

Whitnall Park and Boerner Gardens

Milwaukee

Milwaukee County's Whitnall Park and Boerner Botanical Gardens are a testament to the philosophies and foresight of two men dedicated to the concept that natural beauty should be available to every city dweller. As a result, many varieties of handsome and important trees have been protected, nurtured and planted in the Hales Corners park and adjoining Root River Parkway system, a total of 3,266 acres inside Milwaukee's city limits.

One of the state's oldest sugar maples—over 270 years old—is growing near the corner of Grange Avenue and Root River Parkway Drive. Many other oaks and maples 100 to 200 years old are likewise still thriving, along with mature ashes, basswoods, shagbark and bitternut hickories, black walnuts and hawthornes. The stately American elms, regrettably, have mostly fallen to the infamous Dutch elm disease.

According to Charles B. Whitnall, the "father of the Milwaukee County Park system," who died at the age of 90 in 1949, a rural park should be very large and developed so that as much of it as possible can be left in a natural or semi-natural state. These extensive park and parkway areas provide not only recreation, but educational and inspirational advantages for a fast-growing community. A man well ahead of his time, he said, "We are badly in need of social adjustment, in which 'Land Use' appears to be a most vital factor, because with the natural landscape undeveloped, the physical influences on which we depend preserved, a desirable environment is possible."

Alfred L. Boerner, a landscape architect, also believed that a park should provide esthetic gratification and recreational and educational opportunities. With great effectiveness, he combined beautiful formal gardens with informal areas stressing the natural beauty of the Wisconsin terrain.

Ironically, the Depression made it possible to bring to fruition the combined philosophies of the two men. Civilian Conservation Corps, Works Projects Administration, National Youth Administration and county relief workers accomplished the building of nature and hiking trails, roads, parking lots, structures, dams and bridges, as well as the landscaping and tree planting, during the years 1932 to 1941.

Boerner conceived his Botanical Gardens as, first in importance, a collection of trees, shrubs and other woody plants, with the formal gardens as secondary. The plan was to create a museum of woody plants, both native and exotic, arranged according to plant families, for display, research and nature study. Not the least of his educational aims was to enable citizens of Milwaukee County to learn from example how to make their own home sites more attractive. Thus, unusual trees from all over the world would be tested for aesthetic appeal and hardiness in this climate.

Various groups undertook a number of individual memorial tree plantings, marked by plaques, during the 1930s. These included an ancestral grove established by the Milwaukee County Genealogical Society. Among other outstanding sights in the Boerner Gardens are the Scots pines, planted about 100 years ago, that formed the nucleus of the present expanded conifer collection on 92nd Street near College Avenue; the flowering crab apples and lilacs; a collection of nut trees started in 1939; a collection of dwarf fruit trees started in 1957 and presently containing 29 varieties of apple, cherry, pear, peach and plum; an experimental street tree planting, accomplished from 1967 to '69, that follows new ideas in selection, species and varieties; and the Potter Forest, located on the northern boundary of the park, that is enjoyed by Milwaukee school children as a nature study area.

Source: Mrs. Marshall Thompson, Milwaukee