

# DUSTY ROADS®

## STORIES OF

## KEWANEE

## PAST &

## PRESENT

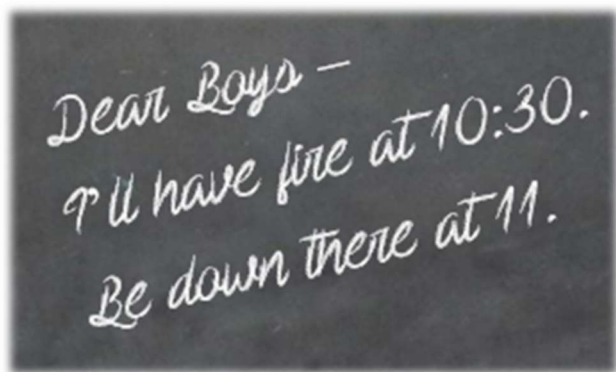


*Dean Karau*

*December 2021*

### *The Demise and Rebirth of Windmont Park*

*How the Premier Kewanee Park Built in 1906 Made Its Comeback*



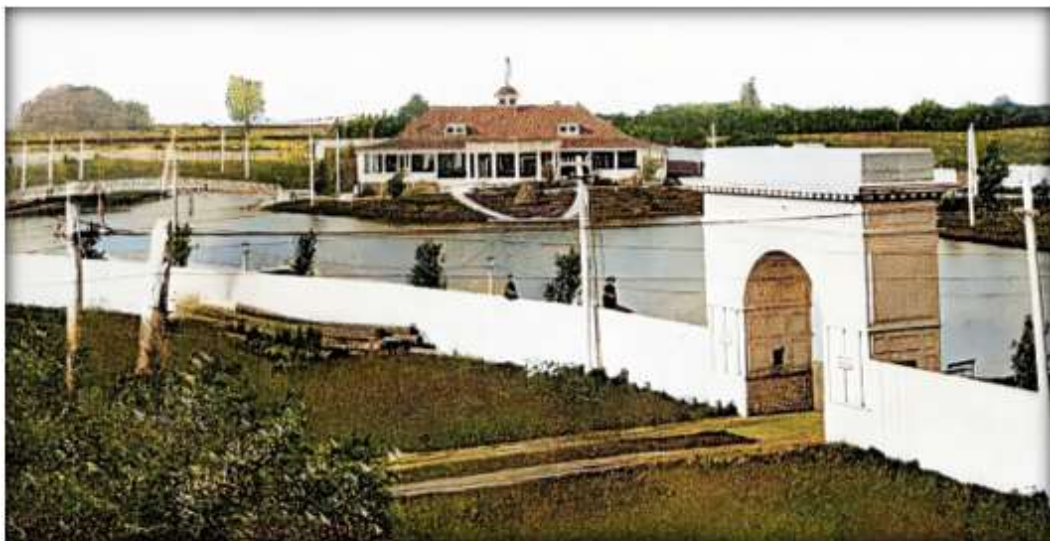
The Kewanee Star-Courier reported that the note was written in chalk on the blackboard at the fire station. It had been discovered only hours before a fire leveled the Windmont Park pavilion on Friday night, September 20, 1930. Officials believed that incendiary devices placed at multiple locations were used to start the fire intentionally, a little after 10:00 p.m. Despite a long investigation, the arsonist was never found.

The fire, however, was only the end of the beginning of the demise of

Windmont Park. The park's decline had begun, incrementally, at least a decade earlier as competition for Kewaneeans' recreational dollars increased.

Of course, there were the old parks for Windmont to contend with – Terminal Park, East Park, West Park, and Chautauqua Park, as well as recreational areas such as Coal Valley. New parks, some private, also sprang up shortly before World War I – Sans Souci, Glen Oak, McKinley, Leggett Field.

But it was the founding of the Kewanee Park District after the war which sped the decline. New, well-laid out parks - Northeast Park, Liberty Park, and



*Early Windmont Park with its lagoon and pavilion*



Baker Park, as well as the refurbished Chautauqua Park - offered picnic facilities, playgrounds, baseball diamonds, and even a new swimming pool. Windmont Park, which had been a premier and unique destination after it officially opened in 1906, became just one of many recreational opportunities for the fast-growing city.

In addition, Windmont Park, like Terminal Park, had been specifically created for the streetcar system. But once the automobile became a means of transportation more accessible to the masses, park-goers were not restricted to parks available only by streetcar.



*My soon-to-be grandma and grandpa (right) with a friend enjoying a beverage at a park*

While Windmont Park's pavilion continued to be popular for events and dances, once the fire destroyed it, the park's decline accelerated. The thousand stunned viewers lined up along the run of popular trees near the south end of the park to watch the blazing fire destroy the pavilion did not realize that the life of the park as they knew it was over. The proverbial nail in the coffin was hammered home a short time later when the owners decided not to rebuild the pavilion after the fire.

After that, Windmont Park was seldom mentioned in the newspaper, except for "*The Time Was When*" feature remembering events from the past.

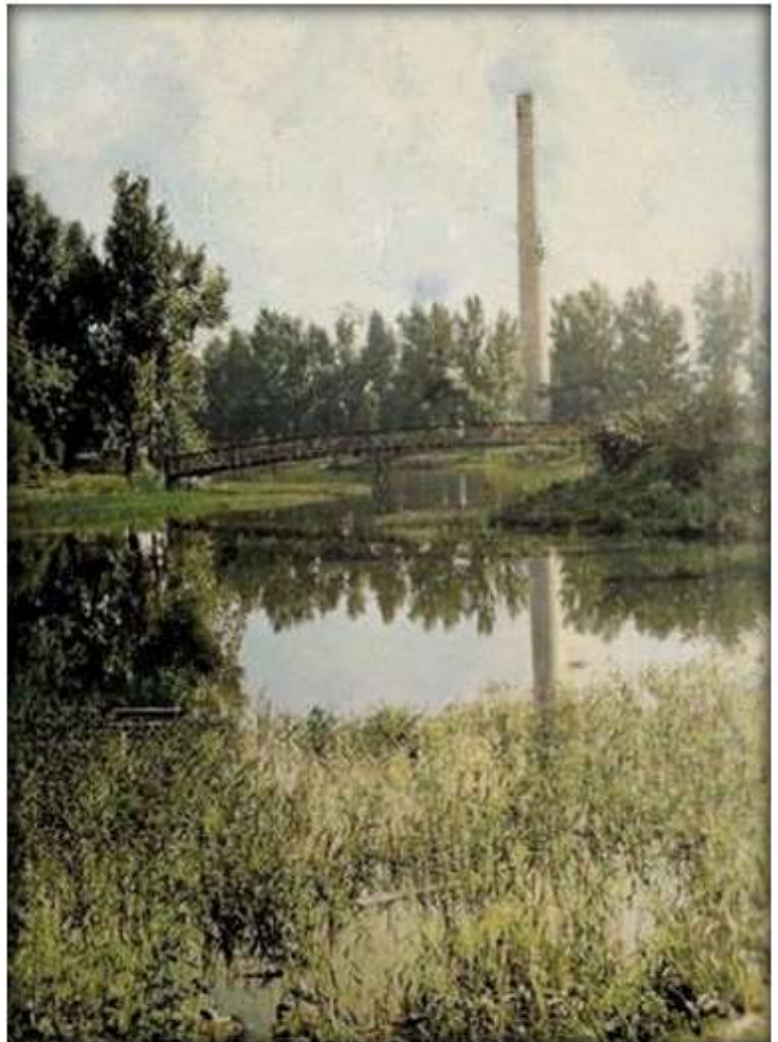
The power plant had discontinued providing power for the streetcars around 1923. The streetcar car barn had also been abandoned, but it, the power plant, and the power plant's large smoke stack remained but unused. Finally, in 1931, the 300-ton, 152 ft. brick smokestack was razed. But the other abandoned buildings remained.

The former lagoon shrank to a small pond, may-

be five feet deep, covering merely a small patch of its former 11-acre tract. It was used primarily by the neighbor's cattle. At best, the former lagoon contained bait, but for fishing elsewhere. The old bridge still stood at the south end of the lake, but it was rusted and creaked and swayed with the slightest weight. The balance of the park was overgrown with weeds and trees.

As one citizen put it, the "*abandoned buildings and neglected property is an eye-sore and detriment.*" Dr. J. H. Oliver referred to it as the "*jungle hide-out this tract of land now is.*" Another said that the park's "*only visitors are the fisherman [seeking] crayfish and the farmer after his cows.*"

But as the Kewanee Park District grew and its importance to both young and not-so-young citizens was recognized, those in Wethersfield began clamoring for a park on the south side of the city.



*The rusted bridge and the lonely smokestack as the weeds begin to claim the lagoon*

Finally, in July 1937, Emerit E. Baker Inc., set up to



fund activities of the park district, offered to purchase Windmont Park and donate it to the district, and to also donate \$25,000 over five years to redevelop the park. The gift was conditioned on the citizens of Wethersfield voting to join the park district and Kewanee citizens voting to expand the district's boundaries to include Wethersfield. In late August, by a six to one ratio, voters approved the proposal.

The park district applied for a Work Progress Administration (WPA) grant to help fund the redevelopment. It ultimately was awarded \$23,000.

Plans were quickly prepared to clean up the old lake bottom so that ice skating could begin that winter. Next, the district planned to tear down the old buildings, saving as much of the brick as possible for

reuse in a new building on the site of the old pavilion and in a clubhouse at Baker Park. A ball diamond was planned on the north side of the 17 acres being acquired, while tennis courts would be placed in the southeast corner.

Over the next three years work progressed on Windmont Park. By 1940, the park was ready to be dedicated. Over 3,000 attended the ceremony.

Soon Windmont Park regained the status it had once held, a premier recreational destination for Kewaneeans, a status it still holds today.

*(Be sure to enjoy this year's Christmas displays in Windmont Park and, when you do, think about the long, up, down, and up again history of the park.)*



*June 17, 1940 Kewanee Star-Courier*



*A 1940s postcard showing the "new" Windmont Park*