

Lithia Park

*By Jennifer Margulis (2009)*

“Did you know there used to be a zebra in Lithia Park?!” my friend Angela asks. We’ve been walking from the lower duck pond, past the playgrounds, and on the main chip trail in Lithia Park, which celebrated its 100th anniversary this past December. It’s a chilly day in early May but when we veer off the main path onto one of the many meandering hikes that spread throughout Ashland’s beloved 100-acre park, we warm up quickly.

“A zebra?”

Angela nods but then hesitates. “Well, there was a zoo in the park, and I think I heard they had a zebra at the zoo ...”

It’s not far from where we’re walking, so Angela and I head to the Ashland Parks and Recreation Office and ask the kind folks who work there if exotic animals from Africa ever lived in Lithia Park . They confirm there was a petting zoo in the park with deer and other animals but they don’t know about a zebra. This office has all sorts of maps and information about the park, including Marjorie O’Harra’s booklet, *Lithia Park* , which details the history of when the park was founded. If anyone will know about a zebra, they tell me at the Parks Office, it will be Marjorie O’Harra.

It’s one of the first questions I ask 82-year-old O’Harra when we meet by the Upper Duck Pond a few weeks later. It’s a gorgeous sunny day in mid May and as I bike up Winburn Way I pass a group of gray-haired ladies in garden gloves and sweatshirts who are pruning and planting in the Rose Garden. Even though it’s not yet 9:00 a.m. O’Harra and I are not alone as we take a seat on a bench overlooking the pond. Amateur photographers with long-lensed cameras slung around their necks contort their bodies into squats and stretches in order to capture the sunlight on the water at just the right angle. A cluster of children from Ashland’s John Muir School, workbooks in hand, squint to identify the katsura, kwan zan cherry, crab apple, and vine maple trees on our side of the pond. “That’s called a wood duck,” a teacher tells her group of children as a brightly colored male paddles past.

O’Harra, who looks both sporty and tidy in a blue pin-stripped button-down shirt over a dove grey T-shirt, white pants, and running sneakers, is not expecting a question about zebras. Though she has vivid memories of visiting the park, and the zoo, when she was a little girl growing up in Ashland, she doesn’t remember ever seeing a zebra here. She does remember another four-legged creature, one of Ashland’s most infamous animals. As a very small girl O’Harra saw the enraged male elk that became so dangerous that in 1936 he actually gored his keeper and had to be put down. You can see the elk, whose name was Teddy, stuffed and mounted, on display at the Elks Lodge downtown. O’Harra, who has a deep love for and understanding of the history of Lithia Park, says the zoo was not one of the park’s best features.

“I remember looking in the wire cage one day at the monkey and the monkey just looked back at me and I thought, ‘this is so wrong,’” O’Harra says. “The really sad part is they had an eagle in a cage. I went up one day and I was looking at the eagle ... a great big magnificent bird that had a pitiful squawk.”

Though inhumane by today’s standards, the zoo did serve an educational purpose for its time: “That was about the only place children could see a monkey,” O’Harra says. As she’s talking I notice a western pond turtle gliding through the water. “We didn’t have television. It wasn’t easy to get in and out of the Valley to cities that had bigger zoos. So I guess that may have justified it. But eventually people realized that was not what they wanted.” The turtle emerges onto the rocks into the bright sun and another clambers up to join it.

Today animals, like the western pond turtles I’m watching and the painted slider turtles that you’re apt to see in the duck ponds, roam freely in Lithia Park. Donn Todt, the park’s lead horticulturalist who has been taking care of the flora here for 30 years, says he’s seen coyotes early in the morning in the wintertime, foxes, wild turkeys, black bears (he threw a garbage can at a nonchalant black bear who had taken up residency a few years ago), native wild band-tail pigeons that sometimes come into the park in the summertime to eat mulberries from a tree by the Upper Duck Pond, lots of western gray tree squirrels, ducks, black-tail deer, moles, and gophers. He’s even spotted nocturnal flying squirrels and once saw a golden eagle in the park. “People who are bird watchers love Lithia Park,” says Todt, “There are water ouzels along the creek” (a really strange bird that has a wonderful song and feeds on

underwater insects by dipping down under the water), “warblers, and pileated woodpeckers that come through in the autumn. This is a great place for wildlife.”

It’s also a great place for plant life. As I walk through the park on another morning with 63-year-old Todt (pronounced “toad”), whose weather beaten face, green hat, boots, and white leather garden gloves show that he’s a man who’s spent most of his life outdoors, he has stories to tell about many of the trees and plants that are in the park today, and even about trees that are no longer standing. We start at the lawns before the playground and Todt points out where the old wooden Chautauqua Tabernacle building once stood, as well as where people would camp on the lawns above the lower duck pond—up to 100 tents at a time—to participate in Chautauqua. Chautauqua was a spiritual and educational movement that originated in New York State and enjoyed popularity nationwide in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Todt shows me where there used to be a row of alder trees that were taken out when he first came to work for the Parks Department because alder trees don’t usually live past 80–100 years.

He also points out trees that were probably planted more than 100 years ago. Wanting to improve the area, the Ladies Chautauqua Club planted maple and locust trees. “Locusts were planted a lot by the pioneers because they were tough,” Todt explains. “People knew they didn’t have to water them year after year, they weren’t real susceptible to livestock or deer. It’s a popular tree around old homesteads and old parks.” By June fragrant honey-scented white flowers bloom on the locust trees. Todt says the plantings by the Ladies Chautauqua Club served a larger purpose “This gave people the idea that maybe more than just the Chautauqua part here should be a park,” Todt says. “Maybe we can extend this a little bit further.”

That extension became what is now what we think of as the entrance to Lithia Park, where an old flourmill that features prominently in black and white photos once stood and where there was once a terrible stink from the abandoned hog pens where hogs used to graze on milling waste. “This was an area that was let go, the mill was closed,” Todt explains. Some people wanted to keep the mill for historic reasons but others had the vision of tearing down the mill and making the area Ashland’s front yard, which, in effect, it has now become.

First known as "Flour Mill Park" or "City Park," the front of what is now Lithia Park developed horticulturally before any other section. Todt says that Himalayan palm trees were planted in this part of the park and there was a Chilean monkey puzzle tree, a smoke tree, roses, and an old Japanese maple. "It was a completely different landscape than it is today," Todt says, "but why did people in Ashland want to plant smoke trees and palm trees?" In fact, the palm trees were such an integral part of the early landscape here that there used to be a popular saying, "Ashland, Oregon, where the palm trees meet the pines." Todt's voice is filled with enthusiasm as he asks another question he has recently figured out the answer to but never shared publicly: "and why were there rhododendron trees planted as early as 1910? Where were they getting this idea that they could plant all this Victorian stuff here in downtown Ashland?"

Todt figured out this horticultural mystery about a year ago when he and his wife started doing some in-depth research, pouring over Peter Britt's old diaries written in Swiss German, and old photographs at the Southern Oregon Historical Society in Jacksonville. Jacksonville pioneer Peter Britt is remembered primarily as a photographer and a successful businessman. But, Todt says, he was also an incredible horticulturalist, bringing plants from all over the United States, including the Bay Area, where he would go to purchase photographic supplies. "Sometime around the 1870s he brought back a palm tree and he planted it in front of his house," Todt explains. "His property became known as Britt Garden. It had big rhododendrons, this palm tree that was 35 feet tall, a variety of tropical looking plants, and a lot of roses. So when people wanted a template for how they were going to design a park they just had to go over to Jacksonville!"

We walk past the playground where a wide-branched Zelkova and a Douglas fir both provide shade for the children playing. Todt points out the native choke cherries growing along the side of the creek that Native Americans liked to eat (and that people today still make into jams and jellies), and also tells me that salmon and steelhead swim up the creek in the late fall. We are headed over to a completely different section of the park, the part designed in part by John McLaren, who was the superintendent of Golden Gate Park in San Francisco for more than 50 years, and

who worked with his brother Donald McLaren on the designs for Lithia Park. We stand by the sycamore grove, which is planted rectilinearly in the Frederick Law Olmstead tradition. But the grove isn't focused on the band shell, making it another conundrum. "If you look at the original design for this section of the park there was a casino straight front and center..." Todt says.

"A casino?!" I interrupt.

"A place where you could have a restaurant, dance but it wasn't a gambling place at all. It's an old terminology that we don't use anymore ... [That casino] was never built," Todt explains.

Instead of having a music area located off Winburn Way at the sycamore grove, the original old-style circular two-tiered wooden band shell was located where the current band shell stands, off kilter from the sycamore grove but well loved and well used nonetheless. This is also the section where the gorgeous but cracked Florentine Butler-Perozzi marble fountain stands, with its winged cherub astride a duck, up a scenic flight of stone stairs. "Unfortunately vandalism is rampant here," Todt says when I mention that the fountain, though it was completely restored in the late 1980s, looks like it has seen better days. "The Perozzi Fountain has suffered more than any other part of the park," he says, adding that it's probably mostly teenagers and folks who have had a bit too much to drink who destroy park property at night. From the vantage point of the fountain, Todt points out some of the trees, including a golden honey locust, a dawn redwood, and an oak tree that Chester Corry, a trained landscape architect who was named Lithia Park's superintendent in 1937, added to the park.

It's this human history, and the way Lithia Park's very existence represents a triumph of conservation and foresight, that especially fascinates Marjorie O'Harra. When she was a student at Ashland Junior High School, which used to stand where the Safeway is now, she would look out the window at the cemetery and think to herself, "there are stories behind the names on those tombstones." Trained as a journalist and later becoming the regional editor of the Mail Tribune, O'Harra regularly gives talks about Lithia Park's history. She likes to tell the story of when Bert Greer came to town in 1911 and bought the semi-weekly Ashland Tidings. Greer had a vision to develop Ashland and promote it as a tourist destination: he wanted the city to

become a mineral water spa area, like Saratoga or Carlsbad. His idea was to develop the city-owned land in Ashland Creek Canyon as a commercial resort. Money and business interests liked Greer's vision and Southern Pacific Railroad Company backed the resort idea as a way to bring more tourism to the West.

O'Harra explains that Greer reported in the Tidings that capitalists from the East Coast were even becoming interested in the Ashland project. He wrote that Ashland "could become the playground of the world." But there was a hitch: Greer had several vocal opponents, including George Taverner and H. G. Enders, members of the City Park Commission, who opposed the idea that private interests, including the self-appointed Mineral Springs Committee that Greer chaired, would control the land in the canyon. After a lot of fighting, name-calling, and political hullabaloo, the people voted to give the City Council authority over the Mineral Springs Committee, which was disbanded in 1917. "Greer left town an unhappy man," says Tom Foster, the coordinator for parks walks for Ashland. O'Harra likes to mention that the defeat in Ashland did not stop Greer's capitalistic career: he moved to Burbank, California, became a majority owner in the Burbank Review, and has been credited with encouraging both the Warner brothers and a young entrepreneur named Walt Disney to locate their studios in the San Fernando Valley.

Though most Ashlanders are not as interested in uncovering the intricacies of the park's history as O'Harra, Todt, and Foster, the beauty, serenity, recreation, health, and joy the park brings locals and tourists alike is indisputable. "Without Lithia Park Ashland wouldn't be Ashland," says Don Robertson, Director of Ashland Parks and Recreation. "It is literally the heart and soul of our town." Robertson still remembers visiting Ashland as a small boy and playing in the wading area by the children's playgrounds. I wonder what my children's memories will be so I ask my daughters what they like best about Lithia Park: "I like to jump from rock to rock up and down the stream," says my 9-year-old Hesperus. "It's a great place to cool off on a hot day." "I like to walk along the trails and climb trees and run after butterflies," says 8-year-old Athena.

Since the buck stops with Robertson, I ask him the zebra question. "No there wasn't. I've never heard of a zebra," he says. I guess that settles it.  
Happy 100th anniversary Lithia Park.