

The Jewel of Lithia Park **By Dennis Powers**

This 98-acre, exquisite park in the heart of Ashland dates back to a Grants Pass minister, the Reverend J.B. Smith, who arranged for a summer series of lectures there in the 1890s called the "Chautauqua." The name came from the New York Chautauqua Assembly, which presented topics in art, politics, music, literature, and other subjects for several days in the mid-summer. William Jennings Bryan, Susan B. Anthony, and John Phillip Sousa were among the well-known personalities who came there to lecture or perform.

The Reverend Smith with others in September 1892 formed the Southern Oregon Chautauqua Association. Selling a bond issue of \$2,500 to purchase eight acres above Ashland Creek and with lumber from Grants Pass, the association with countless volunteers built a large, domed wooden building that held up to 1,000 people for the lectures.

In 1904, the Ladies' Chautauqua Club formed and was a driving force in maintaining the Chautauqua property. Four years later, the Woman's Civic Improvement Club strongly supported an initiative to make the setting a city function and park. Its residents dedicated in 1908 all city-owned property on the creek for the park, authorized a tax levy, created a separate park commission, and included park maintenance in the City Charter. Ashland tore down an abandoned 1850's flour mill on the plaza, and with landscaping, the town became known for its summer Chautauqua series and Lithia Park. The lower duck pond with its spilling waterfall was constructed in 1910.

Four years later, the owner and editor of the *Ashland Tidings* editor, Bert Greer, supported creating a health spa centered on the beneficial aspects of the park's lithium-concentrated water. Although this never came to being, the publicity greatly helped the passage by voters of a \$175,000 bond issue, \$65,000 of which was earmarked to develop Lithia Park. This was a substantial amount of money then, as the total bond issue in today's terms would be over \$4 million dollars--for a town with a population then of 3,000.

This allowed the hiring of John McLaren, the designer and superintendent of San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, to be the landscape architect. McLaren said that the setting was "the most wonderful natural park" he had ever seen and with "little left to do except enhance nature's work." With more acreage acquired and landscaping completed, the park's dedication was over the July 4th holidays in 1916 with a three-day celebration that attracted more than 50,000 people.

McLaren's landscape plan still forms the park's core and follows the natural canyon of Ashland Creek. Native alders, oaks, conifers, and madrones were planted on the canyon slopes, and other ornamental varieties, such as willows, maples, and sycamores were also brought in. Exotic varieties were mixed in: ginkgo, maples, monkey puzzle, Chinese mulberry, and rhododendrons, to name a few.

Credit is given also to Chester "Chet" Corry, who from 1937 to 1969 was the parks superintendent. During his 33-year career, he kept Lithia Park in excellent condition, no

matter what money problems came up. When his budget didn't allow for a work crew, he gardened and fertilized plants by himself in his own beat-up Ford dump truck. When the Oregon Shakespeare Festival began drawing more people, he strove to add a second recreation park, Hunter Park, with room for a ball field and parking to keep Lithia Park from being overrun. He was successful. Corry retired in 1969, but he remained a consultant until he passed away in 1989.

Forty-two acres of the park in 1982 were placed on the National Register of Historic Places for its "outstanding example of distinctive American landscape architecture." At present, many of the trees are a hundred years old and still in place. The curving parkway, an upper lake, Japanese garden, sycamore grove, hiking paths, and a formal terrace for the Italian marble fountain (purchased at the 1915 Pan American Exposition) still remain as years ago. Ashland is a town of some 21,000, but the park hosts a million visitors a year. It is a jewel of a park within a small town's city limits.

Sources: "Lithia Park--National Register of Historic Places," at [Lithia Park History](#); Phyllis Reynolds, "The Oregon Encyclopedia: Lithia Park," at [Lithia Park \(With Images\)](#); *Mail Tribune*, "When Was Lithia Park Built?," April 22, 2007, at [More on Lithia Park](#); Nick Morgan, "Creating a Gem," *Mail Tribune*, April 14, 2013 at [Lithia Park and Chet Corry](#).