

## A Tale of Hyde Park Park Art

by Alta Blakely

On evening walks my husband and I often stroll through Nichols Park (between 55th and 54th Streets, Kenwood and Kimbark). My curiosity became whetted by the names on the low curved wall just north of 55th Street: Josiah Willard Gibbs, Robert VanGoor, William Bela Hofman, Lazar M. Perryman, Henry Schneiderman. What did these five men have in common?

"Josiah Willard Gibbs was a well known physicist!" said my husband. And I had a hunch that Robert VanGoor might have been the husband of Wanda VanGoor, whom I remembered as a member of the staff at the Hyde Park-Kenwood Community Conference, probably in the 1950's. But what of the other three?

Then one June evening, as we walked through the park again, suddenly there was a lovely fountain in a crescent-shaped pool behind the wall bearing those names—a fountain of graceful coils from which water arced in all directions. Here was really a surprise and a mystery! I turned to Len Despres, who seems to know the answers to most of my questions about Hyde Park.

"Call Miriam (Mrs. Alex) Elson," Len said. "She and Muriel Beadle were co-chairmen of a sculpture committee back in the '60's, a subcommittee of the Hyde Park-Kenwood Community Conference. She is the person to answer your questions."

"Yes," said Miriam Elson, "and Muriel Beadle said we should deposit all our committee minutes in Regenstein Library." A trip to Special Collections at Regenstein then revealed much of the story.



In the early 1960's, as part of Urban Renewal, certain areas were set aside for parks. Community members were interested in making these parks attractive, and the HPKCC Sculpture Committee was set up. Members other than Miriam Elson and Muriel Beadle were Don Baum of the Hyde Park Art Center, Theodora (Mrs. George) Bobrinsky,



Photo by Alta Blakely

Charles ("Carl") Dornbusch, architect, Barbara Fiske, John Hawkinson of the University of Chicago faculty, Nancy Hays, Natalie (Mrs. Ben) Heineman, Michael Igoe, Jr., Helen (Mrs. Robert) McDougal, Calvin Sawyer, and Joshua Taylor, professor of art history at the University of Chicago.

The Park District responded enthusiastically to the willingness of community residents to participate in the plans for the two parks. Consequently, an announcement of the sculpture design competition went out on November 16, 1964:

"The Park Sculpture Committee of the Hyde Park-Kenwood Community Conference invites students of the Art Institute of Chicago to participate in a design competition intended to encourage fresh and unstereotyped thinking about a problem common to urban neighborhoods all over the U.S.: How can small city parks acquire sculpture that the community served by the park can afford, will enjoy, and will be sufficiently proud of to protect and maintain?"

The committee expressed the hope that the sculpture, though artistically satisfying, would not be "Hands off." Also "it should be designed so that some or all of it could be constructed by amateurs, under the direction of the sculptor." (This aspect of the plan proved to be not feasible.)

An impressive panel of judges was assembled: Harry Bouras and Cosmo Campoli, sculptors; Joseph Shapiro, "the well known art collector"; Joshua Taylor, professor of art at the University of Chicago; and Charles ("Carl") Dornbusch, architect and also planner of Harper Court.



A news release from the HPKCC to the Hyde Park Herald on August 10, 1966, stated:

"Over 50 models meeting (the stated) requirements were submitted. Prizes of \$200 each were awarded in June 1965 to three students whose models were adjudged best by a five-man jury of sculptors and art experts. The Chicago Park District, whose officials have worked closely with the Park Sculpture Committee from the inception of the project, displayed the models for several months at Park District headquarters. (Also at McCormick Place, as part of the CPD annual flower fair, according to Miriam Elson.)

"The first of the sculptures to be commissioned is an organic form of plastic applied to a steel-wire frame. It is now being made in his studio by the young sculptor, Jerome Scuba, and will be installed in the new neighborhood park at 54th and Blackstone sometime this fall.

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