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HIS 949

Culture Timeline Event Annotation

Chicago Park District. “Progressive Era | CPD.” Accessed November 15, 2012. <http://www.chicagoparkdistrict.com/history/city-in-a-garden/progressive-era/>

July 1902: Opening of McKinley Park in the South Park System of Chicago

Due to the rapid growth of Chicago’s population, it was obvious that the city’s existing parks were not sufficient. At the time, there were almost 1,000 people per acre of parkland and most of the population of Chicago lived more than a mile away from the closest park. This was upsetting to some because when children were able to have time off from work, they did not have somewhere safe and clean to play that were also close to home.

In 1898, photojournalist Jacob Riis from New York City held a meeting at the well-known settlement house, Hull House to speak about this issue. He believed that the best thing for the city would be to expand the park system in order to fulfill the “need for additional breathing spaces in Chicago’s tenement districts.” The Special Park Commission was created out of this meeting and they focused on studying neighborhoods in Chicago and creating parks and playgrounds in the most densely occupied areas. The study took about a year and a half, but once complete, landscape architect Jens Jensen and architect Dwight H. Perkins made plans to create several new parks, playgrounds, and encouraged the protection of thousands of acres of forest, prairie, and marshland.

When the Special Parks Commission began building the parks and playgrounds, they focused their attention to the most densely populated neighborhoods. Budget cuts forced the commission to have to cooperate with the Board of education and other park commissions in order to continue to build the parks.

The first park opened, McKinley Park, was only an experimental park at first. Ball fields, along with new ideas for the South Park System such as a playground, a swimming lagoon, and changing rooms were built at McKinley Park.

McKinley Park was an immediate success, drawing in more 10,000 people to its dedication ceremonies on June 13, 1902. This event was a very important aspect of culture in the Progressive Era because it gave workers recreational facilities that could be utilized when they were not working in the factories. This shows a shift in the thought during the time about working conditions and hours because building these parks implies that people should have free time where they can be with their families and allow their children to play. Had this experimental park not been successful, it is likely that the plans for the construction and creation of further parks would have been abandoned.