit of history connected to it and **ACTION LINE** mailed to you details in several old newspaper clippings.

The park was for years a Methodist summer camp. The first assembly was in a large tent in Aug. 1897, five years after the park was founded through Methodist Conference Epworth League efforts to attract young people.

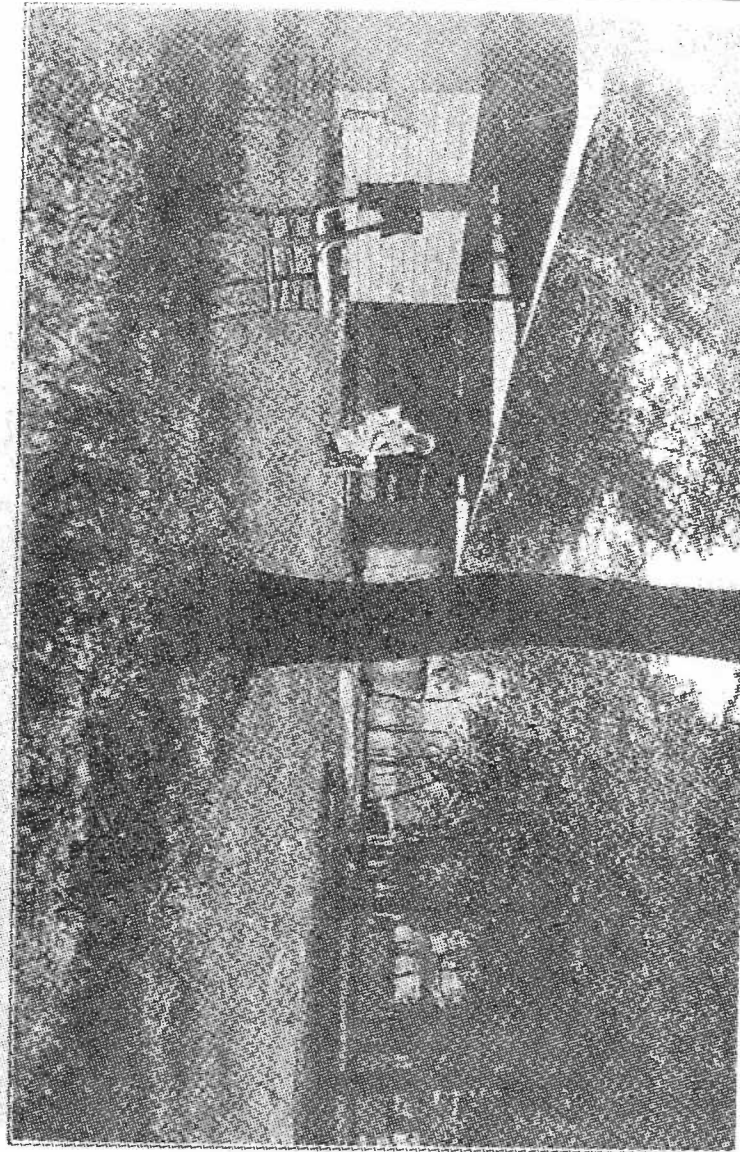
At one time, it was the largest park of its kind west of the Mississippi. Famous people came there to speak: William Jennings Bryan, Booker T. Washington, Billy Sunday and Carrie Nation, for examples. The depression years were not kind to the park and the Epworth Institute moved to Nebraska Wesleyan University. In 1942, the park was heavily damaged by a giant flood and in the following year, it was officially closed and sold by the Methodist Church.

The late Arnett Folsom then owned the park and upon his death the 40-acre woodland was willed to become city property as part of the Wilderness Park scheme.

2/6/1972  
Lincoln Journal Star



Largest Assembly in the West—Largest Camp in the Nation



Journal Star Library

## Wilderness Park to Remain in Wild State

# Touch of Wilderness for Lincoln's Enjoyment

SUN SEP 9 1973 SJS

By Tom Vint  
Outdoor Writer

Wilderness is a state of mind. To a city youth, it may mean the rough on the 18th hole of a local golf course. To an avid outdoorsman it may mean the millions of acres of trail-free forests in the Rocky Mountain range.

Lincolmites have a pleasant median in their own back yard, but not many people know of its presence. It is Wilderness Park, following Salt Creek southward from Van Dorn to the Saltillo Road.

Wilderness Park is not a true wilderness in the purest sense of the word. It has improvements for today, but also memories of yesterday.

According to information contained in Elinor L. Brown's "History of Lancaster County, Then and Now," it is believed



It's All Outdoors

the first people to settle in Lancaster County selected home sites along Salt Creek, in or near the present park grounds.

In the early 1860s, improvements were made along the creek crossing for wagon trains heading west. A bridge was built. A settlement was established. The railroads came in 1870.

Civilization had arrived. In the 1890s, the Epworth League of the Methodist Church made an effort to bring "culture and entertainment" to Lincoln, by then a thriving little community.

In August 1897, according to historical reports, the first outdoor assembly of the Nebraska Epworth League was held in Lincoln Park on the banks of Salt Creek.

In 1903, the Epworth League struck out on its own. It purchased 40 acres of land adjacent to Lincoln Park. It built a small lake with an island and shelter for the lectures.

Success continued as thousands of people flocked to Epworth Park to hear the likes of Billy Sunday, William Jennings Bryan, vice president of

the U.S. Charles W. Fairbanks, Gen. John J. Pershing's original army band, Carrie Nation, Irvin S. Cobb, Booker T. Washington and others.

Camping grounds were cleared from the heavily wooded land. Season tickets were sold, \$1 for adults, 50 cents for children and 15 cents for teams.

A combination of the Depression in the 1930s and the invention of the radio caused a decline in the Epworth Park popularity. Then, in 1942, the worst flood on record hit along Salt Creek.

It wiped out the 90 rental cabins along the creek. It covered the grounds with silt. It left water marks and heavy damage to remaining buildings, wells, etc.

In 1943, Epworth Park was closed and sold. Gone were the glory days when some of the



most prominent people in the country came to this small midwestern park. Epworth Park was forgotten.

In 1970, Epworth owner Arnett R. Folsom died. He willed the land to the city of Lincoln with the request of making it a part of Wilderness Park. His will was done.

Wilderness Park is now nearly 1,500 acres of wood land and small meadows winding along Salt Creek. The Park and Recreation Department has incorporated old Epworth Park into the program of providing a natural area close at hand for Lincolmites to see and enjoy.

Minor improvements have been and are being made in the park. Walking and horseback riding paths have been charted. Wells for drinking water were constructed, along with shelters and picnic table areas.

The old Boy Scout grounds are now Wilderness Day Camp grounds. Bridges have been constructed across the creek at appropriate places along walking paths.

The park has been w city nearly four years. It

ly opened to the public on Memorial Day, 1972, as a primitive area with hopes of it staying that way.

But man's influence and disregard has not bypassed the scenic park. Fences were required surrounding the park to keep motor traffic out. People have dumped trash, grass clippings and all else in the park and/or creek. Others have taken target practice at the signs and facilities throughout the park.

Poaching is also a problem. Four deer have been found dead in the park already this year. Other wild game also must have felt an equal amount of pressure from illegal hunting.

Still, the park serves the general public. Some 700 children use the day camp area each summer. More use is foreseen.

Modern toilet facilities along the walking paths and in the picnic areas are planned. Nearly

40,000 native trees have been planted. New meadow areas with native grasses are being plowed and seeded. A new Day Camp lodge is in the planning.

Talk has even touched on a possible bicycle path bordering the park and the old Epworth Park entrance being restored. But the park will maintain its primitive nature.

Wilderness is indeed a frame of mind. Wilderness Park is tame enough for a comfortable walk, but maintains a touch of wild serenity and beauty provided only by Mother Nature's carpet of grasses and trees. And it's Lincoln's to enjoy.

Journal Star Library