



Ruth F. Musick
1917-2003

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Sep 29, 1917 - Jun 21, 2003
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Tuesday, June 24, 2003

Ruth F. Musick

Ruth F. Musick, 85, of Shawnee died Saturday at a local nursing home.

She was born Sept. 29, 1917, in Shawnee to Thomas W. and Fannie (Tyner) Alford.

Musick graduated from Shawnee High School and had lived in Shawnee all her life.

She worked as a bookkeeper at Cole Finance for many years before retiring.

On May 26, 1934, she married Vernon **Musick** in Chandler. He preceded her in death in 1979.

She was a member of University Baptist Church, American Association of Retired Persons, Shawnee Senior Citizen Center and was the past secretary of the Shawnee Absentee Tribe.

Musick was also preceded in death by her parents and one son, **Bill Musick** in 1995.

Survivors include three daughters, Pat Ozeretny of Shawnee, Jackie Taylor of Tuttle and Jenny Ware of Shawnee; one son, Charles **Musick** of Oklahoma

City; 12 grandchildren and 21 great-grandchildren.

Service will be 10 a.m. today at the chapel of Walker Funeral Service with the Rev. Bob Searl officiating. Burial will follow at Resthaven Memorial Park Cemetery. Arrangements are under the direction of Walker Funeral Service.



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In Memory Of Ruth F. Musick

Born
September 29, 1917
Shawnee, Oklahoma

Died
June 21, 2003
Shawnee, Oklahoma

Services
Chapel of Walker Funeral Service
Tuesday, June 24, 2003
10:00 AM

Officiating
Dr. Bob Searl

Interment
Resthaven Memorial Park Cemetery
Shawnee, Oklahoma

Under The Direction Of
Walker Funeral Service
Shawnee, Oklahoma

Benson Park Part of Early History

This story was provided by [The Countywide News](#)

Early day Shawnee, at least the period between 1907 and 1932, can hardly be discussed or thought of without mention of Benson Park. Early residents of the county, who experienced the park, fondly talked about it in front of those of us who came along too late, leaving us with the feeling of having missed something very special.

The amusement park was located two and one half miles south of Shawnee on Benson Park Road and east of Highway 18. The park site was on twenty-one and a half acres purchased from Thomas Wildcat Alford's Indian allotment. Alford was the great-great grandson of Chief Tecumseh, an Absentee Shawnee, and one of the first of his tribe to attend college.

The acreage for the park was a pie shaped wedge in the middle of the Southwest Quarter of the Southeast

The local streetcar company was a small part of a chain of companies controlled and managed by the vast Bylesby organization, which included the giant Market Street Railway in San Francisco. Shawnee Traction was incorporated on February 16, 1906 and capitalized at \$500,000. The new company began with 11 electric cars, which included three interurbans, four closed city cars and four open city cars. Initially the city fare was a nickel but it was raised to seven cents in 1924. Streetcar companies across the country were having trouble making ends meet and in January 1927 all streetcar and interurban service was discontinued in Shawnee.

Scarcely six weeks after the land was purchased the park opened, albeit not completed. The opera house, an impressive structure measuring 50 by 120 feet, opened with the Beggar Prince Opera Company performing

Quarter (SW/4 SE/4) of Section 31, Township 10 North, Range 4 East of the Indian Meridian, Pottawatomie County. The site split up the Alford land but was done so to allow the creek to meander through the proposed amusement park. Squirrel Creek and the water it provided were to become an integral part of the park.

Alford sold the park site on 17 July 1907 to Deka Development Company owned by William E. Hyde and Russell H. Alexander for \$3190.50. The land was purchased to build an amusement park on so as to stimulate demand for the services of the Shawnee-Tecumseh Traction Company. In 1905 the company operated in Shawnee on 12 miles of streetcar tracks. By 1906, Shawnee-Traction had added the six miles of track joining Shawnee and Tecumseh, the then county seat. With the amusement park along the way, the interurban ridership would be greatly *La Mascotte*. After that one-week engagement, the theatre was closed so that concession stands and permanent seating could be added. Over the next six years stock companies and vaudeville acts regularly performed at the advertised price of twenty cents per seat.

In June 1911, a "Monster Gala Week of the Season at the Benson Park Theatre" was being promoted. Never before heard of Five Big Vaudeville Acts of great variety and novelty with 2000 ft electric photograph were to perform at 2:30 matinees and nightly at 8:15 for a mere five cents. Also in 1911 local talent featuring Miss Pearl Levins as "The Texas Nightingale" performed. High-class singing, dancing and classical sketches were touted. People were urged "to come see what your clever little Shawnee people can do." Admission was again five cents.

increased. By 1900 some 2000 amusement parks had been built in this country by streetcar companies. Benson Park was just an extension of a proven concept of the day.

Construction on the park began three days after the land was purchased and opened on schedule, the first day of September 1907. Shawnee Traction dedicated \$85,000 to the project and the park was continually embellished after the opening. In March 1907, an announcement had been made in Shawnee that an amusement park would be built on thirty acres of land on North Broadway. Speculation of lack of financial support and political opposition led to the demise of that park. Such was not the case for Benson Park, which expanded and prospered for a quarter of a century. The park was named after C.J. Benson, a local banker and chairman of the board of the Shawnee-Tecumseh Traction Company.

In 1913 the park converted the theatre to a natatorium — an indoor swimming pool. That took 25 days and cost \$3,000, but the decision turned out to be a success. On opening day 1200 patrons swam or at least tried to. The water for the pool was provided by wells dug on the site. A contest to name the pool ran for a week before opening and the winning name was the Plunge. The Plunge was probably the most remembered attraction and definitely was the most advertised. A twenty-five cent admission fee included a towel. Five hundred swimsuits were available for rental, in your choice of color as long as it was a drab gray.

Squirrel Creek was dammed up at the north end, forming a man-made lake forty feet wide, twelve feet deep and a half-mile long. Sixteen rowboats were available for rental. It was reported that, in August before the park was opened, hundreds of men and teams

of horses were at work clearing underbrush and digging a lagoon. Picturesque photographs of the park confirm reports that the site was heavily wooded. A two story, 40 by 90 foot boathouse was situated on the lake edge. The second story was a dance floor/skating rink combination. In 1908 a bandstand was suspended from the ceiling.

Two years after the grand opening, another major attraction was added. A roller coaster dubbed the Circle Dip was touted as the largest and most expensive one west of Chicago. It measured 60 feet tall and 2,000 feet long and cost \$10,000. It was reported that one thousand brave souls rode it on opening day, August 8, 1909. According to the management, the Circle Dip was a "cure for dementia, melancholia, meuresthenia, brain fog, brain storm, the tired feeling and all allied diseases."

In addition to the opera house, those with an appreciation of the arts could visit the band shell. Free concerts were offered every Sunday by the resident band. On July 21, 1910, the First Regiment Band performed at the recently built band shell. Visiting bands often performed there, with the most notable one being John Phillip Sousa's. At a performance in 1915, twelve thousand locals came to hear Sousa's band.

Another major attraction was the Baseball Park, built by Spec Arrington on land leased from Alford. The ballpark was situated on the east side of the creek. On the opening day of the 1911 season, a game between the famous Boston Bloomer Girls' baseball team and the Tecumseh Fads was played. On August 21, 1910 a colored base ball game was scheduled between the Brooksville Outlaws and the Earlsboro Grey Wolves. In addition to the game, band concerts and free motion pictures were offered, plus two "Monster Balloon Ascensions." The following month the Shawnee Herald played the Tecumseh Fads in a benefit game for the Confederate home.

Permanent attractions and a host of special features insured large

attendance almost every day, but none more than the annual Fourth of July celebrations. July 4, 1910 proved to be a blockbuster with ridership estimated at 20,000 by the Railway Company. The park's business was consistent with the railway's estimate. Six thousand ice cream cones were sold at five cents each that day, with cold drinks sales in like proportion. The police and representatives of the sheriff's office were on hand to preserve order in case their presence was required, but they were not called upon. Back in the City, only three arrests were made and those for violation of the ordinance prohibiting the display of fireworks in the business districts.

It was reported that as many as seven fat steers were barbecued at one time in preparation for special days, in addition to the cotton candy, hot dogs and pop corn that was always available. Old timers remembered that Clyde Hammon would whip up his special concoction — "Queen of Sheba" ice cream sundaes.

Labor Day was a fun-filled time with activities as varied as races between fat men, lean men, girls, boys, three-legged teams and relays. Ladies who were so inclined could compete in nail driving contests. Contests were also available in boating, swimming, stump speaking, prettiest, handsomest, and ugliest man and woman. Greased pole climbing, tub races, tug-of-war, and baby shows were also offered.

Skaggs Race Track between Broadway and Union and just north of the Canadian River also experienced large attendance on that Independence Day. Both automobile and horse races provided the excitement. The track was reported to be in good condition even though it had not been worked. Ample accommodations were available and the crowd was provided with exciting races.

Fireworks displays were always a part of the holiday festivities, but not limited to the Fourth of July. A local newspaper covered fireworks displays at Benson Park on July 13, 14, and

15, 1910. Admission to the ball grounds was 25 cents with an additional 10 cents charged for a front row chair. An immense crowd enjoyed the display by the Martin Company each evening. On the last night, H.J. Martin, the exhibitor, sustained a serious injury. His hand was badly lacerated as a result of an explosion which was premature and unexplained. The accident occurred when Martin went to light the fuse of an iron-encased mortar. Fortunately, Superintendent Waddle of the Traction Company and Dr. Scruggs happened to be present, and immediately took the injured man to town.

On Monday, July 18, 1910 a free Indian War Dance was scheduled for both the afternoon and evening. Four thousand were in attendance. Two months later a free Indian Stomp Dance featured Pottawatomie County tribes. The streetcar company announced that it would give ten-minute car service to and from the park for the event. The ad promised satisfactory car service. The dance took place in a large ring so that all could see the event.

An airstrip was located in a meadow just north of the park and the first exhibition flights seen in the county were held there. One such example was promoted in a local paper, July 16, 1916. Patrons of Benson Park were invited to come see Captain J.C. Wright give an exhibition of aeronautics that afternoon. The Traction Company ad touted "a comfortable, breezy, interesting ride to the most attractive place in the vicinity."

A companion ad declared Benson Park "the prettiest picnic park in the State," always promising good car service.

Indeed, "picnicking" was a favorite activity with a picturesque setting in the heavily wooded park with picnic tables everywhere the eye focused. And of course Squirrel Creek and the man-made lagoon added to the pleasure and serenity of a day at the park. Picture postcards of the park generously captured the setting with

the tables, gazebos, walking paths, suspension footbridges and the revelers. One thing that catches the eye is how the people were dressed. Men wore coats, ties and an appropriate hat for the season. Women and girls were always in stylish dresses with a complimenting bonnet.

One photograph captured a stylishly dressed young woman standing at the edge of the water apparently gazing at something in the water. What was interesting about that picture was not the subject but what was in the background. Caught in the background, walking down a path, were three young boys on their way to a day of fishing. The boys were dressed in cut-off overalls, each wearing a cap, with a very long cane pole swung over their shoulder. They were Huck Finn look-alikes if there ever were.

County fairs were also regularly held at Benson during its heyday. Tents would be pitched and before you knew it a fair was up and running. A blue ribbon, First Premium, for 1921 indicated the event was called the Pottawatomie Co. Free Fair. A red ribbon, Second Premium, for 1922 called the event the Pottawatomie Free Agriculture and Stock Show.

Featured in many photographs of the park was a miniature train. The train was made by the mechanics of the Rock Island Shops for the proposed amusement park on North Broadway. The Broadway Park was never completed and the train ended up at Benson Park. The miniature tracks traversed most of the park, much to the delight of all that rode the train.

A recent interview with Ruth Alford Musick, daughter of Thomas Wildcat Alford, elicited the following memories of living next door to Benson Park. The home place was named the "Bird's Nest." Ruth recalls that she and her youngest sister would walk down the lane north of the house through Benson Park and over a stile and then wait for her parents to catch up on the way to church. July 4th and County Fair days were always special since the family would pack up their

picnic lunch and spend the day. Even after fried chicken and all the fixings, Ruth and her siblings couldn't wait to go to the "stand" for ice cream.

One day a cowboy who was performing at a rodeo in the baseball field came to the Alford place and asked to buy some of the peaches that were growing on their trees. The cowboy handed Ruth a half-dollar but when Wildcat learned what he had done, he told Ruth to return the money and offered the man all the peaches he wanted. She reluctantly returned the money but he later slipped it back to her on the sly. Ruth remembers the incident so well because that very night while sitting in the front row of seats at the rodeo the cowboy was bucked off his bronc, stomped and killed right before her eyes. That was the last rodeo she ever attended.

Ruth and her dad were avid baseball fans. "We would leave just before dark, Dad carrying the lantern, walk through the barn lot, go up the lane to the Ball Park," she recalled. "We got free passes because we owned the land and we always got good seats. I later married a ball player — Vernon Musick."

Other incidents that stuck in the memory of young Ruth were of her brothers crawling up to the rafters of the Plunge and diving 28 feet into the water. She chuckled when relating the time when a brother went up in one of airplanes that had come to perform and give rides, of course for a fee. When the Alfords learned of the incident, the young Alford was severely reprimanded and told that he could have been killed. In fact, Ruth recalled a barnstormer "doing loop de loops" over the park did crash killing the pilot. The crash occurred just beyond the park boundaries and no injuries were sustained on the ground.

Ruth also recalled hearing her elders talking about a certain person who they referred to as a hussy. When they got to the good part they began talking in Indian and Ruth was left with a gap in her education. Sometime later at the skating rink, Ruth observed a young woman

skating while wearing a skirt with a split up the side revealing more than a little ankle. Ruth thought to herself, "I think I just seen a hussy."

The Alfords were afforded free passes to all the attractions at the ballpark by virtue of the lease agreement. So the kids were thrilled to live at the Bird's Nest with free access to the park. Ruth recalled that the park was well maintained, probably by horse-drawn cycle mowers. Chiggers, however, were apparently a problem and Ruth said she would prefer a plague of locusts to the little red bugs. She and her mother loved to sit in the grass and listen to the bands. This practice no doubt explained the chigger problem.

N.A. "Buck" Lale arrived in Shawnee O.T in 1891 as an infant, accompanied by his mother who came from Missouri to claim the homestead her husband had staked. The elder Lale died after making the run and prior to returning to Oklahoma with his family. In later years, Buck recalled his Benson Park experiences. Noting that he would often take the "owl" car, the last scheduled run at night, after attending high school parties or other social events.

One trip to the park on the trolley resulted in an unplanned stop for young Lale. Wearing his new straw sailor hat, while more than likely riding on the running board, a gust of wind parted Lale from his hat. Making a quick decision, Lale chose to sacrifice his body for the new hat by jumping off the moving car. He reported he was not injured, just messed up a bit by the incident. After retrieving his hat, Buck walked to the park for his planned outing, apparently no worse for the wear.

A recent interview with Dorothy Smith Canada brought out her memories of Benson Park. Like most that frequented the park, the Plunge always was foremost in their recollections. Dorothy remembers the Plunge being a large building with many steps up to the entry. There were in fact six wide steps leading to the four-column portico. Another very clear memory was the pretty horses

that were kept on the park, no doubt to help maintain the park's pretty appearance. The shooting gallery also impressed Dorothy for she remembered you could pay a fee and use a twenty-two-caliber rifle to shoot at paper targets.

Because the Smith family lived on a dairy north west of Shawnee and didn't have access to the street car system, they didn't go to Benson Park until after World War One when the family was able to buy a new car. She also remembered that the family attended a big function held at the

park the last of August. It included all the lodges and sister organizations in the county and the organizer and featured speaker was always Charley Hawk. Hawk was a prominent local businessman and veteran of the Spanish-American War.

Benson Park today exists only in the minds of a few and in surviving photographs and recorded history. A visit to the former site today reveals no evidence of what used to be. A plethora of reasons could be offered why the park finally closed but like most things they have a life. Benson

Park had a long and glorious life that ended in 1932. Thanks to Carol Thomas McClintock for information from her thesis written in pursuit of a master's degree, and to Max S. Lale for information used from his *From Whence We Came: The Sims and Lale Families in Oklahoma*. Some photographs were made available to us from the Pottawatomie Historical Society. A special thanks to Ruth Alford Musick and Dorothy Smith Canada for sharing their memories of Benson Park with the writers of this column.

Special Thanks to [The Countywide News](#) for this article.