

**Sandwiching in History
Crestview Park
Cherry Hill Ave. & Crestview Dr., NLR
August 6, 2010
By: Rachel Silva**



Intro

Hi, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the August Sandwiching in History tour of Crestview Park! As usual, I'd like to thank the staff of the NLR History Commission for their help with the tour as well as Ward 1 Alderwomen Beth White and Debi Ross and Cary Tyson, who is the Director of Main Street Arkansas as well as the President of the Park Hill Neighborhood Association, for their work in the neighborhood. And in a few minutes, we'll discuss the new master plan for Crestview Park, which was recently adopted by the city's Parks & Recreation Department. And speaking of the Parks & Rec Dept., many thanks for mowing the grass yesterday in this heat!

Crestview Park was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1986 because it contains two concrete sculptures designed by Mexican artist Dionicio Rodriguez.

If you attended last month's tour, you heard a lot of history on Park Hill. In a nutshell, forward-thinking businessman Justin Matthews developed the Park Hill subdivision beginning in 1921, and it was North Little Rock's first major suburban development. Matthews also developed Lakewood and Sylvan Hills and in the early 1930s commissioned Dionicio Rodriguez to create "faux bois" (imitation or fake wood) sculptures at the Old Mill, Lakewood Park, and here at Crestview Park.

Background on Dionicio Rodriguez:

Dionicio Rodriguez was born on April 11, 1891, in Toluca, Mexico, a town about 60 miles from Mexico City. At the age of 16, he moved to Mexico City, where he learned the rustic technique from an engineer and a contractor who both specialized in the creation of imitation rocks, caverns, ruins, and ancient buildings. Rodriguez moved to San Antonio, Texas, in 1924. It is thought that Rodriguez not only came to the U.S. to find work, but also to escape the violence and political unrest in his native Mexico during the country's revolution years, which lasted from about 1910 until 1940. Although Rodriguez was commissioned for projects throughout the U.S. from 1924-1955, most of his work was concentrated in Texas, Arkansas, and Tennessee. He did a lot of work in San Antonio, and he was responsible for a large collection of sculptures at Memorial Park Cemetery in Memphis as well. Rodriguez did much of his work during the Great Depression. This can be attributed to the fact that his labor and materials were relatively inexpensive.

Rodriguez's personality has been described as "very distant and very serious." He was always dressed nicely, and did not have many friends because he never stayed in one place too long. In fact, he purchased a new car every year for his travels across the country (and was quite reluctant to let others drive). After all of his time in the U.S., Rodriguez never learned to speak English. This is probably because he was 33 years old when he came to the States, and he could successfully communicate with clients through interpreters or by using sign language, so learning English wasn't a priority for him. Rodriguez was married and divorced twice and had no children. Rodriguez suffered throughout his adult life with diabetes, which eventually caused him to lose his eyesight. Apparently, his diabetic condition was not treated until he exhibited extreme fatigue and weight loss. After seeing a doctor in 1935 (at the urging of Justin Matthews), Rodriguez had to have insulin injections twice a day. He died on December 16, 1955, in San Antonio and is buried there.

"Faux bois" technique:

The "faux bois" (fake wood), "rustic," or "trabajo rustico" (rustic work) technique practiced by Rodriguez has antecedents in Europe, Asia, Central and South America, and other areas of the U.S. Many of these early rustic designs appeared in gardens and were executed with wood to create whimsical themes. Even in the early 20th century when Rodriguez came to the U.S., he was not the only sculptor

using the technique. However, his grasp of the technique and the detail of his work set him apart from other artists of the period.

The Secret Method:

Rodriguez was extremely secretive about his work. He never worked from written plans, so none exist. He would mix coloring, bonding agents, and other products in the trunk of his car, slamming it shut if anyone approached. He would even remove the labels from, and break, the jars that contained his ingredients to ensure that no one could copy his work. Rodriguez sometimes hired people to help him create the rough base of his sculptures, but he never taught them the finishing techniques like how to apply the detailing or how to mix and use the coloring agents. Rodriguez also worked from inside a tent sometimes. However, we do know the basic method he used to create his sculptures.

For large pieces, Rodriguez poured a concrete footing. Then he used steel reinforcing rods or rebar to create the projections of the sculptural work. [FYI: On at least 2 occasions, at the Old Mill in NLR and at Memorial Park in Memphis, Rodriguez used copper rebar to ensure the longevity of the sculptures.] These projections were then tied together with wire, instead of being welded. The form was wrapped with metal lath, or metal mesh or screen material, and the lath was filled with cement, adding rubble for larger pieces. A rough coat of cement was then applied to the exterior of this form. A final coat of “neat” or pure Portland cement was added to the sculpture surface directly from the bag. Rodriguez then used homemade tools and kitchen implements to create the realistic textures of rock, wood, and thatch. The final step was the application of color while the cement was still damp and hosing the sculpture off with water. Rodriguez used a mixture of water and various chemicals to create his tints, including sulfuric acid, muriatic acid, iron oxide, saltpeter, and lampblack.

Do Not Read Aloud...

Notes on cement and concrete: Cement is made up of limestone, calcium, silicone, etc. heated until it forms a hard substance, which is then ground up into a fine powder and when water is added, it hardens. “Pure” or Portland cement was invented in the 1700s when clay was added to cement and heated. This substance can harden anywhere—even under water. It is still used to construct bridges. Concrete is cement mixed with gravel and sand (cement makes up about 10-15% of the mixture).

Rodriguez’s Sculptures in Arkansas:

North Little Rock: Crestview Park, T.R. Pugh Memorial Park or “The Old Mill”, and Lakewood Park.

Hot Springs vicinity: Couchwood Historic District and Little Switzerland (L. S. no longer extant)

Crestview Park

When Matthews platted the first sections of the Park Hill addition in 1921, he set aside an area for a park at the foot of the hill below Crestview Drive. Later that year on June 19, 1921, Matthews gave the park to the city of NLR under the condition that it would always remain open to the public. The flagstone walkways and steps were likely constructed sometime during the 1920s because they resemble other rock work done during that period throughout Park Hill.

Historians theorize that either Justin Matthews himself or his company’s resident architect Frank Carmean discovered the work of Dionicio Rodriguez while traveling in the Southwest and later asked him to create sculptures in North Little Rock. This theory is plausible because Matthews sent Carmean on a trip to study southwestern architecture in the late 1920s.

Between 1931 and 1933, Rodriguez constructed 2 of his faux bois sculptures in Crestview Park. There is a rustic shelter with a front-gabled roof of overlapping hollow logs, designed to resemble a tile roof. This shelter is a unique Rodriguez design and is not duplicated at any other site. Rodriguez also designed a bridge with a bark-covered log walkway and two log benches with backrests.

The newer pavilion was constructed in February 1991 by the family and friends of Artie Gregory, Jr., who served as the Chairman of the City Beautiful Commission from 1977 until his death in 1990. The pavilion was placed here in his honor because he lived nearby and spent a lot of his own time maintaining Crestview Park.

Over the years, Crestview Park provided a convenient short-cut for high school students walking to and from the west side of Park Hill, and in the early days, women working as maids for families in Park Hill would use the park as a short-cut as they came up from the old Military Heights Addition, which was located southwest of Park Hill. [Military Heights was bounded by Park Hill on the north, the Missouri-Pacific RR tracks on the west, 22nd St. on the south, and Main St. on the east. The area consisted of low-income housing and was prone to flooding.

For this reason, the homes in Military Heights were demolished as part of the Urban Renewal program of the 1960s and 1970s (NLR's urban renewal commission existed from 1960 to 1980).]

Cherry Hill Werewolf

According to Walter Metz, the residents of Military Heights were particularly superstitious and helped to keep the legend of the Cherry Hill Werewolf alive for many years.

Walter Metz was a longtime resident of Baring Cross, and after retiring from the Air Force in 1965, he devoted his time to recording the history of Baring Cross and NLR as a whole. He also included human interest stories and local superstitions like the story of the Cherry Hill Werewolf. The NLR Times published a series of stories from his scrapbook in the late 1970s. Metz died in 1994 at the age of 96.

So from the Walter Metz Scrapbook series...around the turn of the 20th century, there was another park in this area called German Park (we know the park was near the current site of NLR High School and likely extended north to the base of Park Hill). Park Hill was known as Cherry Hill back then, and a trail came down Cherry Hill and into German Park. People reported seeing an animal-like creature with fangs, long hair, and a beard walking down the path and crossing the park before disappearing into the Dark Hollow swamps [Dark Hollow is the area just east of I-30 and south of I-40—roughly bounded on the south by E. 13th St., which turns into North Hills Blvd. and runs up to the back of Park Hill—the area used to be very swampy and uninhabitable until the city's first major drainage project, which began in 1907. And the area continues to experience flooding problems today.] The “Werewolf of Cherry Hill” supposedly had the powers of witchcraft and was thought to be responsible for the brutal murders of two teenage girls (in 1902 and 1918, respectively). These stories were likely told to discourage young people from venturing into the swamps.

Crestview Park in recent years...

Although Matthews gave Crestview Park to the City of NLR in 1921, the city did little to maintain it at first. The Park Hill Garden Club took care of park maintenance until the early 1950s, when some school children were “accosted by a tramp” in the park. After one or two similar incidences, the club stopped maintaining the park. An article in the NLR Times from 1964 reported that a clean-up had taken place and declared that the City Parks Dept. would begin

maintaining Crestview Park, but another Times article in 1984 said that the park was again showing signs of neglect.

In Nov. 1961 the new 4-lane section of JFK Blvd. bypassed the old Ark-Mo Hwy. (now the access road to I-40), and the Travelodge was constructed in the late 1960s or early 1970s, making it difficult for people to see the park. But a master plan completed this spring contains many ideas to make the park more accessible and user-friendly.

--Cary Tyson will tell you a little more about the master plan.

Although the park lacks the visibility it once had along the Ark-Mo Highway, it remains an important part of the neighborhood...and hopefully, after implementing some of the recommendations in the master plan, it will play an even greater role in the community.

Thank you for braving the heat, and I hope to see you next month at the 1st Lutheran Church in LR (Sept. 10).