



Arlington County Central Library

Washington Luna Park, early 1900's, Arlington, Virginia.



Arlington County

Aerial view of the Water Pollution Control Plant located in Arlington, Virginia.

From Trolley Park to Sewage Treatment: Luna Park

BY MARTY SUYDAM

Sometimes Charley and I take a long walk around the perimeter of Arlington Ridge. We walk south to the trail along side Four-Mile Run, then east to South Eads Street, then north on Eads. That last corner is now part of the Arlington County sewage treatment facility, a very large, modern, waste processing operation that also includes drop-off locations for hazardous waste.

In the early 1900's there was a 34-acre "trolley park", Luna Park, on that property. The trolley park got its name from the fact that it was located along an electric-powered inter-urban trolley line that provided easy, affordable transportation from Washington and Alexandria along the route of the old Georgetown-Alexandria canal. The original canal structures are gone, but the Washington Metrorail system now follows the canal's route. The location where the canal crossed over Four Mile run was the site of an explosive train wreck that occurred in 1885 where the canal, train tracks and wagon road (now US 1) intersected at the Four Mile run crossing.

Trolley parks were the precursor to amusement parks and were fostered by the streetcar companies to make use of the transportation on weekends. The *Washington Times* recorded:¹

The normal fee for the round trip on the line was twenty-five cents but the railway offered a special rate of fifteen cents to entice park patrons from both the Washington and Alexandria terminals.

Luna Park had a figure-eight roller coaster, circus arena, ballroom, chute-the-shoots slide, restaurants and picnic facilities for 3,000 people. There were other short-lived parks named Luna Park in North America (Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Scranton, and Mexico City), all developed by Frederick Ingersoll, mostly with shaky finances.

The *Alexandria Gazette* of August 16, 1906 carried the following article:

Several elephants which are to be exhibited at Luna Park next week are expected to arrive via the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. They will be led through the city on their way to the resort. Luna Park, which has been a decided success from the day it opened, grows in popularity and continues to be visited by thousands.

Later the *Alexandria Gazette* reported that:

On the morning of August 21st, the four elephants, a male whose name was Tommy and three females, Queenie, Annie, and Jennie, escaped. Annie was quickly caught. The others headed toward Alexandria where they smashed a barn, decimated a cornfield, and trampled a graveyard. By nightfall, Tommie had been caught and owner P.W. Barlow was offering a \$500 reward for the capture of Queenie and Jennie. He persuaded Maj. Gordon W. Lillie to dispatch some of his men after the pair. Lillie was in town with “Pawnee Bill’s Wild West and Great Far East Exhibition.” When he put on his red cowboy shirt, he became Pawnee Bill.

Still later the *Alexandria Gazette* reported that:

On Sunday, August 26th, a horse-mounted procession set off from Alexandria toward Baileys Crossroads, where there had been an elephant sighting. They found Jennie in a thicket and a “Wild West” performer named “Mexican Joe” lassoed her. Queenie remained the last hold out at large... She was captured the next night by Barlow and his men in a pine grove 20 miles south of Alexandria, having been chased all day by country folk wielding pitchforks, sticks, baseball bats and stones.

More thrilling details of this adventure are chronicled in a 12-page article, “Great Northern Virginia Elephant Hunt or The Pachyderm Panic of 1906,” *The Northern Virginia Review*, 2012.²

On April 15, 1915, near a trail that Charley and I often take to climb the Ridge to Fort Scott Park, sparks from a fire in the nearby woods caused the signature roller coaster to burn. The park closed and was dismantled that year. Some remains were said to still visible up to 1988, but all that is now within the high chain link fences of the sewage treatment plant. However, after Charley and I climb the steep wooded trail to Fort Scott Park, we look down and imagine what stood there over 100 years ago as portrayed in a 1907 map of the site.³

End Notes

¹ “Plans Are Completed for Luna Park Opening,” Washington Times, May 28, 1906.

² <http://blogs.nvcc.edu/wp-content/themes/tnvr/mcclellan-raybuck-elephant-hunt.pdf>

³ Luna Park map, Arlington County Public Library, Historical Section, VA/MAP 975.5296 S7 SANBO 1907 #25
