

OAKWOOD PARK

by Jill Dunlap

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In the late 1890's, after acquiring a parcel of approximately 35 acres, the Meadville Traction Company established Oakwood Park as a destination resort. Located in what is now West Mead Township, the park was located on lands between Oakgrove Avenue and Springs Road and could be reached by riding the trolley lines out Alden Street past the Pierson School. On a big holiday, as many as 20,000 people paid their trolley fair of 5 cents, each way, to enjoy the resort facility and all its attractions at no additional cost.

The most impressive attraction was that of the Dance Pavilion, a 60 feet wide x 100 feet long two story building surrounded on all sides by 12 feet wide balconies with gazebos on each corner that served as a resting place for those who spent time inside the theatre or dancing on the specially designed "spring floor". Ball field, picnic areas, outdoor bandstands offering live concerts by famous performers of the day, walking trails, animal menagerie, shooting gallery and many gardens were enjoyed during the summer months. High jumping bicyclists, balloon ascensions, fireworks and the first outdoor movies shown in the area were a big draw for those who visited.

A dam was constructed making a lake 600 feet wide by 1,000 feet long and 3 feet deep in most places. Monkey Island, a small island located in the middle of the lake was a popular spot to reach by canoes that were available at the boat dock. Ice skating was popular for those that could make it there during the winter months.

The trolley lines ran along the dam and ended at the Ponce de Leon Mineral Springs. Research suggests these "sparkling waters" were held in high regard by the Indians and early settlers of the area. Henry Johnson took to bottling the waters and around 1887 was touted as "showing commendable business enterprise" in marketing and distributing the water. Many testified to its medicinal properties. It was available plain or carbonated and was used in the making of an "extra fine quality" of ginger ale. Today, a historic brick monument built by the sons of John J. Shyroch in 1950 marks the spot. Water from the spring is still accessible at times, for those who wish to give it a taste.

The demise of Oakwood Park in the 1920's was mainly due to the extension of trolley lines that had been run west from Meadville, offering travel to another up and coming park known as Exposition Park, later becoming Conneaut Lake Park. Most of the buildings were tore down and the dam demolished during the 1920's, with the exception of the Dance Pavilion. Some references start to call it the "Casino" or "Lakeside" and history begins to get fuzzy until the early 1970's, when the Township established a ballpark and picnic area in the vicinity and began calling it Oakgrove Park.

When visiting the present day site, one can only imagine the flurry of activity during the heyday of Oakwood Park and Ponce de Leon Mineral Springs. In the last few years, many individuals have helped piece together some of the history of this once great destination area. Work is still being done and any interesting stories, photos or the likes to help fill in the blanks are always welcome. Plans to document the historical significance of the area are underway and will be shared in upcoming years.