

Charlotte's Coney Island: Lakewood Park
By: Brandon Lunsford

OK so maybe it wasn't exactly Coney Island, but Lakewood Park was the closest thing for Charlotteans in the early 1900's. In July 1909, industrialist and entrepreneur Edward Dilworth Latta formally opened his amusement park three miles northwest of downtown so that he could convert his existing Latta Park project to additional residential land for the Dilworth neighborhood. The father of the electric streetcar system in the Queen City, Latta had formed the Charlotte Consolidated Construction Company in 1890 and began to realize his ambitions for Charlotte as a boom town of the New South by developing Dilworth as a streetcar suburb by 1891. Latta constructed Lakewood Park on about ninety acres of land near the Chadwick- Hoskins mill villages that were serviced by the Southern Public Utilities streetcar line, so that it would be accessible for visitors by trolley. He had an earthen dam built across a hollow to create a scenic lake, and assembled one of the most attractive and modern amusement parks in the South around it. Lakewood's eventual 100 acres included the largest carousel existing at the time in the United States, a Ferris wheel, shooting galleries, a bowling alley, flower gardens, fountains, steel-lined "unsinkable" rowboats, a swimming pool, and a dance hall that claimed the "best floor in the city" and featured a 12 piece orchestra. The setup of the park was meant to offer rest and relaxation as well as amusement, and the rides and shows were separated from the boating, picnic, and garden areas by the streetcar tracks with a tunnel connecting the two sections. Strings of over a thousand incandescent lights were placed around the lake and its central pavilion, making it a popular destination for couples looking for a romantic late night stroll around the lakefront.



Lakewood also featured Charlotte's first roller coaster, or "scenic railway" as it was called at the time. The coaster was built by the Cincinnati Amusement Company and opened on July 1910 at a cost of \$15,000, and it travelled on over 2,000 feet of track that included seven dips. An 800-seat "casino" opened at the park in 1915, which wasn't so much for gambling as for offering a variety of staged entertainment including plays performed by the Bijou Stock Company for between 10 and 15 cents. Also known as the Air Dome theatre, it showed mostly vaudeville, moving pictures, and one-act farce comedies. The Charlotte Daily Observer from May 21, 1911 announced that the "\$50,000 Beauty," a "trained horse with a gold tooth" had been held over for another week at the Air Dome. There was also a petting zoo that opened in 1915, and by 1925 it had grown to be the largest and most comprehensive collection of animals between Washington and Memphis. Visitors could see monkeys from Brazil, a black bear from Pennsylvania, a wildcat from North Carolina's Dismal Swamp, water buffalo, wolves, a skunk, various reptiles, and two Nubian ostriches named Ruth and Boaz that Lakewood imported from Arizona. The park was very popular with a wide range of Charlotteans who sought an "ideal place to go in the afternoons and nights from the noise and business of the city for a night of rest and sport." Soldiers from the nearby Camp Greene army facility would also frequent Lakewood Park, as they could easily board the electric streetcar that had a turnaround at the camp. The men would also visit a smaller amusement park closer to Camp Greene called Liberty Park, which was advertised as a park "planned, built and operated for the pleasure of the soldier." It was Lakewood Park's only competition at the time and featured many of the same amusements on a smaller scale, although it wasn't able to provide such a unique and impressive man made lake.

In 1911 James Buchanan Duke's interurban Piedmont and Northern Railroad took possession of the streetcar line to Lakewood Park, double-tracked it, and extended it. Latta had leased the park to Southern Public Utilities, and sold it to them outright in 1916. Duke Power later operated the park until 1933, but on April 9, 1936 a tornado destroyed the dam and heavy rains washed out the lake. Repairs were never made, and the amusement park closed for good that season. For the most part, people had already stopped coming to Lakewood Park in 1933 during the Great Depression, which devastated attendance in entertainment complexes all across the country. It was a sad and abrupt end for the best place the city had to offer to entertain its citizens. It may not have been the "Coney Island of the South" that many local papers claimed, but Lakewood Park was unlike anything else that Charlotte had ever experienced and unlike anything we have seen since.

Today a power station and rows of trees and telephone poles mark an unremarkable landscape, and it is almost impossible to think that a lake and a state of the art amusement park once existed on these 100 acres. If you look hard enough, however, the ghost of Lakewood Park is still here. The vegetation is much lusher and greener in spots than in the surrounding area, perhaps a legacy of the lake. Railroad tracks still run where the trolley tracks once did, and the surrounding neighborhood is still called Lakewood and features streets called Parkway, Lakeview, and Parkside. The city has been considering a proposal to develop a greenway trail that would wind through the Lakewood community from downtown Charlotte, possibly making this area popular spot once again for Charlotteans looking to relax and get away from the hustle and grind of the city. For anyone wanting to see a little more of what existed in this amazing place, a series of lovely color postcards of the park and its attractions exist in the Mary Boyer Collection and can be seen on UNCC's Digital

Collections site and at the Robinson Spangler Carolina Room's online image collection.

Images are from the Carolina Room's online image collection:

<http://www.cmstory.org/imagegallery/>