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In Search of Blooming Gardens

On a warm July day in 2008, Denver city auditor Dennis Gallagher, in the role of Mayor Robert Speer, arrived at Lakeside Amusement Park to help kick off the official celebration of the park's 100th anniversary. Reaching that milestone made the park a unique survivor, but the celebration was for more than the park. It was also for the Zangs and Krasners, whose passion and dedication had kept Lakeside alive; for a small town that had survived against great odds; for a Speedway that had become nationally famous; and for the second shopping mall built in Denver. In a way, the celebration was also for Denver, whose growth, economic ups and downs, and City Beautiful program played important roles in Lakeside's development and survival.¹

Between 1895 and 1910, developers built nearly 5,000 amusement parks in the United States. Most major cities had at least one park, but with Lakeside Amusement Park's opening in 1908, Denver had four in operation, while memories of a recently closed fifth remained fresh. In their search for rest and relaxation in a crowded, dirty city, Denver's residents eagerly latched on to anything that resembled a park, including amusement parks. Civic leaders

had often neglected civic beautification during Denver's rapid growth in the late 1800s, but under the leadership of Mayor Robert Speer, who took office in 1904, Denver set out to become an embodiment of the City Beautiful movement that swept the United States in the early part of the twentieth century. Speer was not the first politician to attempt to beautify Denver, but prior efforts were haphazard and half-hearted at best. What made Speer different from the mayors before him was that he had spent years building up his political base, and he came into office with enormous power.²

As Speer was taking his first steps toward realizing his vision for Denver in 1907, brewer Adolph Zang revealed his plans for Lakeside Amusement Park. Zang had spent years building a reputation as a generous and successful businessman working in his father's Denver brewery, almost certainly guaranteeing the success of nearly any project he decided to undertake. The fact that Zang decided to build an amusement park was not at all strange as many brewers, both before and after him, did the same, providing ready markets for their product in amusement parks full of thirsty visitors. Zang, however, had excellent timing on his side when he decided to build his park. With a design inspired by the City Beautiful movement, Lakeside came into being just as Denver's first City Beautiful projects were getting under way.

The ideas of both the City Beautiful and the amusement park owed their existence to Chicago's Columbian Exposition, which an estimated 27 million people from around the world visited between May 1 and October 30, 1893. Honoring the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's voyage, the Exposition was one of the biggest events the United States and even the world had ever seen. Visitors urged relatives, who had often never left the towns in which they lived, to find the time and money to see the Exposition, where they could, among other things, behold exciting new mechanical wonders and people from foreign lands, sample new foods, and ride the Ferris wheel. One of those visitors was Robert Speer, a rising figure in Denver politics, who found inspiration for the beautiful city he dreamed Denver could become. Adolph Zang may have also been a visitor to the Exposition, where Carl Lammers, whose company was the exclusive bottling agent for Zang Beer, had an exhibit and won a prize for the best bottled beer. If he was there, the Exposition may have been where Zang found inspiration for the amusement park he would one day build. The sheer number of marvels visitors could experience at the Exposition was impressive and exhausting, but just

as stirring was the environment created by architect Daniel Burnham and landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. The focal point was the Court of Honor, a set of similarly designed and constructed buildings around a central plaza, all of which implied “authority and imperialism . . . cultural stature, power, permanence, order, and unity.” Judith Adams, in her book on the American amusement park industry, writes that the Exposition and its architecture were, in large part, designed to assure Americans that the country’s national stature was “nearing preeminence.”³

Between 1876 and 1916, organizers held international expositions in Philadelphia (to honor the nation’s centennial), Chicago, New Orleans, Atlanta, Nashville, Omaha, Buffalo (at which President William McKinley was assassinated), St. Louis, Portland, Seattle, San Francisco, and San Diego. Nearly 100 million people of all classes visited these fairs, but the Columbian Exposition seemed to have had the greatest impact on American culture. Nearly everyone involved in the Exposition, from planners to visitors, viewed the Great White City of the Exposition as heavenly, clean, orderly, and safe—essentially, everything American cities were supposed to be striving to become. The classically styled buildings of the Court of Honor—grouped around the central lagoon, decorated with impressive sculptural pieces and murals, and all of similar height and design—proved that architecture could bring order out of chaos. Paths and gardens throughout the space gave the grounds a sense of unity while also allowing each building to have its own character within the general guidelines put forth by Exposition organizers. The people who designed and built the Exposition, according to historian David Burg, managed to achieve the often contradictory result of “unity, diversity, and cooperation.”⁴

The Black City of Chicago (and, by extension, any major city in America), meanwhile, was chaotic, dark, dirty, and violent, everything people wanted to avoid. Large cities, like Denver, had often grown rapidly and with little concern for aesthetics, especially as they battled for survival amid competition from other cities and against difficult economic conditions. With no sanitation systems in place, trash and waste were dumped in the streets and rivers, making them dirty and disease-ridden. Critics also argued that, with little or no open space for relaxation and recreation, cities were dangerous to mental and spiritual health as well. But the Exposition, writes Erik Larson, taught people to see that cities did not have to be dark, soiled, and unsafe

places; they had the potential to be beautiful, a lesson Denver's future leaders and Lakeside's builders learned well.⁵

While some historians argue that the idea behind the City Beautiful movement existed before the fair, no one doubts the architectural influence the Exposition had on it. William Stead is often credited with launching the City Beautiful movement and urban planning with the publication of his book *If Christ Came to Chicago*, in which he argued that American cities could be equal to the great cities of Europe if people allowed designers to do their jobs. Interested civic leaders turned to Daniel Burnham, architect of the Exposition, for advice. Between 1902 and 1909, he completed City Beautiful plans for Washington, DC, Cleveland, San Francisco, and Chicago in the United States and Manila and Baguio in the Philippines. The designs focused on creating a livable urban environment, with healthy and agreeable conditions and abundant recreational facilities. While critics argued that Burnham's choice to use classically styled buildings killed budding American architecture styles, supporters countered that the buildings were only championing the uniformity that marked the Exposition's architecture. A key element of City Beautiful planning, Burnham argued, was that "urban dignity and order . . . must be obtained through impressive and interrelated groupings of buildings," and the classical style lent itself to such a plan. By improving the appearance of a city through unity and introducing public art through sculpture and murals, the proponents of City Beautiful hoped to create a morally uplifting and healthier environment in which people could live and work.⁶

To emphasize moral uplift, the Exposition's organizers wanted the central Court of Honor to remain dignified, free from what they considered the more vulgar devices, amusements, and people that often marked such gatherings. To house the "vulgar amusements" such as freak shows, recreated foreign villages, and rides such as the Ferris wheel, organizers created the Midway Plaisance, which became one of the most popular areas of the Exposition. At the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition seventeen years earlier, fair officials sought to keep the fair pure by convincing city leaders to condemn and burn many of the "honky-tonk amusements" built just outside the fairgrounds. By the time of the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, organizers incorporated the Midway into the main exposition grounds, signifying that promoters had acknowledged and even embraced the popular amusements the public desired. The amusement park, write historians Gary Cross and

John Walton, simply moved the Midway's attractions to a permanent location. Paul Boyton's Sea Lion Park, which opened on Coney Island in 1895, set off the amusement park boom in the United States. Sea Lion was followed by Steeplechase in 1897, Luna (which replaced the failed Sea Lion) in 1903, and Dreamland in 1904, making Coney Island the most famous amusement area in the United States. Each of these parks constantly tried to outdo the others with more beautiful grounds and bigger attractions and rides, but all were built on long traditions in public amusement.⁷

William F. Mangels was a successful amusement ride manufacturer in the early 1900s whose inventions included the device that created the galloping motion for carousel horses and the Whip and the Tickler rides (both of which were at Lakeside). In his 1952 book *The Outdoor Amusement Industry*, Mangels wrote that "public amusement is as old as recorded history," with permanent amusement centers and beer gardens built just outside many large European cities as early as the 1600s. These amusement centers offered acrobatic acts, zoos, bowling, shooting, athletic displays, games, puppet shows, and animal fights. As early as the 1790s, some of the parks offered balloon ascensions and parachute drops, both of which were still standard features in American amusement parks, including Lakeside, in the late 1890s and early 1900s. Artificial illumination was another important aspect of these early parks, and Mangels wrote that some of the large pleasure gardens had as many as 20,000 oil-fed lamps illuminating their grounds at night; one park went so far as to proclaim that its 60,000 lamps turned night into day. In the mid-1700s, fireworks displays, another source of illumination still found in modern amusement parks, first appeared. Another important development came in 1728 when Vauxhall Gardens in England charged the first admission fee to enter its grounds in addition to offering a season ticket.⁸

European-style pleasure parks found their way to the United States where, according to Mangels, they built more on the tradition of public picnic grounds than on that of beer gardens. Entertainment at picnic grounds was often limited to "athletic games, song festivals, target shooting, bowling, dancing, and the consumption of beer and other refreshments," while a few had simple swings or hand-operated merry-go-rounds. One of the best-known early American resorts was Jones's Woods in New York City, which had several unique attractions, including tents that housed pictorial shows in which "wooden figures moved creakily through mechanical plays." Another

prominent park was Parker's Grove (later Ohio Grove), located about twenty miles from Cincinnati, which included many shaded picnic spots, a dance hall, swings, and a mule-powered merry-go-round. In 1886 it was converted into an amusement park, and one of its biggest attractions at the turn of the twentieth century was an automobile ride over an oval course. Owners of similar pleasure grounds throughout the United States converted them into true amusement parks as the park boom took off in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Glen Echo Park in Maryland started as a national Chautauqua settlement in 1883; six years later it was converted into a trolley park, then reorganized as a modern amusement park in 1911. Riverview Park in Chicago started as a picnic grove in 1879 before becoming an amusement park in 1904, with regular stagings of common amusement park attractions, including the *Battle of the Monitor and Merrimac*, *Sinking of the Titanic*, and *Creation*. Thomas Jenkins Kenny established Kennywood in Pennsylvania, which became one of the best-known amusement parks in the United States, as a picnic grove in 1818. Eighty years later the Mellon family of Pittsburgh leased the property and converted it into a trolley park. Also prominent among these early gardens and picnic groves later converted to amusement parks, Mangels wrote, was Lakeside's longtime rival, Denver's Elitch Gardens.⁹

While these early gardens were popular, it was at Paul Boyton's Sea Lion Park on Coney Island, Mangels said, that "the modern amusement park originated." Among the park's attractions were forty sea lions trained to juggle balls and do other tricks, water races, the first large-scale Shoot-the-Chutes in the country, an old mill water ride, and caged live wolves. What set Boyton's Sea Lion Park apart from picnic groves and beer gardens of the time was the fence around it and the admission fee, designed to keep undesirable customers out of the park, visitors had to pay to get through the gates. The fee did not make the park exclusive, however, as John Kasson, in his book on Coney Island, argues that amusement parks actually helped break down class barriers, if only temporarily. With people from all walks of life careening into each other on the Human Whirlpool at Steeplechase or sharing their fear and excitement on a roller coaster at any of the parks, it hardly mattered who made more money or did what job. The parks also helped break down barriers between men and women as they clung to and smashed into each other and often saw more of each other exposed than polite society found decent. Such behavior was frowned upon outside the parks, but as long as it

took place within the safe and controlled confines of an amusement park's gates, it was deemed acceptable by most.¹⁰

Amusement parks burst on the scene just as American society was beginning a rapid change, with flourishing mass culture, expanding urban populations, and increased leisure time. People were leaving farms and small towns for big cities, transforming the United States from a largely rural, agricultural country to one dominated by industry. The middle class began its rise and was dominated by two groups: one represented professional workers such as doctors and lawyers, while the other represented business, labor, and agriculture. Arguing that newly wealthy industrialists had little concern for their workers, progressive reformers battled to make the eight-hour day, half-day Saturdays, and free Sundays standard for many jobs, giving workers leisure time to enjoy as they saw fit. At the same time, social and moral leaders softened their opposition to partaking in games and other amusement activities on Sundays, allowing those who had Sundays off a chance to enjoy themselves without dire moral implications.¹¹

With more leisure time, people flocked to amusement parks because they "provided the city's residents with enclosed playgrounds isolated and insulated from the demands of everyday life." In his book *Going Out*, David Nasaw writes that amusement parks transformed cities from places people wanted to escape in summer months to places people actually wanted to visit. Although air jets might blow off a man's hat or raise a woman's skirt or rides might throw men, women, and children into one jumbled pile, it was okay as long as they were inside the beautifully landscaped and decorated park whose admission fee kept it free from troublemakers.¹²

The rides inside the parks were intriguing as well because they often mimicked the new modes of transportation to which people were adapting. Roller coasters, for instance, were simply modified streetcars that provided a sensation of speed and danger, and Ferris wheels simulated speed and flight. In a sense, writes Judith Adams, amusement park rides allowed customers to "test themselves against the machines . . . that dominated daily urban life." Riders were able to experience risk and danger under safe conditions, and the social release of the parks and the experiences within them provided an escape from drab and dreary city life.¹³

Amusement parks quickly swept across the United States, providing entertainment and fun for the millions of customers who passed through their

gates. *Billboard* magazine began in 1894 as a publication devoted to outdoor advertising, but it soon expanded to include sections devoted to theater, radio, movies, circuses, fairs, and amusement parks. From the early 1900s to the early 1960s, its pages were filled with the stories of these parks. Some of them lasted only a season or at best a few years, driven out of business by bigger and stronger competitors or owners unwilling to invest money to keep the parks viable. Changing economic conditions, such as the eventual closure of streetcar lines (which were responsible for building and operating many parks) and the Great Depression, wiped out hundreds of them. The advent of the theme park in the 1950s, with the opening of Disneyland, further isolated the parks that still survived. Despite it all, however, parks quickly captured the American imagination, becoming places of both fun and fear. Freddy “Boom Boom” Cannon informed listeners in his 1962 song “Palisades Park,” which celebrated the famous New Jersey park of the same name, that they would “never know how great a kiss can feel / when you stop at the top of a Ferris wheel” as his heart went “up like a rocket ship / down like a roller coaster / back like a loop-the-loop / and around like a merry-go-round.” In *Pinocchio*, Walt Disney’s 1940 movie, Pinocchio and the other boys are taken to the amusement park Pleasure Island and literally turn into jackasses after overindulging in unlimited freedom and fun. Even the rise of theme parks and the threat they posed to traditional amusement parks played out in popular culture. In the 1977 movie *Rollercoaster*, a deranged man blows up a series of theme park rides, including a roller coaster, while blackmailing theme park owners to prevent further attacks. In a part of the story written but not filmed, the man is revealed to have been seeking revenge on the corporate-owned parks that were driving his parents’ family-owned park out of business.¹⁴

In March 1907, workers employed by Denver brewer Adolph Zang’s Lakeside Realty and Amusement Company began clearing 57 of the 160 acres of land the company owned at Forty-Sixth Avenue and Sheridan Boulevard in the new Jefferson County town of Lakeside, across the county line from Denver. Six months later, the workers had laid out the grounds around what was then called Sylvan Lake and started construction on several buildings in what would be Lakeside Amusement Park, the Denver area’s newest amusement park (the park was never officially named White City, as is sometimes claimed; that was only a nickname). At the same time, a construction crew in Denver was working to complete the new Municipal Auditorium

at Fourteenth and Curtis Streets, one part of Mayor Robert Speer's newly instituted City Beautiful program. Both the amusement park and the auditorium were essential to Speer's effort to make Denver into a model of the City Beautiful ideal.¹⁵

Denver's residents had sought amusement long before Adolph Zang conceived of the idea of Lakeside. In the city's earlier days, rowdier crowds patronized saloons, gambling halls, and brothels in large numbers, but as the city became more settled in the 1880s many residents wanted cleaner entertainment options. Real estate investor John Brisbane Walker attempted to create such an option with River Front Park, located between Fifteenth and Nineteenth Streets along the Platte River, which opened on July 4, 1887. The park included beautifully landscaped grounds, a race track and baseball diamonds, a boating course on the Platte, and a permanent three-story exhibit hall that resembled an elaborate castle. Winter activities at the park included the Denver Toboggan Club's slides, some of which stretched for 1,000 feet and were traveled by sleds that reportedly reached speeds of 180 miles per hour. When Walker's business interests shifted to New York in 1890, he offered to sell River Front Park to Denver for \$1 million. The city refused, arguing that the lack of convenient access to the grounds and poor air quality in the area made the land unsuitable for a city park; Walker eventually sold the land to the Union Pacific Railroad for \$1.2 million.¹⁶

Walker's operation was simply ahead of its time, as Denver's leadership was not especially interested in creating a hospitable environment for such ventures. Robert W. Speer, the leader who *would* be interested, arrived in Denver in 1878, a twenty-two-year-old tuberculosis victim seeking a cure for the disease. After his arrival, Speer went to work for Cyrus H. McLaughlin, a prominent Denver real estate developer. Speer rose to the top of McLaughlin's company and then founded his own, R. W. Speer and Company. Fellow developers liked Speer and his cheerful attitude, and he formed close relationships with many of them, which came in handy when he entered politics. In 1880, voters chose Speer as Denver's city clerk. Five years later he was appointed postmaster by President Grover Cleveland, and six years after that Governor John Routt appointed Speer as the lone Democrat on Denver's three-member Fire and Police Board; Speer was soon the board's president. By 1901 he was head of the Denver Board of Public Works. In many ways Speer was the typical boss who characterized much of

the era's politics, and people who did business with the city learned "it was wise to donate cash to the 'Speer Club.'" ¹⁷

In 1902, Colorado voters approved an amendment to the state constitution that created the City and County of Denver and gave the city home rule. Two years later, voters (helped by an estimated 10,000 fraudulent votes) elected Speer mayor and approved a new city charter he had heavily promoted. The new charter included the legal framework for civic beautification and created a three-member Art Commission (made up of an architect, an artist, and a sculptor, with the mayor as an ex-officio member). Speer used the Art Commission, headed by Henry Read, an English artist who had come to Colorado for his health, as a planning office to help promote civic beautification. Financing for the major beautification projects Speer had in mind was made possible by another charter provision that created four different park districts (South Denver, East Denver, Highland, and Montclair), each with the ability to acquire and improve land, levy assessments, and issue bonds with voter approval. Speer finally had the political power to act on his twenty-year-old dream to turn Denver into the City Beautiful. ¹⁸

During Speer's three terms in office, city crews graded and paved more than 300 miles of streets and installed sandstone sidewalks and granite curbs (and cleaned them every night), and millions of dollars went into building storm and sanitary sewers. Decorative streetlamps replaced the seven 150-foot-high arc light towers that had lit the city since 1883, and many of downtown Denver's streets and buildings were covered with decorative lights, leading some to argue that Denver rivaled Paris as the City of Light. In 1908 the city opened a municipal bathhouse at Twentieth and Curtis Streets, and more than 150,000 people bathed there during its first year. Speer's "proudest accomplishment" during his first term, however, was the \$650,000, 12,000-seat Municipal Auditorium, completed just in time for Denver to host the Democratic National Convention in July 1908. The auditorium hosted free Sunday afternoon and evening concerts; and thousands flocked to it on other days for operas, gospel revivals, auto shows, and Boy Scout exhibitions. The Municipal Auditorium put Denver, which was desperately trying to win national notice, "on the map as a convention and cultural center," according to historians Tom Noel and Barbara Norgren. ¹⁹

Speer's greatest love, however, was Denver's park system. In planning for Central Park, New York City's mayor, Ambrose Kingsland, argued that the

city's public places were not in keeping with its character and that New York needed a grand public park to provide visible proof of its stature. More than fifty years later, Robert Speer would say the same thing about Denver. As Jerome Smiley wrote in his 1901 history of Denver, the city was "an object lesson of what faith, courage, and energy have done in converting a remote frontier town, that had to fight for its right to live, into a great and growing metropolis." According to Smiley, the city had a beautiful environment, notable architecture, and a healthy climate, but it was also sorely lacking in some areas, such as parks, that would make it a truly world-class city. Smiley argued that "Denver's noble surroundings should inspire a high exaltation of municipal life."²⁰

Mayor Joseph C. Bates had first called for Denver to acquire parkland in 1872, but it was not until 1881, under Mayor Richard Sopris, that the state legislature allowed Denver to buy 320 acres of school land, at a reduced price, for use as a park. The land became City Park. By 1901 Denver had twelve established parks covering 436 acres. City Park was the best developed, with a lake, a buggy racing track, a small zoo, and the newly built Museum of Natural History. Congress Park was second-largest, with 40 acres, followed by the smaller Washington, Park Avenue, Lincoln, Highland, Jefferson, Platt, Curtis, Dunham, Chaffee, and Fuller Parks. Noel and Norgren write that "fledgling parks and shabby attractions did not make Denver a beautiful or distinguished city," but with a budget of only \$67,000 in 1900, the Parks Department could do little. Smiley wrote that, except for the improved areas, Denver's parks were "weed-grown or barren areas," failing to make the city beautiful or distinguished while also failing to provide restful escapes for residents. The improved areas were marvels, however, and Smiley wrote that the "application of intelligent landscape engineering, creation of artificial lakes, and lawn, tree, and flower cultures" had turned them into "blooming gardens." Denver's location in a favored setting among numerous resources and opportunities meant that it should be "an example, a standard, for other American municipalities."²¹

With the park system so slow to take hold in Denver, residents seeking rest and relaxation often turned to any land that resembled a park, including the city's cemeteries. Cemetery monuments were widely recognized as a reliable source of public sculpture by the 1870s, and when Riverside Cemetery opened in 1876 downstream from Denver along the Platte, its founders were

intent on creating a fitting setting for the fine monuments they knew would soon come. Planners laid out Riverside in a grid of avenues, drives, and walks; and the property was graded and planted with trees and shrubs in an effort to copy “the landscape or park plan” popularized by Frederick Law Olmsted. The founders of Fairmount Cemetery, which opened southeast of Denver in 1890, expanded on the concept and invested \$30,000 in a stone chapel, gateway lodge, water system, graded streets, and a professional arborist to care for the many trees and shrubs inside the cemetery. Throughout the 1890s Riverside and Fairmount were rivals, and each attempted to gain an advantage over the other “through the greater beauty of their landscape and the higher artistic merit of their sculpture.” The competition gave Denver two large, beautifully decorated parks outside the city, and it was not uncommon for families to take a carriage or a streetcar to either cemetery on a Sunday afternoon, where they would walk the grounds admiring the magnificent headstones and other structures and enjoy a picnic lunch.²²

Riverside and Fairmount were not enough to fill the city’s recreation needs, however, and in his 1880 history of Denver, William B. Vickers wrote that “Denver, it must be confessed, is sadly deficient in places of legitimate amusement.” Within the next fifteen years, the opening of several summer resorts and amusement parks helped correct that deficiency. The first such park in Denver (as well as Lakeside’s longest-lasting competitor) was Elitch Gardens, which John and Mary Elitch, operators of the Elitch Palace Dining Room on Arapahoe Street in Denver, opened to the public on May 1, 1890. In 1888 John Elitch had purchased the old Chilcott farm in the Highlands, northwest of Denver, believing he and Mary could save money by growing their own produce for their restaurant. The farm increasingly reminded the Elitches of the time they had spent at San Francisco’s popular Woodward Gardens, and in 1889 John proposed turning the farm into a similar park, with gardens, a zoo, and a theater. Like Woodward, the Elitches’ new venture did not tolerate “rough company” or sell liquor. The May 2, 1890, issue of the *Denver Republican* called Elitch’s a “great institution” and said that “from this time forth people intent upon recreation of a legitimate kind will go to Elitch’s Gardens” (a pronouncement seemingly forgotten when Lakeside opened nearly twenty years later). The beautiful gardens, which earned Elitch’s praise for the next century, were lauded as magnificent additions to Denver. The first zoo animals arrived at the farm when both P. T. Barnum, a friend

of the family, and *Denver Post* owner Harry Tammen, also the new owner of the Sells-Floto Circus, gave Mary Elitch baby circus animals. Most impressive, though, was the “elegant theater,” a fixture at Elitch’s until the 1980s.²³

Thomas Edison’s Vitascope, an early film projector, was installed at Elitch’s in 1896 and became the first amusement park–type attraction there; Elitch’s added additional attractions with increasing rapidity after that. In 1897 Ivy Baldwin, a local daredevil, began doing balloon ascensions at the park. In 1899 the Elitches added a penny arcade and constructed a building that housed a reenactment of the battle between the Monitor and Merrimac, a popular attraction at amusement parks across the country. In 1900 a miniature train joined the list of attractions, followed by a Toboggan Coaster in 1904 and the first permanent carousel in 1906.²⁴

The second summer resort to open in Denver was Manhattan Beach on the shore of Sloan’s Lake, south of Elitch’s. Manhattan Beach, which replaced an earlier resort with the same name at Sloan’s Lake, opened on June 13, 1891, and is often credited as the first amusement park in the West. The *Denver Times* asserted that the opening of the park, bathing beach, and menagerie gave the city “one of the most beautiful resorts in the country.” Like Elitch’s, Manhattan Beach featured a zoo, the stars of which were male and female hippopotamuses. Also like Elitch’s, Manhattan Beach had beautiful gardens and a theater. The *Denver Times* singled out the fountain in Sloan’s Lake as the new park’s most unique feature. The center jet on the fountain shot water 100 feet into the air, while the three jets surrounding it reached 75 feet. A system of colored lights at the base of the fountain allowed it to “rise in many colors,” producing “one of the prettiest spectacles imaginable.”²⁵

The restaurant, hotel, bowling alley, and gymnasium rounded out the buildings at the new Manhattan Beach. The boathouse held canoes, rowboats, barges, and a steamboat named the *City of Denver*, and a grandstand beside the lake allowed spectators to watch aquatic events. The park soon added a dance pavilion and roller skating rink. In 1892 Mary Elitch Long took over as manager of the Manhattan Beach theater, a position she held for nearly twenty years. Ivy Baldwin also started doing his balloon ascension act at Manhattan Beach, in addition to continuing at Elitch’s. Manhattan Beach was also the site of the first amusement park fatality in Denver. In 1891 Roger the elephant became spooked by either the balloon ascension at the park or the crowd who had rushed to watch it. He trampled six-year-old

George W. Eaton, who had been riding on Roger and fell off when he stood up to watch the balloon.²⁶

Over the next ten years, management continued adding to Manhattan Beach's amusement devices, although in a somewhat strange move they tore down the roller coaster in 1902, depriving the park of what was by then a fairly standard amusement park attraction. Another major change at Manhattan Beach for the 1902 season involved admission fees, which that year dropped from a quarter to just ten cents in an effort to "cater to the vast multitude instead of the chosen few," allowing "the masses an opportunity to spend a day away from the care and anxiety of labor, amid such surroundings as are conducive to health and pleasure." Speaking to the *Denver Times* about the new admission fee policy, the park's managers, Hellbrun and Mayer, were careful to point out that they did not allow the sale of liquor in the park and that they were determined that propriety would prevail and nothing would be allowed that would offend the sensibilities of women and children. Hellbrun and Mayer also revealed to the *Times* that they had a powerful weapon at their disposal to maintain order: a giant searchlight, another common feature at amusement parks, was in operation atop the park's observation tower. While the rays from the light reminded people all over Denver that the park existed, it also allowed management to shine light into every corner of the park "so as to insure against any infraction of the rules laid down governing the general conduct of the place."²⁷

Lights, from searchlights to smaller bulbs on strings, were an important feature of any amusement park, and Manhattan Beach was the first amusement park in Denver to adopt elaborate lighting schemes. Throughout the park's grounds visitors found arches with rows of colored lights, which made for a "magnificent illuminated promenade." Although management continually remodeled and expanded Manhattan Beach between 1891 and 1904, disaster struck in 1909 when a fire destroyed it. The next year, new management quickly rebuilt the park (renamed Luna) with many of the same attractions but with two notable additions: a movie theater and a new roller coaster. The Aero Coaster, designed by Denverites Harry L. Weber, Theodore Nollenberger, and W. W. McFarland, consisted of a 60-foot conical tower, 120 feet around at the base, with track running around the cone. But Luna Park was never as popular as Manhattan Beach, and customers soon lost interest in it. By the outbreak of World War I, it had essentially been abandoned.²⁸

The third amusement park built in Denver, and perhaps the one most significant to the future relationship between Denver and Lakeside Amusement Park, was Arlington Park, which opened in 1892. The men behind Arlington were Denver postmaster John Corcoran, businessman Henry W. Michael, and Police Commissioner Robert W. Speer. The thirty-acre park along the banks of Cherry Creek, between Pennsylvania and Downing Streets, encompassed land known as Arlington Grove, which the *Colorado Sun* called “one of the nicest groves in the vicinity.” The *Rocky Mountain News* wrote that, based on an interview with Speer, the plans for the park’s “adornment are beautiful.” The ground, according to the newspaper, was very uneven, but the park’s builders handled this by dredging the creek to straighten it and using the dirt from the dredging operation to level the ground. They also built a half-mile-long lake with an island at the north end of the park.²⁹

Aside from the tennis courts, baseball field, and theater, the biggest attraction was a show titled *The Last Days of Pompeii*. A fifty-two-foot-high canvas depicting Mt. Vesuvius was set up on the far side of the lake, with various buildings in front of it, including a temple and a palace. Openings in the stage allowed smoke and flames to shoot up through the set, each series of events controlled electronically. To create the illusion of lava flowing down the sides of Vesuvius, a red light was set up behind the canvas; holes cut through the material allowed it to shine through, while a man moved the light around behind the screen to control the lava flow. The *Denver Republican* found the show an impressive sight, but Mr. Wiley, general manager of the park, said it was “the easiest thing in the world . . . when you know how [to do it].”³⁰

As popular as the Fall of Pompeii and other pyrotechnic shows were, new managers completely remodeled the park in 1897. A new Shoot-the-Chutes, which ended in the lake, gave the park its new name, Chutes Park. A favorite show on the chutes during the 1899 season was Professor W. H. Barnes and his diving elk, which would alternately slide down or dive off the chute. Denver’s first scenic railway, which depicted the route to the Klondike, was also at Chutes Park. In 1898 the *Denver Times* told the story of William McFarland, a ticket broker who rode the scenic railway, essentially an early roller coaster, at Chutes Park. According to the *Times*, McFarland and his fellow passengers were “more or less sober” when they got on the ride, but McFarland declared afterward that he would not ride it again “for the prettiest \$500 bill in the world.” The ride up the incline was pleasant, but for him

the fun stopped after that. He was so afraid that he missed seeing the tunnel the car went through, and he was never quite certain if he was “going to Heaven or the other place.” When he finally found himself on firm ground again, he had to agree with a friend who called the scenic railway “the road of the Lost Soul.” Ten years later, when Lakeside opened with its own scenic railway, the ride was much more popular and acceptable and considered much tamer.³¹

In addition to these two major changes, the new management company also added a professional bicycle track around the lake, taking advantage of the bicycling boom sweeping the nation, and they redesigned the football, baseball, and tennis areas. A palace of illusions, a shooting gallery, burro rides, flying horses, mazes, and a haunted swing rounded out the new attractions under construction at Arlington for the 1898 season. According to the *Rocky Mountain News*, everything at the new Chutes Park would be “run in a strictly first-class manner” as management attempted to make the park both entertaining and educational.³²

Unfortunately, the joy surrounding the new Chutes Park was short-lived. On the night of January 21, 1901, a fire broke out in the engine room of the scenic railway. Firemen told the *Denver Times* they believed tramps had started the blaze, and, within an hour of the first alarm at 11:00 p.m., the park was in ashes. According to the *Times*, nearby residents “rejoiced” as the park burned because they had grown weary of the “noises emanating from it and the objectionable characters it drew there.” By the following summer, portions of the park had been rebuilt, but on June 4, 1902, another fire raged through it. The park never reopened, and in 1903 the remains were torn down. The city of Denver pushed Third Avenue through the grounds, and Speer and the other owners divided the land into building lots. In the 1920s Alamo Placita Park was built on the site, with flower beds occupying the filled-in lake.³³

The glee Arlington Park’s neighbors felt as the park burned in 1901 proved that the park’s owners had misjudged the way some Denverites would accept their creation. The amusement park itself covered 30 acres, but the Arlington Park Land and Improvement Company owned 120 acres. The 90 acres of land not occupied by the park were sold as residential lots beginning in 1890, although anyone building a house had to observe certain restrictions. Houses had to cost at least \$2,000, an effort by Speer and his partners to control the class of people living there. The rules also forbade the construction of bars

and the selling of liquor in the area for five years. Speer and his associates firmly believed the kind of amusement park they built would be a welcome addition to the upscale neighborhood they were creating, but neighbors enthusiastically watching the park burn proved that people did not consider a noisy amusement park a good neighbor. The Arlington Park Company's success at controlling the land around the park doomed the park. Lakeside's owners hoped they would be more successful when they built their park fifteen years later.³⁴

The last Denver-area amusement park built before Lakeside was Tuileries Park, located in Englewood at the end of South Broadway, between Floyd and Hampden. The site had once been Orchard Park, a popular beer garden in the 1890s. Financed by a group of men from Cripple Creek, Tuileries was patterned after Coney Island in Kansas City and managed by William Simpson, also of Kansas City. In the months before Tuileries opened on July 29, 1906, the owners spent at least \$140,000 on construction at the 35-acre site. According to the *Denver Republican*, the park was "the most beautiful natural park in the state" and had "all the familiar amusements," including a lake, roller rink, baseball diamond, and miniature railroad. The newspaper thought the dance pavilion was the largest west of Chicago and deemed the aerodrome, where balloonists and aerialists performed, impressive. The *Republican* reported that management intended to take special care that women and children found no cause for offense at the park, banning liquor sales and making sure the grounds were "amply policed." The July 4, 1901, celebration at Tuileries was an impressive sight as Manager William Gillpatrick hosted five motorcycle races, a baseball game between the Tuileries team and another, a race between two cowboys hoping to win a wife, dancing, and fireworks. Labor Day at the park featured a corn roast at which 10,000 ears of corn, grown on the park grounds, were roasted and given away for free. Although initially popular, increasingly poor attendance forced Tuileries to close in 1912.³⁵

Each of these amusement parks stood out as a showplace in a city filled with undeveloped, weed-strewn public parks. The success of Riverside and Fairmount Cemeteries as parks proved that Denver residents were willing to accept recreation areas not traditionally thought of as parks. Like Riverside's and Fairmount's developers, the owners of Denver's early amusement parks invested huge amounts of money in each of them to make them attractive

and popular showplaces. Newspapers praised Elitch's gardens and statuary, Manhattan Beach's lighting, and Arlington Park's pyrotechnic displays. Visitors found beautiful gardens, educational attractions, and fine theater performances, all important features of Denver's City Beautiful program. In a city starved for space for recreation and relaxation, the appearance of large, beautiful parks was a welcome sight that received a great deal of notice in the press.

And yet, city officials rarely took notice of the first four parks when they opened. At Elitch's opening ceremony on May 1, 1890, Denver mayor Wolf Londoner attended to help show what the newspapers called proper appreciation for the event. The mayor, "in his usual happy vein," greeted friends in the crowd before speaking of his pride in both the gardens and public-spirited citizens such as John Elitch. Mayor Londoner declared that Elitch Gardens was the best advertisement Denver could hope to have to show how far it had come since its founding in 1859. Only at Lakeside's opening eighteen years later would listeners hear similar sentiments expressed, but that was at a ceremony on a scale far above that of Elitch's relatively simple opening. No official government delegations attended the openings of Manhattan Beach, Arlington Park, or Tuileries, and it fell to the newspapers to promote the new amusement parks. Articles proclaimed each park a welcome and beneficial addition to Denver, unmatched by anything before it. Reporters praised each park's beautiful flowers, paths, fountains, lakes, and picnic areas as unlike anything that came before them (probably true, given Denver's lack of such beauty). Newspapers also stressed each park's purity, with articles stating that liquor sales were not permitted, rowdy children were tolerated only on certain days or during certain times, and powerful searchlights could penetrate every corner of dark parks at night.³⁶

As mayor, Robert Speer wanted his city's parks to be as beautiful as Riverside and Fairmount Cemeteries and to offer as much amusement as did Elitch's, Manhattan Beach, Arlington Park, and Tuileries. As such, he had a much broader vision of what could constitute City Beautiful than did many of his contemporaries. Absent from Denver's parks were the infamous "Keep off the Grass" signs that marked New York's Central Park. Denver's residents were allowed (and even encouraged) to walk on the grass and play in the fountains, and one of Speer's more controversial decisions when it came to Denver's parks was to allow couples to spoon in them. Denver, according to

the *Rocky Mountain News*, was in need of more people in the early 1900s, and “if love-making in the parks will help it along, why then they can do all the love-making in the parks they want to.” Speer liked parks for the practical reason that landscaped park areas could provide flood control (floods were often problems in early Denver) and firebreaks. More philosophically, however, Speer and other Progressive-era thinkers believed “an improved environment would uplift the entire urban population.”³⁷

Speer’s favorite park project during his time as mayor was Civic Center Park, which he envisioned as comparable to the Court of Honor at the Columbian Exposition, with architecturally similar government buildings surrounding a central plaza. Speer believed that, if his plan was followed, Civic Center Park would beautify Denver while also making government more efficient, as all city, county, and state offices would be in one area. While Civic Center Park received much of Speer’s attention, he was just as interested in building or completing other parks throughout Denver. George Kessler, who had worked with landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, developed the city’s park and parkway plan, which proposed a network of parkways that radiated from Civic Center Park and connected all of Denver’s parks by road. Included in the plan were three parks near the future site of Lakeside Amusement Park: Sloan’s Lake, Berkeley, and Inspiration Point.³⁸

With Robert Speer in office, the timing could not have been better for Lakeside Amusement Park and its builders. All of the trends that marked the amusement industry were found at Lakeside in one form or another, yet it managed to be a very unique park. Lakeside, for example, was surrounded by a fence that protected it from unwanted customers, but it was further protected by occupying its own town, something no other park could claim. Having the park located in its own town gave its builders and owners enormous control over the rules and regulations that impacted the park and what happened around it, especially in its early years. Lakeside’s close relationship with Denver during the City Beautiful movement was another important difference between it and other parks. Critics blasted the many parks that tried to claim they were part of the City Beautiful movement, arguing that the very nature of amusement parks was in opposition to the values of City Beautiful. But Lakeside and Denver’s City Beautiful program were so closely linked that the city’s changing economic and political climate had far-reaching consequences for the park’s survival. Other observers argued

that amusement parks did nothing to educate or uplift, charges Lakeside's owners might have taken issue with as they tried to do both with their park. Lakeside, through its owners' smart business sense, also demonstrated exceptional skill at surviving changing times, an extremely important factor in the park's long life. The park was, and is, an excellent mirror of the world around it, and Lakeside's various owners have demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt the park to those changing conditions. Unlike thousands of other amusement parks, by being unique, Lakeside Amusement Park has not only survived but thrived.³⁹

Of the nearly 5,000 amusement parks built in the United States between 1895 and 1920, only 100 still survived in 2008. Twenty-eight of them had survived long enough to celebrate their centennials. This is the story of how Lakeside Amusement Park, a park like no other, became one of those twenty-eight parks.⁴⁰

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