MEDIA PACK

“Connecting to the Past:
A Case Study on MacArthur Park and the Westlake Area of Los Angeles”

Mark Satterlee
Camino Nuevo Charter Academy

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Please contact the editors of Geographic Literacy for more information:

Emma Hipolito: hipolito@gseis.ucla.edu
Mary Miller: mmiller@gseis.ucla.edu

UCLA History-Geography Project
1320 Moore Hall
Los Angeles, CA 90095
Phone: (310) 206-9796
Fax: (310) 206-5369

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WHERE THEY TOOK THEIR PLEASURE

Westlake Park (now MacArthur Park), about 1900
There was a time when the main Sunday attraction in Los Angeles was a carriage ride to Agriculture Park to watch the rabbit coursing.

This sanguine sport consisted of turning loose a group of jack rabbits and then a pack of hounds. The hounds bounded and sprang across the fenced area of the park chasing the rabbits. The people howled and cheered. When the last rabbit had been run down the visitors turned to the saloon at Agriculture Park, or to the horse races there.

Agriculture Park got such a reputation for bloody sports, gambling and drinking that eventually it was closed, but between the 1880s and 1890s, it was uncommonly popular. The people of burgeoning Los Angeles sought their pleasures as they were offered.

In the Spanish period, and right after California became a state, sports had a strong Latin flavor. There was a psycho-drama in a fenced downtown arena. Horse racing was popular. In the 1850s there was a bear and bull fight in a sturdy pen that saw "neither bear nor bull win the battle." Cock fights were not uncommon. Rodeos—simple roundups of local stock—were held, and a circus performed in an empty building on Aliso Street. Minstrel shows came to town. Admission at one time was charged to see an albino, and a dwarf named Anastacio Cardenas, who could sing and dance, was a popular attraction.

Few eastern dramatic companies brought their talents to Los Angeles deliberately, however. When a packet stopped at the Los Angeles harbor, singers and actors would sometimes consent to appear on Los Angeles stages, but usually they were only passing through on their way to San Francisco.

In 1856 a local character by the name of Hazard opened the Hazard House, part of a grander "Garden of Paradise," and captured the amusement-hungry people of the area.

The Garden of Paradise reached from Main Street to Spring between Third and Fourth Streets. In addition to the structure called the Round House in the garden, there were two heroic statues that attracted wide attention. These were Adam and Eve: elsewhere in the garden was a reproduction of the Serpent and the Tree of Life. The beer garden atmosphere, plus "a conglomeration of other oddities," made Lehman famous.

It was in the 1870s that local excursions became popular. When Santa Monica was settled—"the streets of Santa Monica are sprinkled daily with sea water"—the Los Angeles and Independence Railroad found a palace car and made an excursion package from downtown Los Angeles to the booming beach city. The timetable allowed enough time to "bath, fish or picnic."

In 1887 Dave V. Waldron, who owned about thirty-five acres at the southwest corner of Main and Washington Streets, opened a little private park called Washington Gardens. Street cars ran right to the main gate. Waldron staged a small variety show, had a pavilion where personnel from Wood's Opera House (a song and dance emporium downtown) appeared. There was dancing, walking in the garden: "an innocent and healthful means of recreation." There were animals in the park, notably a monkey and ostriches. Washington Gardens changed its name to Chute's Park in the 1920s, and a Ferris wheel and a merry-go-round became principal attractions.

But it was Agriculture Park that attracted the most attention. It started out as a spot where shows of livestock and crops were held. But the agriculture fair idea never took hold. Instead a race track was built. There were horse and dog races and even, in 1903 and 1904, automobile races run by the enthusiastic members of the Automobile Club of Southern California.

The Los Angeles Fire Chief, despairing of foot-deep dust at Figueroa and Jefferson, ordered his men to wet down the dust one weekend before the onslaught of carriages. The Park people were so pleased that they presented the chief with a trumpet.

Sunday School attendance in the area fell off alarmingly. One Sunday school teacher was appalled to find some of his boys catching rabbits and fattening them for the coursing at the Park. A churchman reported to city officials: "the yelping of the hounds and the yelling of boys makes Sunday a day of horror for the neighborhood."

The church people, who led the fight against the sports of Agriculture Park, prevailed. The park was closed and the buildings torn down. Like other plots of land in the early days, a title search revealed that the area was, in actuality, city property, and the site became Exposition Park. In 1910 the cornerstone was laid for the Exposition Building and Museum.

Many of the city's other parks came into being in unusual ways. Elysian Park, an unloved piece of rancho land, was given to the city by George Hansen, but for years it was completely unimproved. It was not until the depression-like days of 1896 that $20,000 was appropriated and men were hired at $1.00 a day to work on the site.

Echo Park was also refuse land—no one wanted it, so the city was able to hang onto it for a park site.

The land at Westlake Park was once auctioned to the public. The auctioneer started at $10 an acre. There were no takers. When he got down to 25 cents an acre and there were still no takers, another park was born.

Sycamore Grove (or Park) started in 1860 when Clois I. Henrickson opened a little hotel, a dancing pavilion, a