

Sandwiching in History
Lamar Porter Field
3200 West 7th Street, Little Rock
September 7, 2018
By Travis Ratermann



Intro:

Good afternoon, my name is Travis Ratermann, and I am the Survey Historian at the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Thank you for coming, and welcome to the “Sandwiching in History” tour of Lamar Porter Field. I’d like to thank the staff of Billy Mitchell Boys & Girls Club and Jay Rogers for allowing us to tour the facility today! This tour is worth one hour of HSW continuing education credit through the American Institute of Architects. Please see me after the tour if you’re interested.

You are standing in and around a beautiful 10-acre park built within the heart of Little Rock, Arkansas. Though more widely known for the park where Brooks Robinson grew up playing baseball, the site has a great history surrounding two great historic organizations, the Boys and Girls Clubs and the Works Progress Administration(WPA). Though the Works Progress Administration was disbanded and unfunded by 1943, the Boys and Girls Clubs throughout the United States continue through today. Though the 10-acres site was donated for the construction of a Boys and Girls Club, it was the work of the WPA, in the construction of the baseball field, and the drainage ditch and bridges that helps illustrate how the two historic organizations came together to build such a wonderful facility and green space. When through the other work completed in the 10-acre site, the cornerstone of the entire project was the grandstand and baseball field. The site has 7 contributing and 2 non-contributing resources located throughout. The contributing structure include the concrete grandstands, while the six contributing objects include the fieldstone water fountain, fieldstone drainage ditch/culvert, two arched fieldstone bridges, sectioned wall surrounding the fountain, and the chain-link fence. The non-contributing objects include the batting cage and wooden bleachers.

History of the Boys Club/ Boys and Girls Club

Three women, Mary Goodwin, Alice Goodwin and Elizabeth Hammersley, founded the Boys Club in 1860, in Hartford, Connecticut. The three women believed that “boys who roamed the streets should have a positive alternative.”¹ The Little Rock Boys’ Club was officially organized July 14, 1914, but began out of the Newsboys’ Club in 1912, later known as the Citizenship

¹ Boys and Girls Club of America, “Our Mission & Story: History,” <https://www.bgca.org/about-us/our-mission-story>, Accessed 3 August 2018.

Club.² It is stated in the Lamar Porter Athletic Field National Register Nomination that, “There was a true need for a Boys' Club in Little Rock which faced a growing juvenile delinquency problem in the absence of mandatory schooling and adequate recreational facilities. Local youths ‘had formed gangs and *were* committing depredations here and there’ including gambling, drinking and petty thievery.³ The nomination then goes on to state that “The club was an immediate success, from the society's point of view. The local probation officer reported a 50 percent drop in juvenile delinquency after the first month the program was in operation.”⁴

The Little Rock Boys’ Club was rapidly expanding over its first couple of years. By 1916, the organization moved from its original location, which was the old First Presbyterian Church, located at Fifth and Scott. The organization then moved to the Fulk Building at 317 Markham, before again moving to the Concordia Club at 8th and Scott in 1924. The Concordia Club Building would burn only a few years later, but the Boys’ Club was rebuilt on the same site in 1931. The Boys’ Club would remain at this site until 1978 when it moved to its current location at 3107 West Capitol Ave. It is during this period between 1931 and 1978, that the Boys Club was renamed the Billy Mitchell Boys in honor of Executive Director J.W. “Billy” Mitchell. It is noted in the National Register Nomination that, “One of the bellwether events of the early years of the Little Rock Boys' Club was construction of the Lamar Porter Athletic Field.”⁵

² Mark Christ, *Lamar Porter Athletic Field*, Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places, 1990.; Norris Guinn and Willis Callaway, *Lamar Porter Field and the Memories of Sports in Little Rock During the 1950s* (Little Rock, Arkansas: NA, 2007), 8.

³ Mark Christ, *Lamar Porter Athletic Field*, Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places, 1990.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

The baseball field is named after Lamar Porter, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Q.L. Porter of Little Rock. Lamar graduated from Little Rock High School before attending Sewanee Military Academy, in Sewanee, Tennessee. Following his time at the Sewanee Military Academy, he enrolled at Washington and Lee University, where during his junior year he was killed in a car accident on May 12, 1934.⁶

Louise Skillern Porter and Pauline Skillern Jordan purchased the 10-acre plot of land, on which the fields, gardens, and Billy Mitchell Boys' and Girls club sit, from Eloise Field Weir and Ernest J. Field, Jr., for the sum of \$10,000 on April 24, 1935, using the James Skillern estate funds.⁷ Less than a month later on the one-year anniversary of Lamar Porter's death, his family including his mother and aunt, donated forty lots, or roughly four city blocks, bound by Capitol Ave on the north, Johnson Street on the east, 7th Street on the south, and Brown Street on the west. The naming of the field was already stated in Resolution No. 1331, between the City of Little Rock and the Skillern heirs, that the field would be known as "the Lamar Porter Boys' Athletic Club Athletic Field."⁸ Though the baseball field is the centerpiece of the entire property today, the goal of the Skillern Estate was to create a wonderful playground for the children of Little Rock that encompassed tennis courts, baseball and softball fields, a clubhouse, horseshoe links and picnic grounds.⁹ It was stated in the *Arkansas Democrat* following the donation of land, that the land being donated was for recreational purposes only, and could never be diverted

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Norris Guinn and Willis Callaway, *Lamar Porter Field and the Memories of Sports in Little Rock During the 1950s* (Little Rock, Arkansas: NA, 2007), Part I, Exhibit 3 and 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Exhibit 5.

⁹ William Johnson, "Big Playground for Boys' Club as Memorial to Local Youth," *Arkansas Democrat*, Editorial Section, 1.

from recreational use.¹⁰ It is also noted during the official press conference for the donation of the playground, that the tract of land donated was “covered with trees, some of which will be preserved for shade, beauty, and enhancement of picnic delights. A lot of work must be done.... The first thing on the program is a ball diamond, with other furnishings coming along as fast as conditions permit.”¹¹ The donation of the land would be turned into a great recreational facility that was badly wanted/needed throughout the city at the time.¹²

Only 3 months into the Works Progress Administration’s tenure, Arkansas’ contribution to the program was already being hailed as a success. The first WPA funds expended in Arkansas were given out on July 15, 1935. It is through this first allotment of funds that the State Works Progress Administrators set out to put 37,343 relief clients back to work. By October 13, 1935, the administration was more than half way to its goals, as 19,561 relief clients were working on more than 600 projects throughout the states.¹³ The program was set up to help skilled, semi-skilled, professional workers and laborers work five days a week for a total of thirty-five hours, on road work, bridge construction, building construction, drainage ditch improvements, and athletic stadia.¹⁴ One of those stadiums constructed was Lamar Porter Athletic Field.

Between the donation of the land, in May 1935, and the official approval of the Works Progress Administration project (WPA) in August 1935, the donated land sat in limbo. It is unclear at this time whether it was the plan from the outset of the donation for the Boys’ Club, the Skillern Estate, and the City of Little Rock to apply for WPA fund to help in the construction of the park.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ “19,561 Are Employed on WPA Projects,” *Arkansas Democrat*, 13 October 1935, 1-2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

What is known is that a plan for the development of the site was “worked out,” at the time of the official donation announcement.¹⁵ It is also stated in March of 1936, that the Boys’ Club gave the 99-year lease with the City of Little Rock so that it would “conform with WPA regulations which hold that no project shall be considered unless it is on public property.”¹⁶ The proposal given by the sponsor, probably the City of Little Rock, went into the State WPA office in either the third or fourth batch of potential projects that would be forwarded on to the President of the United States for his administration’s approval. The approval letter, sent by the Applications and Information Division through approval by President Roosevelt, was received and reported on August 14, 1935, in the *Arkansas Democrat*. In the article, it states that a total of \$475,675 was approved for work in Arkansas under this batch of projects. Another \$144,664 would be added to this round of projects through sponsorship aid.¹⁷ It then goes on to state...

Included in the allotments approved by the president was a grant of \$56,251 for the construction of a playground at Little Rock. The playground, to be known as Lamar Porter athletic field, will be operated by the Little Rock Boys’ Club. Approximately 10 acres of land bound by Brown street on the west, Johnson on the east, Fifth street on the north and Seventh street on the south was given [to] the club by Mrs. J.D. Jordan and Mrs. Q.L. Porter of Little Rock for the establishment of the playground in memory of Mrs. Porter’s son.¹⁸

¹⁵ William Johnson, “Big Playground for Boys’ Club as Memorial to Local Youth,” *Arkansas Democrat*, Editorial Section, 1.

¹⁶ Gene Newsom, “Work on Elaborate Playground Is Rushed as Summer Vacations Near,” *Arkansas Democrat*, 29 March 1936, Magazine Section, 3.

¹⁷ “\$75,675 WPA Jobs Approved For Arkansas,” *Arkansas Democrat*, 14 August 1935, 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Of the \$56,251 approved by President Roosevelt for the project, the sponsor would have to contribute another \$9,260 to aid in the construction effort as specified in the legal agreement.

Construction began in the middle of September 1935.¹⁹ Given the amount of WPA, PWA and CCC projects going on throughout Little Rock at this time, it was very rare to receive status updates on any project. It was not until October 6, 1935, during the third installment of an eight part daily series that gave status updates on projects in all eight WPA districts in Arkansas. It is in this status update on District 3, which encompasses Little Rock that the citizens of Little Rock were finally given a progress report on Lamar Porter Athletic Field. In the article, it states...

Lamar Porter Athletic Field, at West Seventh and Johnson streets, representing an expenditure of \$61,000, of which \$21,000 is for materials, probably will require six months to complete. Work of clearing the tree growth for the baseball diamond has been completed and work will be started on the foundation soon for the grandstand. The stand will be of concrete.²⁰

The same day that the article came out discussing the progress on the project, another article continued to express the great work that the Boys' Club was doing for the young boys of Little Rock. In the article, it states that 2,564 boys and 731 girls are benefitting for the work that the club conducts. It then goes on to state that the club has "long since proved it[s] invaluable worth

¹⁹ Gene Newsom, "Work on Elaborate Playground Is Rushed as Summer Vacations Near," *Arkansas Democrat*, 29 March 1936, Magazine Section, 3.

²⁰ "3,785 Working on WPA Jobs in District 3," *Arkansas Democrat*, 6 October 1935, 2.

in property molding, under good influences and through its many programs, youth from six to 18 years into useful and healthy citizens.”²¹

Construction was steadily moving along and by March 1936 it was noted that 63 percent of WPA funds was going towards public buildings and road and bridge improvements and construction, while “an additional 16.3 per cent [*sic*] will be spent on parks and playgrounds, nationally.”²²

When broken down at the state level, 6 percent of allotted funds were being used for parks and playgrounds, which included the \$56,251²³ for the Lamar Porter Athletic Field. It is also in late March 1936 that the *Arkansas Democrat* gives a status report while also citing the architecture firm as being Thompson, Sanders and Ginocchio. In the article, Frank Ginocchio states that “we have designed the Lamar Porter playground after much observation over the South and we believe it conforms to the very best standards of playground design. It fills a definite social need.”²⁴ The article then goes on to describe the progress of the work and description of the structures. It states...

With the pouring of concrete at the Lamar Porter recreation field at seventh and Johnson streets, comes word that the state’s most elaborate playground for underprivileged children and adults will be ready for use by early summer. Already the 10-acre tract...is ready for sodding, the preliminary stages of landscaping and ground preparation complete with nearly 200 men at work the

²¹ “Building Strong Bodies at Boy’s Club, *Arkansas Democrat*, 6 October 1935, 2.

²² B.N. Timmons, “Public Works Get Majority Of WPA Funds,” *Arkansas Democrat*, March 1936, 14.

²³ It must be stated that the actual dollar amount fluctuates depending on the article, but generally ranges from 53,000 to 56,291.

²⁴ Gene Newsom, “Work on Elaborate Playground Is Rushed as Summer Vacations Near,” *Arkansas Democrat*, 29 March 1936, Magazine Section, 3.

whole project is taking shape as an example of what private generosity, civic alertness and WPA co-operation can do for municipal betterment....the massive 300-foot long grandstand. The ground is cut away on each side to allow for dressing rooms and showers. Concrete foundations are set deep to uphold the tremendous weight of the reinforced concrete stand....The grandstand is in three divisions, a center and two wings. The girls dressing room will be beneath the right wing and the boys' beneath the left.... The grandstand will seat 1500 people, will have a wooden roof supported by minimum number of columns and standing as it does on the crest of the slope, will command the entire playground.²⁵

The article goes on to describe the four tennis courts out past centerfield, and the creek that is being walled with mortared rock, and bridges to traverse the creek. West of the tennis courts would be the picnic area, with tables, benches, fire pits and playground apparatuses located beneath the pines. ²⁶J.W. Mitchell, of the Boys' Club, and for whom the Boys and Girls Club is named after, stated in an interview for the article that "when summer comes and the ground is actually in use with hundreds of children playing to their hearts' content we can truly say that now the Boys' Club offers well rounded recreational service and splendid opportunity to our youth."²⁷

Less than two weeks later another progress report was given stating that the south wing of the grandstand is almost complete, and the sodding and landscaping was finished. It is also noted that the baseball diamond and tennis courts were laid out. The quarter mile long creek/drainage ditch that cuts through the southwest corner of the property was completely walled with native

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

stone, though there was no discussion of the native stone bridge to traverse the ditch/creek. The playground equipment would not be installed until after the grandstand was complete, though the plan was still to have the playground open to the public by July 1.²⁸

The July 1 deadline must have meant July 1937, because by June 14, 1936, the entire project was only 39 percent complete while the grandstand was only 40 percent complete, after an average of 150 men had already worked 166 days on the project. It is also at this time, that it was indicated that the baseball diamond was laid out to Southern League specifications.²⁹ This may explain why the grandstand and baseball diamond was reversed from the corner of Brown and Capital, in preliminary design plans, to the corner of Johnson and Seventh.³⁰ Following a small article on August 9, 1936, there is very little progress described in the newspapers.

The project was eventually completed on April 22, 1937, at a final cost of \$122,244.53, with the federal government, through the WPA, providing \$108,710.82. Though evidence has not been found just yet, this new number suggests that a second WPA grant was received by the sponsor to cover roughly another \$53,000, which may also explain why it took an extra year to complete the project.³¹ In the article discussion on the completion of the project, it did state that the only remaining work that needed to be done, was level the tennis courts and cleanup the grounds.

²⁸ “Work on WPA Jobs Advances”, *Arkansas Democrat*, 12 April 1936, 13.

²⁹ “WPA Construction Projects in Pulaski Moving Forward at Rapid Pace,” *Arkansas Democrat*, 16 June 1936, 6.

³⁰ “Lamar Porter Memorial Park,” Thompson, Sanders & Ginocchio Collection, Old State House Museum, Little Rock, Arkansas.

³¹ “Lamar Porter Field Completed,” *Arkansas Gazette*, 23 April 1937.

Though the work was completed, the fun for the community and children was just beginning. Softball tournaments would begin nearly as fast as they could put them on, as many tournaments are discussed in the sports section of newspapers throughout the state starting as early as 1938.³² The Boys Club, which would later become the Boys' and Girls Club, would remain at their downtown location until roughly 1978, when it built a new headquarter location at 3107 West Capitol Ave, or located beyond the center field fence. Several other changes took place between initial planning and completion. The tennis courts were initially designed to be located where the, current Boys' and Girls; Club is located, but were moved to the corner of Johnson and Capitol, before being replaced by the softball field. The softball field was initially supposed to be located along the left field line, but was later relocated to the corner of Brown and Capitol sometime between 1943 and 1960. That softball field is still located in that spot. The large baseball field has also changed since it was initially constructed because between 1937 and at least 1960 there was no outfield fence, just a berm or terrace and light poles. The light cost the city roughly \$5 a night to operate, but luckily, they were able to bring in \$30 - \$35 a night game.³³

There is only one documented case where a baseball player hit a fair ball out of the entire park. It was hit in 1954 by Bobby Hiatt, who hit a ball that was claimed to still be rising as it went over the manual scoreboard, which was 370 feet from home plate, and was found in the flower garden of the house at 604 Brown Street. There was chain link fence around the perimeter of the entire

³² "Bruner-Ivory Softball Team to Play in State Tournament," *Hope Star*, 29 August 1938, 5.; Softball Grows Fast Each Year, *The Camden News*, 31 May 1938, 5.

³³ Softball Grows Fast Each Year, *The Camden News*, 31 May 1938, 5.

park, but this ball was returned to Bobby Hiatt at the end of the tournament.³⁴ (It is probable that the ball bounced over the fence or rolled under the fence, but in any case it was a big feat to accomplish.)

Another great baseball player who played on this field was Pat Seerey, who played at Lamar Porter Field in 1940 for the Little Rock American Legion Doughboys. Pat would go on to play the outfield for the Cleveland Indian (1943-1948) and the Chicago White Sox (1948-1949). Pat was traded by the Cleveland Indian along with Al Gettel to the Chicago White Sox in exchange for Bob Kennedy on June 2, 1948.

However, the most well-known player to ever play on this field is none other than the “Human Vacuum Cleaner” Brooks Robinson. Brooks was born in Little Rock, 26 days after the completion of Lamar Porter Field. His father probably played on one of the softball teams that started playing out here after the stadium was completed, as he played for the International Harvester team in Little Rock.³⁵ He helped operate the manual scoreboard, sell drinks and shagged fly balls. His first organized ball club was playing catcher for the Woodruff School softball team. On a side note, Brooks was crowned King Bub at Lamar Porter Field after winning a bubble gum bubble blowing competition. He was named King and Arlen Turner was Queen even if she blew a bigger bubble.³⁶ He played American Legion baseball while attending Little Rock High School in the early 1950s. The Baltimore Orioles drafted him in 1955, where he

³⁴ Norris Guinn and Willis Callaway, *Lamar Porter Field and the Memories of Sports in Little Rock During the 1950s* (Little Rock, Arkansas: NA, 2007), Part II, 11.

³⁵ Brooks Robinson and Jack Tobin, *Third Base is My Home* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1974), 20.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 30-31.

signed a Major League contract for \$4,000.³⁷ That \$4,000 contract would be the beginning of a great career that spanned 23 years, all with the Baltimore Orioles. His career included 18 All Star teams, 16 gold gloves, AL MVP in 1964 and World Series MVP in 1970. If there is one thing everybody in Little Rock knows, it is that Brooks Robinson began his illustrious baseball career here at Lamar Porter field shagging balls, keeping score, and selling concessions on his way to the Hall of Fame

The field would be continually used for baseball of all ages, and that continues through today. Recent renovations have helped keep the field in great shape, including a new fence, scoreboard, and new paint job. The field is still used today by the Boys and Girls' Club's RBI (Reviving Baseball in the Inner Cities) Baseball Program. The field is also host to several local teams and leagues since it was opened in 1937 including Pewee League, Midget League, Little League, Pony League, American Legion, and semipro. It has also been home to two local high school baseball teams as well including the Episcopal Collegiate School baseball team and the Little Rock Catholic Rockets baseball team.

Today, feel free to explore the park and take in the beautiful scenery. I would like to point out the stone retaining walls located within the stream and the two stone arched bridges originally constructed by the WPA, but was restored by the Mitchell Boys' and Girls' Club, in part thanks to a \$20,000 Historic Preservation Grant given to them the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Thank you again for coming, and please join us for our next Sandwiching in History Tour at the Rock Island Argenta Depot at 1201 East Fourth Street in North Little Rock on

³⁷ Brooks Robinson and Danny Peary. *We Played the Game: Memories of Baseball's Greatest Era* (New York: Black Dog & Leventhal, 2002), 306.

Friday, October 5th. Also, please join us this Saturday, October 13th at 11:00 a.m. for our Walks Through History Tour in Downtown Heber Springs. Thank you again for coming and have a great weekend.