

The background of the entire page is a painting of a sunset over a park. The sky is filled with warm, orange and red hues. In the foreground, a woman is riding a bicycle on a path. To the left, a person is walking a dog. In the middle ground, there are several houses and trees. The overall scene is peaceful and scenic.

# The True Story of How Belmar Park Came into Existence

**Belmar... A Mansion Lost  
Leads to a Major Park Created  
Through Persistent Citizen Activism**

**A Case Study of How Citizen Activism Can Work**

## Preface

By Dick Hilker

Former editor of the *Lakewood Sentinel* newspaper

This book might well have been titled "You Can Fight City Hall -- And Win."

It is the story of how a large public park was established smack-dab in the heart of Lakewood, Colorado, on land surrounded by pricey commercial and residential real estate.

Certainly, many cities across the U.S have been able to preserve parks in similar locations. But establishment of the 127-acre Belmar Park was rare for a couple of reasons.

First, most central parks were created in the 18th or 19th centuries, during the early days of urban development. Belmar became a reality in 1974, when it was already located across the street from what, at the time, was the largest shopping mall between the Mississippi River and the West Coast.

And, in the case of Belmar, the preservation of prime open space was the result of a six-year grass-roots citizen campaign that was opposed by municipal officials and the land owner. That effort involved thousands of Lakewood residents who shared a vision: "Preserve it now or lose it forever."

Author Stuart MacPhail recounts the long struggle. Almost a half century later, he didn't have to rely on musty newspaper and government archives. A public relations guy by trade, Stu was one of the volunteer leaders of the "Save Belmar" movement. He was in the front lines of the fight.

This book recounts the seemingly never-ending obstacles that were overcome. And it documents and preserves an important event in Lakewood's early history.

Looking back, preserving the Belmar Estate, once the home of Denver Post newspaper heiress May Bonfils Stanton, also had a secondary benefit not readily apparent at the time.

(Continued on inside of back cover)

## Cover Art

Our cover features a portion of "Belmar Park," an oil painting by Raymond T. Knaub, a 100-inch long, 44-inch high interpretive view of Lakewood's Belmar Park as it surrounds Kountze Lake. The painting reflects the harmony, space, light and reverence for land that Knaub has found in landscapes since his childhood days in the North Platte River Valley near Scottsbluff, Neb. His work has been shown from New York City to San Ynez, California... and in Chicago, Tucson, Scottsdale and Santa Fe, as well as throughout Colorado.

Knaub was for many years a teacher with the Jefferson County schools, including 21 years teaching computer graphic arts, creative writing, painting and drawing at Green Mountain High School in Lakewood.

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An electronic variation of this book is also available for reading on e-readers such as Kindle, and on computers, under the title *A Case Study of How Citizen Activism Can Work* at

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Compiled in 2019 by Stuart MacPhail,  
from personal memories, citizen interviews, and extensive research through the  
archives of the **Lakewood Sentinel** (formerly Jefferson Sentinel) newspaper.

**W**hen the City of Lakewood publishes information about the origins of Belmar Park it usually simply says ***"The City of Lakewood acquired the land in 1973 and established Belmar Park."*** Actually, 1973 was near the end of the story. The real back story started in 1969 and grew from there.

Most of Lakewood's early city officials (elected and upper administrative staff) never wanted the Belmar land for a park. If it had not been for persistent, aggressive citizen activism... against huge odds... Belmar would not be a park today.

This essay is primarily about that back story on the origins of a 127-acre park (now expanded to 132 acres) in central Lakewood, Colorado called Belmar. It is also a good case study on the power of ordinary citizens (in any community) who band together in non-violent challenges to official government and civic leaders.

While this report provides some coverage of May Bonfils Stanton, the Bonfils Mansion and the Bonfils Estate, this is not intended as an exhaustive source of information on those topics. Other recommended resources are referenced at the end if the reader wishes deeper info on those topics. This book focuses primarily on the circumstances under which Belmar Park came into existence.

**NOTE: Portions of this book are critical of some of Lakewood's early elected leaders and administrative staff. Please bear in mind that the content herein reflects the author's observations and opinions... but they are supported by quoted news coverage of that era.**

Some context is needed to give perspective.

## **Background -**

In 1969, East Jefferson County, Colorado was claimed to be the *"most heavily populated unincorporated area in the world"*.

During 1904-05 the East Jeffco communities of Arvada, Edgewater and Mountain View each incorporated. Some were motivated by threats of annexation into Denver. There was minimal animosity between Denver and its western suburban neighbors from 1920 through most of the 1940s. After WWII various Denver mayors began eyeing land in

Jefferson County as a way to expand their empires. In 1947 local boosters made their first (unsuccessful) bid to incorporate Lakewood. A couple of other times before 1969, local civic activists and power brokers had unsuccessfully attempted to incorporate the area into one or more cities.

Surprisingly it was the actions of one relatively powerless woman that kick-started new efforts to incorporate in early 1969. Mrs. Pauline LeBlanc, 38 at the time, announced that she was starting a one-woman campaign to get Denver to annex all of east Jefferson County at the west edge of Denver (some 27 square miles). Bill McNichols was the mayor of Denver at the time, and very anxious to expand his city. It is still unclear whether or not the McNichols administration played any meaningful role in Ms. LeBlanc's efforts.

The truth is, there was not much of a campaign. Ms. LeBlanc's well-publicized announcement instantly stirred-up citizen reactions. Those living in East Jeffco knew that any annexation into the City of Denver would automatically also involve annexation into Denver County and the Denver school system. A federal judge had just ruled that the Denver school system must bus its students to non-neighborhood schools in an effort to attain racial balance. Very few people in Jeffco aspired to make those kinds of changes to their lives.

Capitalizing on the fear that Ms. LeBlanc had stimulated, various East Jeffco civic leaders (particularly those who were local business leaders and political power-brokers) instantly began new efforts to head-off Denver annexation by launching a drive to incorporate the area into one or more cities. To them, incorporation was "*the answer*" to preventing future annexation by Denver.

Initially efforts were started to create three separate cities: Wheat Ridge, Lakewood and Alameda. The Wheat Ridge folks were strong enough to hold themselves apart from the aggressive activists in central East Jeffco. Those who aspired to create a separate city south of Sixth Avenue were not so strong. They were persuaded to join their neighbors in east central Jeffco when organizers opted to call their proposed new municipality "Jefferson City" rather than Lakewood.

The boundaries chosen for Jefferson City began at Sheridan (Denver's primary western border) and extended west beyond Youngfield. The plan extended south to Hampden Avenue, and (initially) north to Interstate 70... but that got scaled back to 26<sup>th</sup> Avenue with some areas extending north to 32<sup>nd</sup> Avenue.

The Wheat Ridge incorporation vote was held first... on June 17, 1969. The question was approved by about a 550-vote margin. A week later (June 24) residents in the proposed Jefferson City area voted 8,478 to 3,371 in favor of incorporating.

The new Jefferson City was reported to cover about 50 square miles (not likely) and was said to include about 116,000 people. Some reports said the area was 44 square miles (still not likely) with a population of 93,000. It was described by some as the

largest incorporation of a city in American history as of that time. In any event, most accounts agree that the new city had suddenly become Colorado's 3<sup>rd</sup> largest municipality.

**NOTE: As of 2010 the Lakewood population had reached 142,980, and 154,000 by 2017. As of 2016 Lakewood was listed as the fifth most populous city in Colorado (Aurora and Colorado Springs grew faster), and the 172<sup>nd</sup> most populous city in the United States.**

The first City Hall for the new Jefferson City was in a former school district administration building at 1580 Yarrow Street. The man who had served as the incorporation chairman, 43-year-old James "Jim" Richey, district manager for Proctor & Gamble Co, became the city's first mayor.

With about 100 years of history (dating back to when Colorado was still Colorado Territory... referring to the area as "Lakewood"... a drive was quickly organized to change the new city's name to "Lakewood".

An election was held on Nov. 4, 1969 which kept the initial leaders in place for 2-year terms. Nearly 12,000 total voters participated. In that same election voters approved a new 1% sales tax to pay for city services... and chose to change the name of their new municipality to Lakewood (9,724 votes) and drop the moniker Jefferson City (1,757 votes). Jefferson City had officially lasted only 9 weeks.

## **Power-Brokers at the Time**

The East Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce was organized in 1945. Leaders of that organization (along with leaders of the Lakewood Jaycees) were the ones who spearheaded the 1969 incorporation of Lakewood. In early January 1970 that organization changed its name to the **Lakewood Chamber of Commerce**.

During the same era there was a similarly influential group known as **Industries for Jefferson County** (IfJC). This group focused mostly on attracting industries to the county. There tended to be a lot of overlap between leadership of the Chamber and IfJC.

During that era the **Lakewood Country Club** was the predominant local social institution for Jefferson County's influential folks. Of course the most influential folks belonged to the Denver Chamber of Commerce and Denver Country Club too... but when it came to provincial issues, the Lakewood Country Club was the center of local social/political activities. This was not where the common folks of Lakewood/Jeffco hung out.

Although not literally a power broker, the **Community College of Denver** opened its Jeffco campus during the early days of the new city of Lakewood. The West Campus of

the Community College (now known as Red Rocks Community College) opened at 1209 Quail, focusing on occupational education. There were about 700 students in initial classes. In 2019 the school serves nearly 8,000 students.

The men and women who were initially elected to run Lakewood... its **Mayor, City Clerk, Treasurer and 10 Council Members** (2 each from 5 Wards) became the most obvious exercisers of local power once the city was formed. They expressed that they wanted "*A city of participation*".

A few months after the city was formed, in running to retain his position as the city's first mayor, Jim Richey said one of his three aims was to "*search out, encourage and involve the 'people talent' that resides in the city*". He no doubt meant that at the time, but within a year he was going out of his way to discourage citizen views and participation. It was the views of business leaders... primarily as expressed by the Lakewood Chamber of Commerce... that were given attention over the views of everyday Lakewood citizens.

Zoning decisions became an interesting topic in the early days of the new city. Many of the builders and developers who sought to upgrade the zoning of city parcels were members of the Lakewood Chamber of Commerce, the same group to which most members of Council belonged.

The Council was totally at liberty to support or ignore recommendations of its zoning staff and/or Planning Commission. In those early days, after Council meetings Council members had a tendency to migrate as a group to such neighborhood lounges as Jefferson 440 (then at 440 Wadsworth) or The Tally Ho (7655 W. Alameda, on the north side of Alameda just west of Wadsworth... rebuild after two fires, and closed in 1993). Knowing what would be on the agenda for the following meeting, over a shared drink one Council member might let it be known that he thought a given zone-change applicant was a jerk, and that he intended to oppose the application.

During the next meeting that Council member might offer an excuse as to why the application was unworthy, move to deny the application, and see fellow Council members follow his lead out of a spirit of fraternalism. Decisions tended to be subjective anyway.

On the other hand, most rezoning applications were approved... if they could somehow be justified as adding to the city's tax base. Citizen input during the first few years of the new city was at best tolerated... seldom really listened to. Later, as citizens became more vocal and began to use petitions to challenge zoning decisions, that began to change.

In fairness to Council during those early years, the ten members didn't have much in the way of professionally-crafted, Council-approved "master plans" for the city, from which to objectively evaluate applications.



## Major Individual Influencers of East Jeffco's Destiny

Within days after incorporation of Jefferson City/Lakewood, Charles E. Stanton proposed plans for development of 13.3 of the approximately 200 acres he then controlled on the SW corner of Alameda and Wadsworth. He said that particular piece would involve \$2 million worth of development.

**NOTE: Reports on the size of the Belmar Estate at that time period varied from 195 acres to 208 acres. The size of the estate west of Wadsworth at the time of May Bonfils Stanton's death was usually reported as 250 acres. Stanton was known to have sold some of the estate's parcels prior to 1969.**

**Likewise, the portion of the estate ultimately being sought for a large central/regional park was variously reported as 127 acres and 128 acres. For sake of consistency in this report, references and quotes below have been changed to the 127 acre description. The actual initial size was 126.7 acres.**

Stanton had already sold at least 25 acres that was being developed into The Villas townhouses on the W/NW corner of the land he still controlled. He proposed to develop and retain ownership of the 13.3 acres he was then seeking to get rezoned. Readers will want to know how Stanton came to control the land in question.

**Frederick Gilmer Bonfils** (wife - "Belle") – co-founder of the Denver Post

In 1895 Frederick Bonfils (pronounced BON-fee-z) and Harry Heye Tammen purchased the small "Evening Post" (described as a Democratic newspaper) and re-named it the Denver Post. Mr. Bonfils owned (or maybe leased) and used the above referenced approximately 250 acres of land as his own private wildlife preserve. Bonfils kept the approximately 50-acre Kountze Lake stocked for the fishing pleasure of himself and his friends. Wildlife roamed freely on those grounds.

**NOTE: Charles B. Kountze was the founder of Denver's First National Bank. During the 1870s he owned large parcels of land in Jefferson County. One of the tracts he owned included what we now describe as the Belmar Estate. He either sold that 250 acres or leased it to Frederick Bonfils. In any event Bonfils owned at least some part of that land when he died. The man-made lake on the property was originally named Grassmere Lake. In honor of Charles Kountze, the body of water was later renamed Kountze Lake.**

According to Colorado historian Tom Noel, when Mr. Bonfils died in 1933 he left an estate valued at "\$14,300,326 (about \$269 million in 2018 figures). Upon the reading of his will, May found herself largely written out, leaving her a measly \$12,000 a year. The will did stipulate that if May divorced [Clyde V.] Berryman (her first husband) her annuity would more than double." See page 8 for more about Mr. Berryman.

*"May went to court, where her lawyer argued that Bonfils' will encouraged divorce and discouraged good morals. The court agreed, awarding May the same \$25,000 annuity as [her sister] Helen received. Frederick's widow, Belle Bonfils, died two years after her husband. Her \$10.5 million estate went primarily to Helen, again shortchanging May. Worse, May's small share was set up as a trust fund to pay her the income. Even more insulting, Helen was to administer May's trust."*

Noel further reports that *"May had her lawyer, Edgar McComb, contest [her mother's] will. He charged that Belle had been unsound in mind and under Helen's influence. In a court appearance that saw the two sisters angrily shout at each other, the court upheld May's right to share evenly in her mother's estate. Helen, however, retained control of The Denver Post, where she insisted her sister was never to be mentioned. May, in return, made snide remarks about Helen's theater career to other news sources."*

**Mary Madeline "May" Bonfils Stanton** – inherited Jeffco land from her father  
Born in 1883 and raised in a strict Catholic home, Ms. Stanton had one sister, Helen, six years younger. In 1904, May eloped at age 21 (all the way to Golden, Colorado) with Clyde V. Berryman, a non-Catholic sheet music and piano salesman for Wells Music Company. That marriage caused a major rift in her relationship with her parents and sister. The relationship rupture with her sister worsened during the mid-1930's after the death of their parents when Helen inherited the lion's share of their parents' estates.

May was separated from Berryman around 1916, and for many years she reportedly paid Berryman a salary to stay away from her. Using three separate legal actions, May finally divorced Berryman in the mid-1940s. She had her maiden name restored, and thereafter tended to live a secluded life.

It is unclear whether May inherited all of the 250-acre Jeffco estate her father owned or leased, or just 10 acres of it. But, in any case, she eventually acquired all of it. Later she purchased about 500 acres east of Wadsworth Blvd., putting her in control of about 750 acres of prime Jefferson County land.



*Front of the Belmar Mansion prior to demolition.*  
Courtesy of Western History Dept., Denver Public Library

In 1936 Ms. Bonfils began construction of a mansion on the property for herself – a 20-room mansion patterned after the Petit Trianon Palace in Versailles, France. She named the new mansion and the surrounding estate "Belmar"... a combination of her mother's name (Belle) and her own first name (Mary). The original Petit Trianon (described as a small chateau located on site of the botanical gardens of the Palace of Versailles) was built during the 1760s by Louis XV.

A few years after completion (in 1768), Louis XV died (in 1774). The young (20-year-old) Louis XVI gave the Petit Trianon and its surrounding park to his 19-year-old Queen, Marie Antoinette (of "let them eat cake" fame) as a wedding gift, for her exclusive use and enjoyment.

Ms. Bonfils was variously described as a recluse, a philanthropist, collector of art treasures, one of the wealthiest women in the West, and the last of the Victorians. She slept in a bed once owned by Marie Antoinette, sat in a chair that was once used by the United Kingdom's Queen Victoria, and as an accomplished pianist, she owned and played a piano once played by Frederic Chopin.

Sometime in the late 1930s, Ms. Bonfils bought and had moved to the western shore of Kountze Lake on her estate what was then believed to be the pioneer small home (log cabin) of Count Henri and Countess Katrina Murat (which had been built in 1858 when Denver was a frontier city of only 300 people and had been claimed to be Denver's first hotel).

The Murat structure (described by some as a "pocket-sized home") is said to have provided lodging to 1859 gold rush adventurers and journalist Horace Greeley (then editor of the New York Tribune). Countess Murat reportedly pieced together from her old Paris gowns and petticoats the first American flag flown in the area. She has been termed "*the Betsy Ross of Colorado*".

The 17' x 20' structure (including a lookout tower) had been at 1249 10<sup>th</sup> Street in Denver, in the way of area renewal. Ms. Bonfils bought it for \$3,500. She hung a picture of Count Murat over the stone fireplace, and used the structure as her private retreat. Recent investigations suggest that what she purchased may not have been the actual Murat cabin but one located next door.



*Edwin Stanton in front of the Murat structure when it was on the west edge of Kountze Lake.*  
Courtesy of Lakewood Heritage Center, Lakewood, CO.

At age 73, May married 46-year-old Charles Edwin Stanton on May 28, 1956. She died on March 11, 1962 at the age of 79.

**NOTE: Mr. Stanton is referred to herein (and in other publications) variously as Charles Stanton, Ed Stanton, Edwin Stanton and Edward Stanton. They are the same person.**

**Charles Edward Stanton** – an architect/decorator and long-time friend of Ms. Bonfils. In his family's papers, Stanton is described as "*one of the premier interior designers in the United States*". Those accounts report that Stanton "*acted as interior decorator to President Truman during the White House renovation and reconstruction (1949-1952)*", and that he did design work on hotels, casinos, and department stores. Outside of those family papers, this writer found no evidence to confirm those achievements.

At some point Ms. Bonfils met Stanton and asked him to oversee the installation of an elevator in her mansion. Reportedly, eventually Ms. Bonfils asked Stanton to marry her, "*so he would help manage her estate and also insure that Helen would not inherit any of it.*"

A report by historian Tom Noel said May proposed "*If you marry me and enable me to live at Belmar, I'll give you a million dollars. I want you to take care of me for the rest of my life. But you can't just live with me; we have to be married.*" They married at Belmar on May 28, 1956 before a district judge. They renewed their marriage vows in Rome in 1961.

About 1957 she and Mr. Stanton created the Belmar Development Company and drew up plans for the undeveloped 500 acres Mrs. Stanton had purchased on the east side of Wadsworth, across from her mansion. They are credited with conceiving of a residential neighborhood and a Lakewood downtown district, including the Villa Italia Shopping Center, which Gerri Von Frellick eventually developed.

May Bonfils Stanton reportedly left half of her estate to Mr. Stanton. Reports of the value of that estate vary from \$12 to \$30 million. Charles Stanton continued to live at Belmar until 1970 when, what he said was in accordance with May's will, he donated the mansion and 10 surrounding acres to the Catholic Church. During the roughly 8 years Mr. Stanton lived in the Belmar Mansion after May's death, neighbors observed numerous parties at the property, complete with fireworks over the lake. Charles E. Stanton died in Denver, Colorado on April 1, 1987.

#### **Gerri Von Frellick – developer**

Gerri Von Frellick had been a successful developer in Texas before some unfavorable investments caused him, his wife and daughter to move to Colorado to start anew. Von Frellick later reported that he arrived in Colorado with just \$500 in his pocket and a contract to remodel the downtown Denver Walgreens store.

In short order he assembled investors to build the Lakeside Shopping Center (1957) just outside the west edge of Denver on West 44<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Then he assembled another investment group to build Crossroads Shopping Center in Boulder in the early 1960s.

With two Colorado successes under his belt he set his sights on the acreage on the SE corner of Alameda Avenue and Wadsworth Blvd., May Bonfils Stanton's land. May and her new husband already envisioned a major Italian-themed shopping center there, so

Von Frellick built it. The development involved draining a small existing lake... one of 7 in the Alameda area that were drained to accommodate development. The new development (completed after May's death) became Villa Italia Shopping Center on 72 acres of the Bonfils Stanton land.

Villa Italia opened in 1966. At the time it was said to be the largest indoor, air-conditioned shopping center between Chicago and California (described as 800,000 sq. ft. of indoor space with more than 70 retailers). Considered one of the biggest enclosed shopping malls in the world, it was definitely one of the earliest and most successful such malls in the country.

Von Frellick went on to develop Academy Park (SW corner of Wadsworth Blvd. and Hampden Avenue), Cinderella Shopping Center (in Englewood), and Diamond Hill Office Park (on the west side of I-25 near Spear Blvd.).

When Mr. Von Frellick first contacted citizen backers of a Belmar Park, he made it clear that he had a mixed bag of motivations. He let them know that he was not anxious to see a new large commercial area develop across Wadsworth from his Villa Italia, and his new developing Academy Park was in competition for some of the office tenants being considered by Craddock Development Company (see page 15) and Stanton. But, he assured park backers that he was also sincere in his desire to see the Belmar Estate become a large central Lakewood park.

By the 1990s the shopping center was in substantial decline. Von Frellick no longer owned the shopping center. During its 3+ decade life, Villa Italia was periodically remodeled and expanded before it finally closed in 2001.

In 1997 Lakewood voters approved the creation of an urban renewal authority to assist with redevelopment of Villa Italia and the surrounding area. In 2002 the then-104-acre Villa Italia site was acquired by Denver-based Continuum Partners. Continuum demolished the shopping center and redeveloped the site into 22 city blocks consisting of 50 new buildings (900,000 sq. ft. of retail space, 269,000 sq. ft. of office space and public areas, and 1,200+ residential units). The new development opened in 2004.

Continuum sold the development to Starwood Retail Partners. It is now simply known as "Belmar". Starwood continues the initial development concepts of accommodating the automobile but putting pedestrians first. The development has become a vibrant, true downtown for Lakewood with 80+ shops and some 2,000 residents.

Gerri Von Frellick died at age 76 on January 4, 1993.

## **The Belmar Estate – An Overview**

Many believed the exterior of Ms. Bonfils' nearly-hidden white structure was constructed of Italian marble. The exterior was actually a glazed white terra cotta. In any event, the

exterior was a splendid, stately, gleaming white. It was built at the height of the Great Depression at a cost of \$1 million. At the time of its development, the Belmar Estate consisted of about 250 acres.

Ms. Bonfils commissioned Jules Jacques Benois Benedict, said to be Colorado's most flamboyant architect at the time, to design her dream house. Benedict reportedly said he designed Belmar "*in the fashion of the Petit Trianon with an exterior of 'marbleized terra cotta'.*" Construction began in 1936, and the 20-room mansion was completed in 1937.

The west side of the new mansion included a solarium that overlooked a swimming pool (south of the mansion) and Kountze Lake, surrounded by its natural wooded area and views of the Rocky Mountains in the background. In 1953 Ms. Bonfils purchased a three-tiered fountain that featured three crouching lions at its base, and had it installed between her home and the lake.



*The west face of May Bonfils' Belmar Mansion with the three-tiered marble fountain in the foreground. This photo was taken sometime after May's death. Courtesy of Western History Dept., Denver Public Library*

The finished "gem-like" mansion and its elegant appointments were often described as one of America's most beautiful homes. Reportedly, Ms. Bonfils firmly refused to allow pictures to be taken of her home, and had turned down requests by such national magazines as LIFE to do picture stories.

During demolition of Ms. Bonfils' mansion, that fountain was sold to the Van Hummel Howard Foundation which gave it to the City of Denver

and moved it to the three-acre Hungarian Freedom Park alongside the south side of Speer Blvd. at Clarkson Street, just east of the Denver Country Club.

Wanting her estate to be a private oasis, Ms. Bonfils had Kountze Lake and the rest of her property declared "State Licensed Preserve No. 557" to prevent "*hunting, fishing or trespassing for any purpose.*" She was protecting a herd of 30 mule deer, preening peacocks, ducks, geese and swans that she had brought onto the property. She used part of the property to set up Belmar Farms where she raised prizewinning Suffolk sheep, Black Angus cattle, milk cows and chickens. She also raised oats and barley on part of her land.

## The Battle Begins to Save Belmar as a Park

Now that readers have an overview of the Belmar property and know the influential players involved in the upcoming struggle to determine the future of the Belmar Estate... it is time to learn about the many citizen "little people" who chose to become civic activists.

In a democratic society, the elected officials are usually thought of as "representatives of the people" and/or "leaders of the people". Sadly, the longer governmental officials are in office they tend to see themselves less as representatives of their constituent's wishes, and more as leaders who know more than the general populace.

America is typically described as a "representative democracy", so (in this writer's view) the emphasis should be on representing the aspirations of their constituencies. In the case of Lakewood leaders (particularly in these early years of the new city), most city leaders talked about involving the citizens, while evidencing that they thought they knew best on most issues, and did not want to be distracted by vocal citizens.

Throughout the late 1960s various Lakewood citizens began writing letters to the Jefferson Sentinel suggesting that the Belmar Estate would be a wonderful central Lakewood park. Initially, such suggestions were not given much merit by the community's most influential leaders.

Within days after the Jefferson City incorporation, the Jefferson Sentinel newspaper reported that Charles E. Stanton proposed "*plans for development amounting to \$2 million at 13.3 of the acres he controlled at Alameda and Wadsworth.*" He had already sold at least 25 acres at the NW corner of the estate that had been developed into The Villas townhouses. Stanton was to function as developer of the new 13.3 acre multi-purpose development and retain ownership of the ground.

On May 7, 1970 the local newspaper (by then known as the Lakewood Sentinel) reported that the Belmar mansion and the 10 acres immediately around it had been given to the Catholic Archdiocese of Denver, "*in accordance with*" Ms. Stanton's unpublished will.

Mr. Stanton's gift to the church came with strings attached... reportedly, "*that the place be used for religious purposes only and that should the Archdiocese ever decide to sell the property, the marble mansion ... must be torn down.*" Were those stipulations really in Ms. Stanton's will? We will never know. The will was never published. Part of the will is on file in state archives, but that part makes no such stipulation.

That same edition of the Sentinel carried an editorial under the heading "**Mansion Should be Preserved**" the editors wrote, "*the mansion and its surrounding grounds should be retained in its present state – and hopefully opened to public visit.*"

In January 1971 (and later again in the spring) the Ladies Auxiliary of the Knights of Columbus sponsored tours of the Belmar Estate as fundraisers. Then, claiming they had no "religious purpose" for which the estate could be used, the Catholic Church put the property up for sale.

Students in some Lakewood schools (particularly Alameda High School) began to pick up on the idea of saving the land, or at least the lake and part of the land, as a park. In April 1971 there was a student-led effort to save Kountze Lake (on the Belmar Estate) for public use. One elementary teacher even helped her students create a petition drive to get the city to acquire the land for a park. That teacher was criticized "for getting grade school students to press parents to sign petitions to save Belmar mansion... vs support for office park".

Meanwhile Mr. Stanton entered into an option contract with Hallcraft Homes, a contract that involved draining most of the lake and using much of the remaining and recovered land for development of homes and multi-unit residential buildings.

In early 1971 a group known as the Open Space Committee of the Alameda Citizens' Action Lab gathered thousands of signatures to "Save Kountze Lake". They worked with Alameda High School teachers and students. Reportedly some 150 area residents volunteered their time "to work on any course of action to save the lake." Soon thereafter another effort got underway to save the entire Belmar Estate as a park.



View from the back of the mansion looking west across the fountain and Kountze Lake toward the mountains.  
Courtesy of Western History Dept., Denver Public Library

The actions of most official Lakewood leaders in this era made it clear that they felt saving land for a large central park was at odds with increasing the new city's tax base, and thus not a desirable thing. Had they made a better case for their position, citizens may have supported them. Instead, they simply used their power to thwart the citizen-driven efforts to save much of Belmar as a park. As will be shown later, that proved to be their downfall.

Throughout the many months that followed, Denver media often referred to the citizen campaign as a David vs. Goliath scenario. On one side was Lakewood's mayor, virtually all of Lakewood's City Council, key staff members, the Lakewood Chamber of Commerce, the Denver Archdiocese, and two well-to-do developers.



With the exception of Gerri Von Frellick (who donated office space, allowed petition signature-gathering in his Villa Italia Shopping Center, and funded some legal services), the citizen effort was strictly voluntary labor... hundreds of hours of volunteer labor.

## **Kountze... A "Lake" or "A Catchbasin"?**

In mid-April 1971 students from Alameda High observed that the water level in Kountze Lake was dropping at an unusual rate. They contacted citizen groups that had been working to save the lake and/or the land for a park, asking if the water was intentionally being released as some sort of effort to deflate citizen efforts.

Lakewood City Administrator Walt Kane issued a statement that *"The water just naturally goes down at this time of year and there's runoff."* He and Lakewood City Council members reportedly said *"that natural bodies of water are under the protection of the State Dept. of Natural Resources and cannot be tampered with without the department's approval."* Two weeks later the Director of Colorado's Dept. of Natural Resources stated that Kountze Lake was not under the jurisdiction of his department.

The Lakewood Sentinel reported that *"A catchbasin in the vicinity under development by Hallcraft Homes, once a part of the large Belmar estate (are they talking about Kountze Lake?), is under drainage. This (draining) was approved by Lakewood City Council when rezoning for a residential development was granted Hallcraft. The catchbasin is not a natural resource."* Did the Lakewood Council members and City Administrator really not know of this provision in their earlier approval?

Just prior to the depletion of Kountze Lake, surrounding neighbors noticed two things: (1) people were invited onto the property with chainsaws to cut down and carry away many of the cottonwood trees on the property "for free firewood", and (2) heavy equipment was used to cut a trench in the south face of the dam that helped form Kountze Lake. Reportedly someone was brought to the property during that time in abortive attempt to catch and save some of the lake's fish as the water level went down.

One can't help but ask who other than Charles Edwin Stanton was in control of the Belmar Estate during this time. Regardless who was responsible for the water depletion... the water level continued to go down. Rather than deflate citizen efforts, it spurred them to a higher level.

By April 29 members of the Alameda High School Citizens Action Lab reported to City Council that they had already gathered thousands of signatures of area residents who wanted to save Kountze Lake... and they said they were gathering more at the rate of 1,000 a week. Lakewood's Mayor Jim Richey reportedly praised the students' work and told them that *"Council will give them 'full, undivided support'."*

In early May it was announced that the Denver Catholic Archdiocese had entered into a purchase option agreement with Craddock Development Company of Colorado Springs

to sell the Belmar mansion and 10 surrounding acres... *"opening the way for commercial and residential development on hundreds of acres once the estate of the late May Bonfils Stanton."* During that announcement a church representative acknowledged for the first time that *"Kountze Lake, a 50-acre expanse lying to the west of the mansion, is now being drained. Although this was not included in the gift from Stanton and is still in Stanton's ownership, it is the sole water supply for the home".*

**NOTE: The December 9, 1971 edition of the Sentinel reported that the Craddock purchase of this prime 10 acres of Belmar was for \$300,000 (\$30,000 per acre).**

Craddock Development would need city-approved rezoning of the 10-acre Belmar estate property in order to allow construction of their proposed office park (which was initially described as a new 80,000 sq. ft. office building). A city-issued permit was also required before the mansion could be razed.

A May 6, 1971 editorial in the Lakewood Sentinel said, *"We urge City Council to deny rezoning of the property, which is now residential and agricultural in zoning category. We also urge Council to investigate every legal path toward blocking destruction of the beautiful mansion for its aesthetic and historic value. We join with the concerned young people of Alameda High School on the future of the 50 acre Kountze Lake, owned by Stanton, which is now being drained."*

**Note: At that time, Kountze Lake was often referred to as covering 50 acres. The likely size at that time was about 36 acres.**

As *"an unprecedented groundswell"* of public interest began to surface, a week after the Sentinel editorial Lakewood Mayor Richey announced that he and Council would *"explore all possible paths"* toward preservation of the Belmar property, including the 10-acres acquired by Craddock.

Apparently exploration of *"all possible paths"* didn't take long. By May 27 city officials said they could not stop the proposed development. City Administrator Kane said *"the city will continue attempts to obtain some land in the estate for a civic complex."*

Then on June 17 Sentinel writer Marlys Duran wrote, *"Even the powers that be could not – or would not – save Belmar."* She reported that days before, the Lakewood Council, under the guidance of City Administrator Kane, had voted to issue the permit allowing demolition of the Belmar mansion. During that same Council meeting George C. Christiansen an attorney and a member of the Wheat Ridge Planning Commission, speaking as a private citizen, offered his own detailed proposal for how the Belmar land and lake could be acquired for public use.

Christiansen reported that the entire Belmar estate had been recently appraised by Jefferson County Probate Court at \$1.8 million, suggesting that was the amount acquisition would likely cost. He called for use of the city's condemnation powers, joint

ownership with surrounding communities, the solicitation of donations, the sale of bonds, and possible federal funding.

**NOTE: If Christiansen was reporting a valuation for the entire 250 acres that Stanton had inherited, that would have been an average of \$7,200 per acre. Even if he was just talking about the 127 acres the city ultimately acquired (not likely), that would be less than \$15,000 per acre. The city ultimately paid nearly \$19,000 per acre.**

Had city leadership really been committed to acknowledge and pursue the already-evident overwhelming citizen support for saving the mansion, the lake, and some of the land for a park... they could have followed up on Christiansen's counsel and done so. They didn't! Rather, they issued the demolition permit and ultimately approved the Craddock rezoning request.

## Belmar Mansion 'Being Ravaged'



In a July 14, 1971 Sentinel story, writer Jean Saum reported, "The proud Belmar Mansion is in the throes of death. There is no dignity in the demise of Lakewood's only historical showpiece." Ms. Saum's extensive piece went on to describe "the rape" of Belmar. She reported that many of the building materials salvaged from the mansion would be transported to a site near Taos, New Mexico where they would be used at an isolated mountain commune.



**Above:** Interior front hallway of the Belmar Mansion before demolition.

Courtesy of Lakewood Heritage Center, Lakewood, CO.

**Below:** This is the same interior front hallway... as it appeared during demolition.

From the July 15, 1971 Lakewood Sentinel

One of the young men helping with the salvage work was reported as saying, "People from around here will spend thousands of dollars to travel to Europe to visit crumbling mansions, yet will stand by and let one like this be destroyed".

After the salvage crew finished, the wrecking ball came. Within a short time, the Belmar Mansion was little more than a pile of rubble!

## City Teases Belmar Land Acquisition While Proposing Bonds

In September 1971 City Administrator Kane announced the city was "in negotiations" to acquire 15 acres of Belmar land for a civic center, plus Kountze Lake and some land around it for a park... if citizens approve a \$1.7 million bond to provide funds for that purpose.

By November the city actually proposed four bond questions, totaling \$12 million of indebtedness for a wide variety of public improvements, only a small part of which would have been for park land purchases at unspecified locations. Lakewood voted down the bond proposal, yet voters narrowly approved a 1% increase in sales tax, half of which was intended to service such bonds.

The increased sales tax income was estimated to generate \$2 million in 1972, half of which had been earmarked for city maintenance and neighborhood street improvements.

Lakewood officials, stalling for time to plan their vision for the 200+ acres remaining of the Belmar Estate, recommended denial of the Craddock rezoning request. It was during that time there was discussion about saving Kountze Lake, but City Councilman Mel Flowers suggested letting the lake dry up. "It's not really practical," he said. Director of Community Development Gary Latham responded that Flowers' idea was, "not unattractive" to city planners.

During January 1972 Lakewood residents Grace Tidball and Caroline Lege, operating under the name Lakewood Open Space Development Committee, called a meeting of Lakewood citizens to "outline plans for financing construction of a 150 - 250 acre park in Lakewood".

A report in the Lakewood Sentinel said that the new group was seeking a vote of Lakewood citizens to use half of the new 1% city sales tax (approved in November) to purchase about 186 of the remaining Belmar acres for a park. They proposed that they would collect some 2,000 registered voter signatures to force city council to adopt a special fund for the Belmar land purchase and development, or to call a special city-wide election on the question.

The petition question provided that two appraisals be obtained on the Belmar property, and that if negotiations with the property owner were not successful, the city was to

enter into condemnation proceedings. It also stipulated that once the Belmar land was paid for, a portion of the new sales tax would continue to be used for the purchase of additional Lakewood parks, recreation areas and open space.

The new committee also made it clear that they intended to do all they could to block the proposed rezoning of 10 acres of the land then being sought by Craddock Construction Company. The group began its petition drive.

About that time the Lakewood Chamber of Commerce openly got into the action, endorsing commercial and residential development of the Belmar property, and asking city council *"not to withhold rezoning of Craddock Development Co's plans"*. Chamber president Bill Moyer was quoted as saying, *"the newly-formed Lakewood Open Space Committee [proposal] to finance a huge park on the entire Belmar Estate from half of the city's 1 pct. sales tax is not economically feasible at this time."*

Regarding the Craddock proposal, Moyer said it *"will mean \$50, \$60,000 additional property tax each year to city and county coffers."* As for the park proposal, the Chamber President said, *"without proper development and the necessary personnel for upkeep and patrol, such a large tract of land could become more of a hazard than a benefit to the immediate community."*

The Lakewood Sentinel responded to the Chamber's position by downplaying the value of the "greenbelt" they championed in the city's most recent hastily-drawn master plan for the Belmar site. Their editorial said, *"Greenbelts are nice on the drawing boards, but they often don't turn out the way they're planned. An area wide park, such as that proposed for Belmar, would be of more value to the entire community – even at a premium price. The central area of Lakewood sorely is lacking open space, and the Belmar tract is one of the few remaining"*.

**Note: The citizen petition drive for Belmar Park got started on January 19, 1972. On February 28 City Council voted to have their own park-expansion election for May 2.**

## **City Leaders Declare War Against Citizens**

In early February 1972 war formally broke out between Lakewood city leaders and Lakewood citizens. The February 10 edition of the Lakewood Sentinel carried a story headlined *"City vows fight against Belmar site"*. The newspaper reported that Mayor Jim Richey *"vowed this week that he and City Council will work to defeat the purchase the vast Stanton estate for a park site if it comes to a vote of the people."*

The statement simply brought into the open what had been simmering at city hall for a long time: city leaders knew what was best for Lakewood, and citizen opinion was really not welcome. City Councilman Bob Bailey reportedly *"called the Belmar tract a 'white*

*elephant' the purchase of which would cripple the city for parks and recreation for the next five years".*

The Sentinel report also revealed city plans to put a \$3 million bond question on the city's May 2 charter convention ballot. The proposed bond revenues would be used to purchase unspecified park and open space lands and other city improvements, but specifically deleted use for Belmar by draining sales tax revenues that the Lakewood Open Space Development Committee's petition proposal sought for the Belmar acquisition.

Councilwoman Betty Miller proposed a motion authorizing an appraisal of the Belmar property so they could know what the cost might be. Her motion was not supported. So under the heading "**Let's get cost figures**", the Sentinel editorialized "*Without giving concrete evidence to the citizens of Lakewood that the Belmar cost is prohibitive, we're afraid the people might defeat the proposed bond issue in May. We urge that an appraisal be made on which to base the city's position.*"

That same edition of the Sentinel announced the formation of the Lakewood Parks Committee, chaired by Stuart MacPhail. Noting that "*the priorities of citizens 'must somehow' be taken into consideration,*" MacPhail said the new group would support the petitioning effort of the Lakewood Open Space Development Committee to place the Belmar issue on the ballot.

The following week City Council voted to authorize an appraisal on the Belmar property, specifying that the appraisal must be completed by March 13 when Council was scheduled to consider the Craddock request to rezone its optioned 10 Belmar acres from Agriculture-1 to Planned Development. Citizen groups were already calling for a moratorium on rezoning large chunks of land (such as the Belmar tract) until such time as the city completed a comprehensive land-use plan.

During that Council meeting Grace Tidball announced that her Open Space Committee already had more than the necessary 2,064 signatures on its petition to force a public vote on the Belmar question.

By February 24 an appraiser had been chosen, but City Administrator Kane refused to divulge the appraiser's name, even to the press. The name promptly came out anyway... Ed Earley, a Lakewood resident. He promised to get his work done quickly.

In early March, Villa Italia Shopping Center developer Gerri Von Frellick got involved in the effort to save Belmar as a park. He had been helping parks-related citizen groups by allowing them to gather petition signatures on the shopping center property. Those opposed to saving Belmar as a park openly questioned Von Frellick's motives.

Von Frellick was simultaneously developing Academy Park, a proposed office park at the SE corner of Wadsworth and Hampden. Opponents noted that Midwestern Financial Corp. was the primary potential tenant for the Craddock-controlled site at

Belmar, and that Von Frellick had been trying to get them to Academy Park. Von Frellick acknowledged that fact, but reported to the Sentinel that *"he had made the offer to withdraw the contact in case Midwestern officials felt it was presenting a conflict or frustrating their desire to locate in Lakewood"*. Midwestern ultimately withdrew their offer to rent space at the Craddock site.

Von Frellick went on to say *"I have been persuaded that the rights for zoning belong to the people. Can Lakewood City Council trade these rights for a City Hall site voters have rejected? Let's get our priorities right. Give the people Belmar park, and the people will give Council a better civic center than they dreamed of."* Mr. Von Frellick continued to support the "Save Belmar" effort.

About this time Lakewood Councilman Bob Bailey wrote a guest editorial that the Sentinel published. Bailey attempted to set forth the position of City Council on park issues, attempting to set the stage for citizen-approval of the upcoming \$3 million parks bond question.

He said the \$3 million could purchase 1,000 acres of park land and open space, scattered throughout the city's five wards. He said *"In the event the Belmar Estate property is priced in such a way that it can be made part of this program, the Lakewood City Council will give very serious consideration to its inclusion in this park and open space development. It may be, however, that the Belmar property may be so valuable that its cost would approach or even exceed the total funds available under the anticipated bond issue."*

Bailey went on to make the unsupported, unexplained statement: *"Even if development is permitted on the Belmar property, land consisting of approximately 50 acres will be dedicated to the city for park land and city purposes."*

Ed Earley's appraisal reached City Council about the same time that a reported 3,748 petition signatures (2,064 were required) to call an election on the Belmar question were turned in by the Lakewood Open Space Development Committee. A couple weeks later Councilman Bill Stepp alleged that *"A lot of people were duped into signing those petitions"*.

Earley set the value of the entire 208 acre site at \$5,580,722 (including \$40 per acre for the 10-acre Craddock parcel and \$50 per acre for the 50-acre chunk at the SW corner of Alameda and Wadsworth that Stanton wanted to develop for office and commercial uses).

On March 6 City Council met in a 3-hour closed-door session to discuss the situation. A report in the Sentinel said a leak of the Council's discussions claimed that *"City Council has agreed, at least informally, to try to purchase a large portion, but not all, of the 208 Belmar estate.... to seek to buy some 148 acres..."* excluding the 50 acres at the SW corner of Alameda and Wadsworth, and maybe the 10-acre Craddock site. Earley's appraisal said that remaining portion would be worth about \$2.7 million. A week later

Council members responded to the above story, saying no such agreement had been reached.

City Attorney Ray Johnson immediately offered Council his opinions on ways the petitions could be invalidated. On March 8 Charles Stanton took out a full page ad in the Lakewood Sentinel telling Lakewood citizens, among other things, that he would "*vigorously resist condemnation*" of his land. His ad said that "*feasibility studies done in the 1950s indicated the land was inappropriate for public use*".

In mid-March, by a vote of 7 to 3, Lakewood City Council approved the 10-acre rezoning sought by Craddock Development. The action was over the objection of Councilwoman Betty Miller who had sought to get the matter tabled until after a possible May vote by the public on the purchase of the Belmar land. Council members Gene Fortier and Chuck Whitlock joined in Miller's effort to table the action. They were unsuccessful.

Before the Council decided how to handle the petition-mandated Belmar election, it heard again from City Attorney Johnson. He told them that due to a State Supreme Court ruling he had since studied, his initial suggestions about how to invalidate the petition effort was probably not viable.

Instead, Johnson counseled, "*The ordinance could be withheld from the ballot if a registered city elector lodged a written protest of the signatures and City Clerk Jean Rogers then determined, at a public hearing, that they were insufficient.*"

He told Council "*the petitions must contain only 2,058 names of registered city voters to place the ordinance on the city ballot, meaning 1,690 of the signatures would have to be purged to invalidate the document.*"

Still assuming an election on the Belmar question would be held on May 23, Councilwoman Miller proposed that an advisory question be put on the May 2 ballot (along with the \$3 million bond question and the charter convention delegate election) to determine voters' reactions to a "*middle ground*". She noted that the initiated ordinance offers voters only two choices... to buy all of Belmar or to buy none of it. No action was taken on her suggestion.

Letter writers continued to flood the Sentinel with pleas to save Belmar. As an example, Ruth Wrench wrote "*Here in Lakewood we need a lake and some woods.*" She said, "*because many lakes have been drained, because meadowlark meadows have been eliminated, the widest possible land from the Stanton Estate needs to be acquired and these valuable assets preserved and reestablished in Lakewood, where we live.*"

The March 27 City Council meeting included an action which formally set May 23 for the election mandated by the citizen petitions. Councilman Bill Stepp said the action was being taken "*because the law says we must pass it.*" Mayor Richey vowed to "*work actively*" to oppose passage of the Belmar question.



This same week three Lakewood residents, Howard Revie, Gene Marlatt and Stuart MacPhail, with contributed legal counsel, filed suit against the city to overturn the recent rezoning of the 10-acre Craddock parcel. District Judge Daniel Shannon gave Lakewood until May 22 to file a transcript of the City Council's proceedings in that rezoning. City Council, Mayor Richey, the Craddock Development Company the Archdiocese of Denver (still the owner of record of the 10 acres in question) and Charles Stanton were also charged in the complaint.

As reported in the Sentinel, *"The suit not only challenges the validity of Lakewood's P-D zoning category, but charges that Council granted the zoning because of 'an express or implied contract' with the owners of Belmar that the city would get a municipal complex site 'at a price less than the fair market value'."*

Judge Shannon set June 30 as the date for Lakewood and the other defendants, including Mayor Richey, other city officials, Stanton and the Archdiocese of Denver to show cause why the zoning decision should not be reversed.

As the May 2 bond election approached, City Administrator Walt Kane issued glowing reports about all the parks and open space that would be purchased if the \$3 million bond question were to be approved. He expected the city could get another \$3 million in *"matching federal funds"*, and the \$6 million would enable the acquisition of *"central and peripheral regional parks as well as another 10 neighborhood parks."*

Capitalizing on citizen interest in Belmar as a large, centrally-located regional park, Kane said *"the city presently is discussing several 100-150-acre sites within central Lakewood, including the Belmar and Addenbrooke properties, but 'a specific location for this large regional park has not yet been determined'."*

As the Sentinel editorialized, the city's words and actions relative to bonds and where bond money (if approved) would go, have added *"More Confusion"*. In their editorial they said, *"We think the city must make clear whether or not Belmar will be part of the bond issue. By not taking a definite stand, how can it ask citizens to vote for the bonds without knowing what they will be getting?"*

Another citizen organization was formed about this time *"to assure that Lakewood voters will not be deprived of their constitutional right to petition City Council to vote for"* Belmar as a central park. The group was known as Lakewood Individuals for the Environment (LIFE).

LIFE announced a petition drive urging City Council to reverse its rezoning of the 10-acre Craddock site. In the first week of its effort 1,000 signatures were gathered of the 2,058 needed. The petition provided that if Council failed to reverse its earlier decision, the question would have to be put to a vote of Lakewood citizens.

On April 12 some 3,000 petition signatures were turned in to the City Clerk. Reportedly, City Attorney Ray Johnson told Council that the petitions appear to be valid and that

they automatically prevent the Belmar/Craddock rezoning from going into effect. During a study session, Council members seemed ready to reverse the Craddock zoning decision, but the next Monday they voted unanimously to not repeal the zoning.

This same week Berry Craddock of Craddock Development Company filed a \$2 million "slander" suit against MacPhail, Revie and Marlatt, claiming that they had "libeled" him. Craddock announced that, pending litigation outcome, construction of their by then-proposed six-building office park would commence in July and take 18 months to complete.

During mid-April the three citizen groups that had been working to acquire Belmar for a park (Lakewood Parks Committee, Lakewood Open Space Development Council and LIFE) jointly agreed to support a "Yes" vote for the City's May 2 bond election... if City Council passed a resolution confirming that no additional city property taxes would be increased as a result of either the bond issue or the May 23 vote on the acquisition of the Belmar Estate for a park.

An April 20 editorial the Sentinel noted that the May 2 bond election was only 12 days away, and "*no organized opposition to the bond proposal has appeared*". "But," they said, "*we still are concerned that the Belmar Estate... is left hanging and unsaid.*" Throughout the bond campaign Council had refused to commit that any of the park funding within the bond proposal would go toward purchasing any portion of the Belmar Estate.

The editorial went on to say, "*During the past months of the drawn out Belmar hassle, Council generally has taken an attitude of scorn toward citizens in support of the property.*"

At its April 24 meeting Council affirmed that only sales tax revenues (not property taxes) would be used to pay the interest and principle on the bonds being proposed on May 2. Council did not address the question of the May 23<sup>rd</sup> election. In spite of that omission, based on the affirmation about the proposed May 2 bonds, the three groups announced that they would support the May 2 proposal. Meanwhile both the Jefferson County League of Women Voters and the Lakewood Chamber of Commerce issued statements of support for the May 2 bond issue proposal.

Leading up to the May 2 bond issue election Lakewood officials kept promising that, if passed, the bonds would enable the city to purchase up to 1,100 acres for some 13 new parks in Lakewood. While they talked about the importance of "*a centrally-located park,*" they continued to avoid any commitment to use any of the funds for purchasing Belmar land. Voters did approve the \$3 million bond question on May 2.

Petitions with more than 3,000 signatures calling for the Belmar election had been filed on March 6. On May 5, just inside the 60-day deadline for protest of the petitions, a protest was filed with City Clerk Rogers. According to a Sentinel report, City Attorney

Ray Johnson told Council that *"Decision on the validity of the petitions rests with Mrs. Rogers (Lakewood City Clerk), under state law."*

Johnson also advised Council that *"in his opinion it might be possible for the city to use \$3 million in park bonds approved May 2 for the purchase of Belmar"*. But the report went on to say *"Council has indicated in general, however, that the bonds would not be used in that manner."* Councilman Bill Stepp was quoted as saying *"If the May 23 issue passes, I for one would never vote to issue the bonds."*

Ms. Rogers set May 12 as a hearing date for the protest. On May 11 the Lakewood Open Space Development Committee (initiators of the citizen petition drive) secured a temporary restraining order from District Judge George Priest *"halting that hearing and ordering Mrs. Rogers to show cause why she should be allowed to proceed."*

On Tuesday May 16 Judge Pile, sitting in for vacationing Judge Priest, dismissed the restraining order and vacated the order that the City Clerk show cause. An attorney for the election opponents notified the judge that he would appear before him the following Monday morning (May 22) and ask that the next day's election be enjoined.

Meanwhile Clerk Rogers rescheduled the protest hearing for Friday May 19. The Sentinel report said: *"If Mrs. Rogers rules at that hearing that the petitions are invalid, the special election automatically will be called off. That provision is outlined in a resolution passed March 27 by City Council calling for the May 23 vote."*

*"Under state law, if the petitions are ruled invalid, the petitioners would have 15 days to file new documents, starting the initiative process over again. If, on the other hand, Mrs. Rogers should uphold the petitions, the protestors would have 10 days to file an amended protest, if they so chose."*

*"Chances were considered good that Mrs. Rogers will invalidate the petitions, since she will be advised by City Attorney Ray Johnson that in his opinion, they do not comply with state statute,"*

About that time, Caroline Lege of the Lakewood Open Space Development Committee reported that she and the committee *"were rebuffed by Council members whom they approached concerning possible amendments to the proposed ordinance"*. The Sentinel report said *"The committee has contended that Council could have deleted the most expensive portion of the estate, the northeast corner appraised at \$50,000 an acre, before the election is held."*

In a letter to the editor Ms. Lege said *"the city administration has done so much to confuse voters about the cost of Belmar."* Then she made an excellent argument as to why saving a substantial part of Belmar for a park was important, noting that *"Belmar is a lush, instant park with 23 varieties of full-grown shade trees."*

The Thursday May 18 edition of the Sentinel carried an editorial which said in part, *"The case for Belmar park, at this point, has reached such confusing legal proportions it would be difficult for even Perry Mason to solve. It undoubtedly will go down in the annals of Lakewood history as one of the most confusing of all times.*

*"As it now stands, Lakewood voters won't know until Friday (tomorrow) whether an election on the Belmar issue will even be held."* It went on to say *"Although there are many legal ramifications involved, we still are in favor of retaining a large portion of Belmar for a park."*

The editorial concluded by saying *"It is unfortunate the issue has become so embroiled. Many compromises could have been reached, we feel, before this stage. If next Tuesday's election is called off – and we speculate that in all likelihood it will be – the whole issue will likely start again. If and when it does, we hope there can be a meeting of minds and that past differences can be forgotten. We hope some way can be found to obtain Belmar."*

On May 19 City Clerk Rogers ruled that the petitions which called for the May 23 election were invalid. Her basis was three unreported grounds. Based on one citizen's protest and one City official's decision, the election was called off at the last minute.

Mrs. Tidball of the Lakewood Open Space Development Committee described as *"rather appalling"* what she called *"a dramatic effort to still the voice of the people by cancelling the election."*

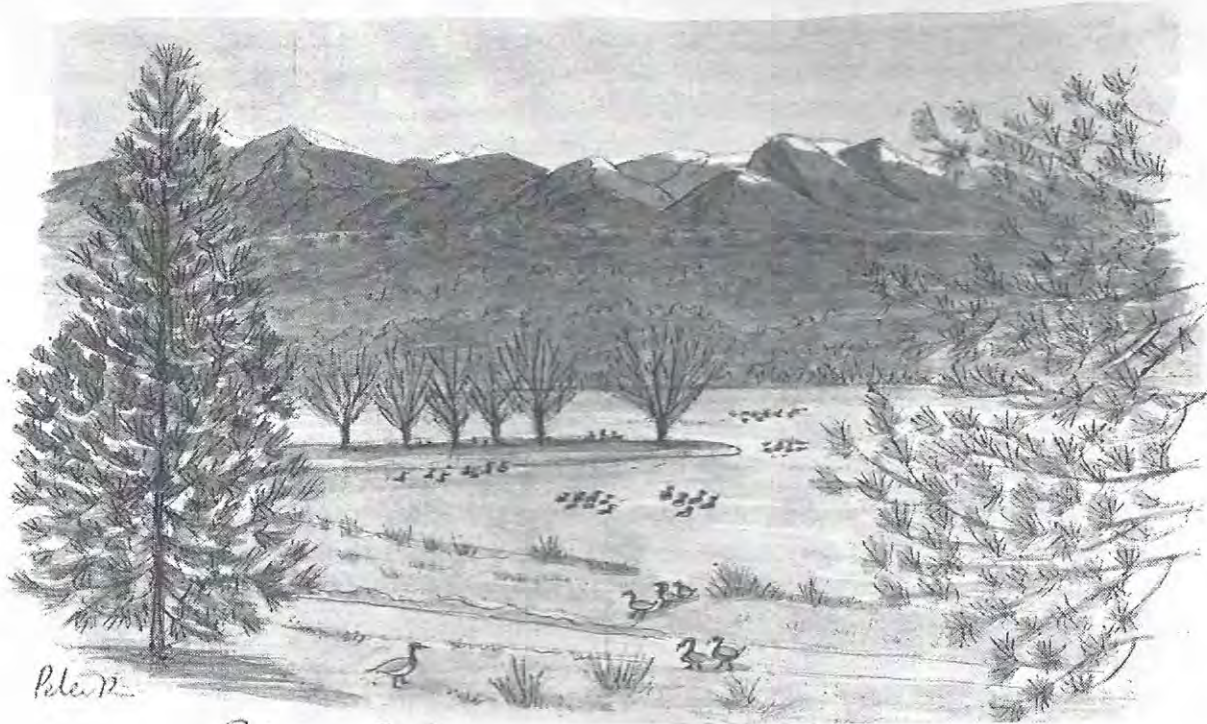
Stuart MacPhail of the Lakewood Parks Committee was quoted in the following Sentinel as commenting *"Unfortunately, no matter how you cut it, the citizens of Lakewood have had their right of election taken from them. When a properly called election can be stopped in this manner, it is a grave disservice to the democratic process."*

Two days after the aborted May 23 election the Lakewood City Council met and authorized a second appraisal on part of the Belmar property... the southern 2/3 of the estate, not including the northern 62 acres. The appraisal was to include the 10-acre Craddock site and 127 acres at that point optioned to Hallcraft Homes.

At the same time the three citizen groups which had backed the Belmar-for-a-park election presented a joint letter to City Council *"agreeing to 'support and applaud' any action by [Council] to purchase the 'southwest 138 acres for our central park, including existing landscaped areas'."* The Council did not publically acknowledge the letter, but the next Sentinel editorial did, by noting that the groups *"applauded Council's efforts to seek the purchase"*, and saying *"we, too, think every effort should be made to retain Belmar as open space."*

May 24<sup>th</sup> the Lakewood Planning Commission voted to recommend to Council that it deny a rezoning request by Hallcraft Homes that would have allowed for up to 1,786 dwelling units on 127 of the Belmar acres. The possibility that those 127 acres may yet

be considered for a park was thought to have influenced the Commission's decision. The Sentinel reported that "*Hallcraft reportedly holds an option from Stanton to purchase its portion of Belmar for "\$6,000 an acre for land subsequently rezoned for single-family and \$13,000 [per acre] for any [land] rezoned for multiple family."*



## What Was Belmar Land Really Worth?

When this saga began, the entire Belmar Estate was zoned "*Agricultural-1*".

As indicated above, the June 17, 1971 Sentinel reported on a proposal to save the Belmar Estate for a park. George G. Christiansen, an attorney who was also a member of the Wheat Ridge Planning Commission proposed that Lakewood, Wheat Ridge and Edgewater work together to save the land for the benefit of all East Jefferson County residents.

An interesting part of the Sentinel coverage of that presentation reported Christiansen as saying "*the Stanton estate was appraised by Jefferson County Probate Court at \$1.8 million, making that the approximate amount the city would have to raise.*" Assuming he was talking about the remaining estate that was then being discussed (about 200 acres), that would be \$9,000 per acre.

Appraisers like to tout the phrase "*highest and best use*" as their basis for appraising the value of land. From early on in the fight to obtain the Belmar land for a park, citizens discouraged City Council from taking any actions which might tend to elevate the cost of the land in question. For instance, they believed that city approval of any upgraded

zoning would unnecessarily increase later land acquisition costs. That's just what Lakewood City Council did.

When appraiser Ed Early completed the first of the appraisals done on the property (March 1972) he stated that zoning did not impact appraised values. He assured Lakewood Council members that his valuation was strictly based on his evaluation of "highest and best use" of the property.

At the time of Earley's appraisal Craddock Development had produced a plan for the 10 acre site of the former Belmar Mansion, but there was no formal plan on the table for the entire 200+ acre site.

By then Craddock's plan called for six 2-story office buildings. What if his plan had been for ten 5-story buildings? Would that have been a higher and better use? Hallcraft had a vague plan to build a combination of single- and multiple-unit residential structures on 127 acres of the land. If they had proposed to include some office and commercial structures, would that have elevated the "highest and best use" valuation of that 127-acre parcel?

**FOR THE RECORD...** Craddock reportedly paid \$300,000 (\$30,000 per acre) for the 10-acre prime portion of the Belmar Estate which it contracted to purchase from the Archdiocese... and that was contingent on getting the land rezoned. A year later, in anticipation of Council's rezoning approval, Ed Earley said those 10 acres were worth \$40,000 per acre. Another year later Daniel Clinger (the second appraiser) said the value was \$35,000 per acre.

About five months after the Earley appraisal (as reported in the August 10, 1972 edition of the Sentinel), Craddock Development announced that it had obtained its own appraisal of the 10 acres (after the property had been rezoned, but before it even began to develop the site). That appraisal claimed the site was worth \$641,400 (\$64,140 per acre). Hmmm!

**ALSO FOR THE RECORD...** Hallcraft Homes had optioned the 127 acres it wished to acquire from Stanton... again, subject to favorable rezoning... according to a Sentinel report, for "\$6,000 an acre for land subsequently rezoned for single-family and \$13,000 (per acre) for any (land) rezoned for multiple family." There was no report of what Hallcraft paid to acquire its option.

Shortly after the January 30, 1973 election, Hallcraft vice president Lynn Ashton was quoted as saying "it would seem fairly obvious' that costs have gone up considerably since the last appraisal and since the city issued a building permit to Craddock for an office park." His firm ultimately sold its option on the 127 acres to the city of Lakewood for \$2.4 million (\$18,897 per acre) after having the bulk of its purchase money on the table for just a few months (July to October 1973). Not a bad profit!

During the spring of 1972 the Lakewood Planning Commission recommended approval of Stanton's request to rezone 62 acres on the northeast portion of the Belmar land. His proposal was for "an office campus". In addition to office buildings, Stanton said he might also include "a small commercial area and a hotel or motel."

**Three weeks later the Sentinel reported that "An angry Charles Edward Stanton drew new battle lines on Belmar this week by withdrawing his request for rezoning on its northeastern corner [62-acre site] and vowing to make a 'vigorous and determined opposition to condemnation of any property in which I may be interested, regardless of the cost or consequences involved'."**

The report went on to say "Aiming his fire not only at City Hall, but at 'the delegations of gushing housewives, office clerks and immature lawyers who have become the self-appointed critics of my business activities and my private life,' Stanton informed Mayor Jim Richey that 'All further contact between me and the City of Lakewood will be through legal counsel'."

The report on Stanton's letter went on to quote these parts: "Plans for developing this acreage will be postponed until a future time when, hopefully, a more mature attitude of the Lakewood residents and their city administration can assure the same fair and impartial consideration that would be accorded to any other property owner," and "Obviously, this would require some honest effort to refrain from political connivance, and to avoid further special delays of sensationalism and hysteria concerning the development of the Belmar property."

A June 8 hearing was scheduled by City Clerk Rogers on a protest filed against the citizen petitions demanding an election challenging rezoning of the 10-acre Craddock parcel. Surprise, surprise, Ms. Rogers once again found an unreported reason to rule that the citizen petitions were invalid.

Meanwhile City Council amended its earlier decision to authorize a new appraisal of 137 acres of the Belmar property. It authorized appraiser Daniel Clinger to appraise the limited Belmar acreage for a fee of \$2,500, and also the South Garrison Street Addenbrooke property, for a "minimal" additional fee.

**NOTE: A July 20 Sentinel story reported that Clinger's appraisal eventually claimed that the 137 acres he appraised at Belmar had a total value of \$2,472,500, and the 112-acre Addenbrooke property had a value of \$842,000. Reportedly, Clinger said the 127 acres (after removing the Craddock 10 acres) would be worth \$2.1 million. It included sections valued at \$7,500 to \$15,000 per acre, but reached a value that averaged \$15,748 per acre.**

Irritated by recent citizen initiative and referendum efforts, in late June Lakewood City Council proposed a new ordinance that would require signatures of 15% of legal voters to get an initiative on the ballot. The then-existing requirement was 15% of the voters

who voted in the last election, like was true in most other Colorado cities and the state. Since only about 30% of "legal voters" voted in the most recent mayor/city council election, in effect, the proposal would triple the number of signatures required.

Meanwhile a Lakewood Home Rule Charter Commission had come into existence, and it was working on a more liberal petitioning process. Following discussions and decisions by the Charter Commission, Lakewood City Council amended its late June proposal. The final ordinance requires signatures by 15% of voters who voted in the mayoral election, for both initiative and referendum petition efforts.

The July 6 Sentinel carried a picture and story entitled "**All dried up – Only a Miracle can revive Kountze Lake**". The story detailed "*The demise of Kountze Lake,*" saying "*it is now only a mud-cracked indentation. Fish kept stocked in the lake ... have long since floundered, white bellies up to the sun, leaving behind the stench of decay and rot.*"

The story reported that Stanton had sold water rights (which fed the lake) to Coors Brewery in Golden. Actually, that sale had taken place a year earlier. There were reports that one or two natural springs also fed the lake. Possibly that is what kept the lake alive in the intervening year.

So speculation began to develop that someone (under Stanton's direction??) had intentionally hastened the demise of Kountze Lake. See page 15 for evidence of what really happened. In any event, as the Sentinel reported, "*The hopes for Belmar as a huge city park, centered by a gleaming lake, which has stirred many Lakewood residents*" suddenly looked beyond reach... just what Mr. Stanton wanted.

On July 20 the Sentinel reported that City Council authorized the sale of the \$3 million bonds approved by voters on May 2. The bond sale was set for September 25. Council said the sale was in anticipation of five park land purchases: 4 acres at 14<sup>th</sup> & Eaton Street, 125 acres on the northeast side of Green Mountain (a site where the threat of earth slide dangers had caused a zoning moratorium), 5 acres at 26<sup>th</sup> & Urban Street, 250 acres for the proposed Bear Creek Regional Park (mostly located in a flood plain), and "over 100 acres for a central community park".

The Lakewood City Council July 31<sup>st</sup> meeting was principally dedicated to a public discussion of the relative merits of the Belmar vs. Addenbrooke properties for a large central park. The Sentinel reported that the meeting turned out to be "*a muted, low key public hearing,*" speculating that proponents for Belmar had "*made an apparent change in strategy.*"

Caroline Lege spoke for the combined citizen groups, telling Council "*You have studied the reports and appraisals ... you know what you want. You also know what we would like.*" She outlined legitimate ways the city could purchase all or most of both potential park sites.



The Sentinel reported that she went on to say *"What this means is that you (Council) can think big. Look down the road 50 years hence and consider making a magnificent gesture."* She concluded by announcing, *"We officially ask you to buy a portion of Addenbrooke and the most desirable, large portion of Belmar that you can collectively agree upon."* Another meeting was set for August 15.

A few days later the Sentinel, under the heading **"A way for the will"**, editorialized *"Belmar, no doubt, will be somewhat more expensive than the Addenbrooke parcel, but we feel this is the last chance the city has to obtain such ground. Council should concentrate on finding a way – if there's a will. We hope there is."*



*Editorial cartoon in the August 3, 1972 Lakewood Sentinel*

During late August City Council was to consider the rezoning request from Hallcraft Homes on 127 of the Belmar acres. In a surprise move, an attorney for Hallcraft showed up at the meeting and requested postponement. Knowing the continuing support for a large park on the land, Hallcraft's Attorney Richard Plock reportedly told Council *"his client preferred to have its application heard on its 'merits,' and not as part of a larger issue."*

Plock told Council that *"Hallcraft officials looked upon the City Planning Commission's earlier unfavorable recommendation on the rezoning 'as a reflection of the controversy surrounding this land'."*

He asked that the public hearing and decision be tabled until after questions have been resolved about the city acquiring some or all of that land for a park. City Council happily voted 8 to 0 to postpone the hearing until February 26, 1973. At the same meeting Council approved the final plat on the Craddock 10 acres, enabling the developer to begin construction on what he had begun calling Irongate Executive Plaza.

In early November Lakewood City Council informally set January 30, 1973 for a special municipal election on (a) a zoning referendum (dealing with 15 acres at 20<sup>th</sup> and Wadsworth... a question that got postponed before the election was held) and (b) possibly a Belmar park land acquisition question and bond proposal. It planned to formalize the election at its November 13 meeting.

## Round Two Gets Underway –

On October 23, 1972 a new citizen drive was launched to acquire Belmar land for a park. This time the three earlier citizen groups (Lakewood Open Space Development Committee, Lakewood Parks Committee, and Lakewood Individuals for Environment) decided to join forces under a new combined effort.

Citizens for a Better Lakewood (CBL) was born... billing itself as *"a citizens' action group to work on behalf of various community betterment projects and to endeavor to motivate Lakewood citizens toward responsible participation in local governmental affairs."* The group agreed that its first project would be to seek a large portion of the Belmar Estate for a Lakewood park.

The group which ultimately had 230 members elected an 11-member board, selected Stuart MacPhail as its chairman, and agreed to formally incorporate *"to assure a responsible accountability for all of the group's actions."*

MacPhail reported that he had met with Mayor Jim Richey and communicated to him that while City Council had not resolved its position on Belmar, *"a large number of Lakewood citizens still wish to work on a positive drive to save a major portion of Belmar for the good of Lakewood's future."*

He reportedly told the mayor that *"after a year of continued effort to acquire the Belmar land, we have agreed to unite to bring the Belmar question to a successful conclusion."* The conversation was a week after City Council had tentatively set January 30 as the date for a possible Belmar vote, so he reportedly told the mayor *"The nature of our drive will depend upon the way Lakewood's elected leaders handle the promised election on the Belmar question. We feel the question about acquiring Belmar be put to the voters without any unnecessary provisions which may tend to distort the question."*

A week later, in late October, Lakewood City Council members dithered and delayed again. In their study session they were scheduled to determine the questions they would put before voters on January 30. They could not decide if they should simply ask

voters "an advisory question" (non-binding) about purchasing some portion of the Belmar land, and a second question geared to passing another \$2 million bond issue for parks (not necessarily tied to Belmar).

City Attorney Johnson told members of Council that the two-question method would give electors the chance to approve both the acquisition of Belmar and the money to accomplish it "or to reject the Belmar site but okay the bonds for financing other parks." Johnson's advice did not dwell on the fact that his proposal only gave voters an opportunity to express an opinion on Belmar, not direct them to purchase Belmar land.

As the Sentinel reported a few days later, "Representatives of CBL, who sat through the lengthy study session to hear Council's decision on the election, only to be met by another delay, threatened this week to put 'a clean non-prejudiced question' before the voters, through use of the now well-tested petition process."

One CBL member reported that the group had already retained the services of an attorney, and was contemplating the preparation of a petition so they could be ready "if Council does not soon resolve to give voters a fair chance to express their aspirations for Belmar Park."

Another CBL member reportedly said, "We of CBL would prefer to work in cooperation with City Council, but cooperation must be a two-way proposition. Our members are wondering if City Council really wishes to work together with Lakewood citizens... or if City Council prefers the conflict that inevitably develops when citizens are forced into petition drives."

A week after the above referenced study session, City Council unanimously passed a resolution following the City Attorney's two-question recommendation, simply asking voters an "advisory question" about the acquisition of 127 acres of the Belmar property for a park, and posing a \$2 million bond question that permits the city to use the bond revenue for "purchasing lands for public parks and the improvement of public park lands." The question included no restriction that the bond revenue be used for Belmar.

At that meeting City Attorney Johnson announced the dismissal of four Belmar-related legal actions. Three were dismissed at the request of park supporters as "an apparent outgrowth of recent conciliatory efforts between Council and park supporters" reported the Sentinel. The fourth case, filed by developer Barry Craddock against three of the park supporters, was dropped because of dismissal of one of the park supported actions (opposing Craddock's 10-acre rezoning).

In late October CBL leaders met to consider their options in view of the wording that Council decided to use on the January 30 election questions. There was a lot of discomfort expressed about the advisory-only Belmar question and the fact that Council had refused to commit the funds from the \$2 million bond question to Belmar acquisition.

In the end the CBL group decided to NOT launch another petition drive, but to work vigorously for passage of both questions. They believed that if both questions passed by a good margin, Lakewood City Council would be strongly pressured to purchase 127 acres of Belmar for a park, and use the \$2 million bond revenues for that purpose.

Unspoken was an on-going citizen commitment to take further steps if Council failed to honor voters' wishes. CBL announced its intention to support both of the January 30 questions. They began an all-out campaign to inform Lakewood voters about the upcoming election and the two questions that must be approved together.

In early November the once-famous 114-year-old pioneer cabin of Count and Countess Murat that May Bonfils had moved onto her estate (at the west end of the lake) was removed from the property.

**NOTE: By this point the Belmar Mansion had been stripped of its valuable features... the marble-like structure had been crushed and carried away... the most park-like 10 acres had been sold-off, had its zoning up-graded, and office park construction was beginning... the water rights for the lake had been sold... the former Kountze Lake was little more than a dried up mud hole... several trees on the site had been cut down... and the last historical feature (the Murat cabin) had been removed. Stanton and his associates had done all they could to make the former Belmar Estate as undesirable as possible for a park. Yet the citizen park-backers carried on.**

On January 18, less than two weeks before the January 30 election, the Lakewood Sentinel clarified the questions in the upcoming Belmar election. They reported, "A two-part question will be on the ballot. The first is advisory only: shall the city of Lakewood acquire for public park purposes 127 acres of land lying south of Alameda Avenue and west of So. Wadsworth Blvd. The second asks if the city shall issue up to \$2 million worth of general obligation bonds for purposes of purchasing and improving public parks."

The Jefferson County League of Women Voters (JCLWV) said it is "not opposing purchase of the property, (but) it feels Belmar will be expensive and the money needed 'is simply not just sitting there waiting to be spent'."

In this edition the Sentinel gave JCLWV an opportunity to report their "Pro and Con" positions on Belmar. Most of their "Con" reasons had to do with taxes and water... too much tax money to purchase Belmar land and lost revenues if the land were taken off the city's tax rolls... and large quantities of water that they said would be needed to rejuvenate the lake and maintain surrounding land as a park.

They quoted one source that said 100 million gallons of water would be needed annually, and that would take 9 wells at \$30,000 to \$35,000 each. For reference, in 2019 the park and Kountze Lake are being maintained with some ditch water and two wells.

On the "Pros" side the JCLWV statement listed some very good reasons to acquire Belmar as a park. They said:

- "We need to preserve open space in Lakewood. Land suitable for the parks is fast disappearing and the prices are rising ... In 1899, Denver could have purchased City Park for \$50,000. In 1924 they paid \$2 million for the same 320 acres. Phelps-Brauer, a consulting firm to Lakewood on park acquisition, recommends the purchase of Belmar.
- "High density residential development would be costly. Economic studies have shown that any residential development costs a city more than it gains, as service costs are greater than property tax benefits.
- "Projected population figures for residential development on Belmar indicate an elementary school would be needed, at a cost to taxpayers of about \$1 million. Belmar could be quickly prepared as a park, with development coming along as money is available. The former lake could be filled (as storage rights are still owned)....
- "The property includes a wide variety of mature trees, which would take years to reproduce on other property. The trees enhance a park site by offering shade, lessening erosion and providing a natural habitat for wildlife.
- "The Belmar land is perfect for a central park because of its location and features, such as rolling terrain, wooded lands, gulch and former lake."

In the weeks leading up to the election some unnamed person or persons spent a lot of money on a radio/TV/newspaper ad campaign against the Belmar question. Even after the election the person named as the chairman of that campaign refused to release the names of those who funded it.

Five days before the January 30 Belmar vote the Lakewood Sentinel dedicated several pages to the upcoming election.

Days before the vote on Belmar Park, Lynn Ashton, vice president and general manager for Hallcraft Homes was interviewed by the Sentinel. They reported that Ashton, whose firm wanted to build 1,200 (some estimates said up to 1,785) multi-family units, said *"if the Belmar vote is favorable and Council proceeds to purchase the land, I am sure there will be quite a debate over what the city has to pay."* This was the interview in which Ashton said *"it would seem fairly obvious' that costs have gone up considerably since the last appraisal and since the city issued a building permit to Craddock for an office park."*

That edition of the Sentinel also reported (about the proposed \$2 million bond proposal): *"City officials have stated the bonds will not increase taxes but, instead, will be paid*

*from the city's half-cent sales tax increase, which went into effect last May when voters approved a \$3 million parks bond issue."*

A rough draft of a master parks plan for the city was delivered to City Council this same week. The plan, developed by Phelps-Brauer Associates, a consulting firm, said *"the Belmar site (100 acres) has such potential because of its natural amenities and could include such features as a children's farm, zoo, sledding and tubing, ice arena, concession stand, court games and renovation of Kountze Lake."*

This last edition of the Sentinel before the election concluded with several Letters to the Editor about Belmar, and an editorial headlined **"We believe Belmar should be 'saved'."** Among other things, the editorial said *"While hindsight is always better than foresight, saving Belmar and other open space, for that matter, is long overdue. But it is still not too late. Vote on Belmar and the bonds."*

## **Belmar Purchase & Bond Issue – A 2 to 1 Citizen Victory**

Election night, January 30, 1973, enabled Lakewood citizens to cheer, even as many of Lakewood's elite moaned. Citizens of Colorado's third largest city had spoken loud and clear. The Belmar Park and bond questions passed in 19 of the city's 25 polling precincts. The total vote favored both questions by better than a 2 to 1 margin.

The next week's Sentinel reported that Lakewood City Hall was dead on election night. Only three Council members showed up: Galt McClurg, Bill Wilson and Betty Miller. The Sentinel noted that *"While the Belmar vote was only advisory for City Council, Councilwoman Miller said 'My book is we buy it'."* Councilman McClurg was quoted as saying *"It's pretty darn clear – let's go!"*

Five days after the election the Sentinel reported Lakewood officials *"will begin immediate negotiations to purchase 127 acres of the Belmar Estate"*. At that point Stanton was still the owner of the land in question, but it was subject to an option held by Hallcraft Homes. It took Council until October to conclude those "immediate" negotiations.

Meanwhile that February City Council postponed the 127-acre Hallcraft rezoning request until April 23. At a follow-up meeting Lynn Ashton of Hallcraft notified the city it may withdraw its zoning application. On March 23 the Sentinel reported that the application was being withdrawn. During July Hallcraft Homes exercised its option to purchase 114 of acres from Stanton (Hallcraft reportedly already owned 13 of the acres involved).

On August 9 Council entertained a motion to finally purchase the park land. On September 10 City Council formally agreed to purchase 126.7 acres of the Belmar Estate for \$2.4 million with actual acquisition slated for early October. But, Stanton had imposed covenants on the property that Council members were not comfortable with.

That night leaders of the Belmar Development Task Force, a committee of CBL, presented Council with a list of park development suggestions. The statement asked that the proposed park consist mainly of natural areas and open space, to include picnic areas, a small playground, hiking and bike paths, a lake and a bird sanctuary.

One of CBL's leaders, task force chairman Norma Beard, told Council that City Parks Superintendent Gary McDonnell had attended all of the group's meetings to assist in developing all of their proposals.

The September 13 Sentinel reported that Council had formally agreed to purchase the 126.7 acres from Hallcraft Homes. Mayor Jim Richey announced that the city was in the process of selecting a firm to assist in planning future development of the Belmar property.

Then at a meeting on September 24 City Council unexpectedly tabled the acquisition "indefinitely". Negotiations with Charles Stanton about eliminating eight restrictive covenants on the lands had "reached an impasse". Council announced that it was going to start condemnation proceedings so they could obtain the land free of the Stanton-imposed covenants.

Councilman Galt McClurg said *"It seems to me that Mr. Stanton has put every roadblock possible in the way of the city acquiring the Belmar land as a park."* (He had!) McClurg went on *"I don't understand why he can't sit down and be reasonable."*

Then the October 11 Sentinel reported that City Council had agreed to complete the Belmar land purchase at the \$2.4 million price, with seven of the restrictive covenants (slightly modified) still in place.

## **The Political Fallout –**

Nine months after voters had their say on Belmar, there was another election. This time it dealt with whether or not to retain the mayor and ten members of Lakewood's City Council. Three Council members declined to run for reelection.

Only 4 of the 7 incumbent City Council members who sought reelection were retained. One of those defeated incumbents was Councilman Mel Flowers who had famously said about Kountze Lake, *"let the lake dry up"*. Only two of those reelected (Betty Miller and Charles Whitlock) were among the original Council elected when Lakewood was first incorporated in 1969.

Four of the citizens who had been active in the Belmar Park drive (Carolyn Bacher, Paul Thompson, Gaylor Smith, and Sharon Carr) were elected to City Council. In 1979 three more CBL leaders and park backers (Norma Beard, Linda Shaw and Dorothy

Wisecarver) were elected to Council. Ms. Bacher served 8 years on Council. In 1983 Ms. Shaw went on to become Lakewood's fourth mayor, serving 8 years.

Ms. Beard headed a new citizens' group that focused on developing Ms. Bonfils' old Belmar Farm into a museum and historical area (1976). Earlier known as Lakewood's Historical Belmar Village, that Weir Gulch portion of Belmar Park, is now known as the Lakewood Heritage Center. It has blossomed into a popular museum (with some 40,000 artifacts and over a dozen historic structures), a festival area, and family outing area.

Two years after the Belmar property was acquired, the former lake was still a dried up mud hole and the grounds were increasingly littered with debris. Weir Gulch was being used as a dump. The August 7 and 14, 1975 editions of the Sentinel carried front page stories about the land being a "wasteland in the heart of Lakewood". It announced a "Citizen's Day" to get Lakewood residents organized to start cleaning up "the forgotten park"... "to help make Belmar a useable park".

The Belmar Civic Association, and several businesses were listed as having joined the Sentinel as co-sponsors of the event. The following week the Sentinel reported that some 300 folks turned out for "Citizens Day". The Green Mountain McDonalds even provided 50 gallons of orange drink and 350 hamburgers for the volunteer workers

The Belmar land continued to stand undeveloped for several years after it was finally acquired for a park. Actual park development started in 1982. In an essay by Anita Harkess entitled "**Belmar Park - Where the Sidewalk Ends**" she reminisced about her frequent adventures as a young girl into the undeveloped "expanse of knee-high grass and black-eyed Susans" ... "a magical place: one with hills and trails, and the most perfect lake in the world for skipping rocks."

Having grown older, Ms. Harkess wrote that the spirit that Belmar Park "calls Coloradans to walk the paved concrete trails that snake across it. Belmar Park is steeped in the spirit of sanctuary. Those who walk there, or bicycle, or simply sit staring into man-made Kountze Lake, seek to lose track of the



The adjacent artwork, capturing a couple of the typical shelters/gazebos that have been installed at Belmar Park for bird watchers, and the one on page 27 in this book were acquired from the 20th Century Emporium in the Visitors Center at the Lakewood Heritage Center.

The artist's name is Peter Robinson



*stressful, workaday world, immersing themselves in the park's calm and security."*

Over the years, through a series of small land acquisitions, 5.5 acres were added to the park, giving it a total current size of 132 acres. Kountze Lake was finally restored to its current 15-acre size (less than half the size of when the campaign to save Belmar began).

## **Belmar Park Today –**

Much to the credit of those early Belmar Park citizen supporters, city leaders began to recognize the need to acquire and develop increasing acreage for Lakewood's open space and parks. When the City of Lakewood was founded it had only 10 parks within its boundaries... on a total of about 80 acres of land. The Foothills Park & Recreation District already existed at that time (now part of the Lakewood parks/open space system) with an additional 11 park sites on an additional 170 acres of land.

The Belmar Park effort was a key stimulant to Lakewood's hiring of Phelps-Brauer, a landscape, architectural and site planning firm in 1972. After a six-month study, one of the firm's recommendations was to increase park acreage from 3 acres per 1,000 population to 20.8 acres per 1,000 population.

When Gary McDonnell (the city's first parks director) retired in 1993, the city had 75 parks on 6,500 acres. As of early 2019, Ross Williams, Lakewood's Facilities Planner, reports that the city now owns 7,240 acres of parks and open space... 45.8 acres per 1,000 population.

The Belmar Park of today has become as envisioned back in 1973, a park featuring natural areas and open space, including picnic areas, a small playground, hiking/jogging/biking trails and bridle paths, with a small year-round flowing stream (in Weir Gulch), a lake and a bird sanctuary. In a nut shell, Belmar Park has become the large natural oasis and place for serene contemplation in the middle of Lakewood... a park that supporters of the late 1960s and early 1970s had hoped for... mostly open space.

There is lots of natural wildlife on the grounds of Belmar Park, including coyotes, raccoons, foxes, skunks, rabbits, squirrels, chipmunks, beaver, muskrats, and an occasional mountain lion. The park and the restored Kountze Lake are once again home to great blue heron, ringbilled gulls, ducks, Canadian geese, and scores of other bird species. Even annual migrations of white pelicans.

The Lakewood Heritage Center at the SE corner of Belmar Park, with an official address of 801 South Yarrow Street, opened August 1, 1976, on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Colorado's statehood. The original plans for that area called for inclusion of an interpretation of structures typical of the greater Lakewood area from 1859 through World War II. That mission was later modified to include saved structures typical of

those from 1900 to 2000. That mission is being fulfilled. As they became available, historically significant structures have been moved to the site and are open to the public.

As a side note, Lakewood did go on to purchase the Addenbrooke property for a park too. In 1978 97 acres of the land between Garrison and Kipling were purchased for \$914,000. An additional five acres of the Addenbrooke property, including the Addenbrooke home, was purchased in 1987. Addenbrooke Park is a more traditional park than Belmar with manicured turf, playing fields and multiple picnic areas.

According to Jefferson County records, on December 28, 1979 Charles Stanton donated about 14 acres adjacent to the north edge of Belmar Park to the City of Lakewood for a municipal center. Until that point, Lakewood officials had planned to build the municipal complex at an already-acquired Union Blvd. and West Second Place 28-acre site.

This is how a May 31, 1979 Sentinel article described the transaction: *"in a dramatic display of financial one-upmanship Tuesday, millionaire land owner Charles E. Stanton raised the ante one last time in the four-month 'poker game' being played out to determine the future site of the Lakewood city hall building."*

Stanton's donation (partially driven by tax considerations) took place during a citizen-led controversy over a prior zoning decision that dealt with his adjacent land, then referred to as the proposed multi-million dollar Belmar Plaza. That controversy involved citizens vs. city legal battles that went all the way to the Colorado Supreme Court, and extended into the late 1990s.

In 1982 The City began construction of its \$6 million municipal complex (Lakewood City Commons) that includes city courts, police headquarters, a cultural/arts center and a library. The complex formally opened in August 1984.

**NOTE: The original city hall built on this site (which in 2019 houses the police department and municipal courts) had been designed for a Union Blvd. site where the city had earlier intended to build its municipal complex. Its large glass face/entry was intended to look east toward Denver. When adapted for the site adjacent to Belmar Park the building was oriented to overlook the park. Unfortunately, that put the building's primary entrance at what was designed to be the back of the building.**

## Winter in Belmar Park



Photo courtesy of Lakewood Heritage Center,  
Lakewood, CO.

Belmar Park features 3.2 miles of concrete pedestrian/bike trails (and more gravel paths). There are also 1.6 miles of equestrian/bridle trails in the park. The walk around the perimeter of Kountze Lake is about 1.4 miles.

**All Trails**, a national web site that plots out hiking trails across the US, describes Belmar Park as having a *“moderately trafficked loop trail ... that offers scenic views and is good for all skill levels.”* One of the site’s users reported *“The lake is beautiful with lots of birds and great views as you walk around. Great for the family.”*

The **Go Hike Colorado** web site says *“Belmar Park offers a fantastic natural oasis in the middle of suburban Lakewood that is great for kids and adults alike. ... The trails around the lake provide for a peaceful nature walk with numerous boardwalks and viewpoints.”*

The web site for **Spinlister**, a national bike rental and sharing service, says *“There may be no more bike-friendly acreage in Lakewood than Belmar Park. Over four miles of both paved and gravel trails are interwoven within its borders, allowing cyclists to freely explore all the attractions the park has to offer. Chief among these is the beautiful Kountze Lake, with its asymmetrical appendages protruding from a diminutive center island.”*

## Typical Activities at the Lakewood Heritage Center That Enhance Community Life in Lakewood

**Spring...** Earth Day event, enjoying the sustainable garden, Rockin’ Block Party.

**Summer...** Sounds Exciting! Summer Concerts, picnics near the Amphitheater.

**Fall/Winter...** Cider Days event, visiting Santa at the Lakewood Lights event.

**Year around...** Walking/biking around the park, guided tours of the historic buildings, classes for adults and children, exhibition openings at the museum galleries and store.

**For specific dates/times of Heritage Center activities, call 303-987-7850.**