

# Memorial Park: Nature's 24 Hour Fitness

By Natalie Garza

## Running the Seymour Lieberman Exercise Trail

The first time I ever ran more than half a mile was during my freshman year at Dartmouth College when it seemed that half the campus was trying out for crew. I never made the team, but one of the things I took away from those weeks of training was a love of running. During one work-out session, the coach told us to do several sets of push-ups and run a three mile trail. It sounded torturous that someone would voluntarily run that distance. Being from Texas, I was not prepared for the difficulty of running the hills of New Hampshire or the effect of the cool weather on my lungs, so I lagged behind during that first run and probably walked about half of it. For the remainder of my four years, I regularly ran that same route along Rip Road, leaving me with some of my best memories.

Since then my preference has been to run outdoor trails. Admittedly I am not the most dedicated runner, often going months at a time without putting on my running shoes; but when I moved to Houston, I quickly looked for trails to run. Something about going out on a run just made me feel settled in and connected to this place that was my new home. Houston is a great city for outdoor running with its many trails, and Memorial Park is easily the most popular place to run in Houston. The Seymour Lieberman Exercise Trail is just under three miles and named after a Houstonian who became one of the first regular runners at Memorial Park when the loop around the golf course consisted of nothing more than a grass path. In 1949, Lieberman founded the Junior Olympics, and in the 1950s and 1960s, he wrote articles and books promoting jogging and its health benefits. The park dedicated the trail to Lieberman in 1978, at the same time that the city replaced the worn out grass path with pine bark and mulch. In the 1980s, the trail received additional updates, including lights, a stretching area, water fountains, and a more durable crushed granite surface that dries quickly after a rain.<sup>1</sup>

*Enjoying a run on the Seymour Lieberman Exercise Trail. The many trees along the trail provide for a serene running environment but also serve as shade during Houston's hot summer days.*

All photos courtesy of Houston Parks and Recreation Department.



*With the Williams Tower as the backdrop, golfers have a beautiful view from a tee at the updated Memorial Park Golf Course.*

In her brief history of Memorial Park, Sarah H. Emmott refers to the Seymour Lieberman trail as a place to see and be seen. On any given day, you can find running groups, parents with their jogging strollers, and hundreds of individual runners along the loop. What I like about the crowd running at Memorial Park is that they keep me motivated on days when it is difficult to place one foot in front of the other. Memorial Park is also a place that I enjoy sharing with others. During one of the first visits my parents and sister made to Houston, I convinced them to walk the Seymour Lieberman trail with me. When I got my first dog in Houston, I frequently took her on runs, and equipped with a jogging stroller, my three year-old son and I have shared many runs in the park. There are so many great things about the parks in Houston, which this issue of *Houston History* highlights. Memorial Park represents the variety of recreational activities enjoyed in the city's parks and some of the best amenities that our parks system offers.

## History of the Park

Memorial Park sits on the former site of a World War I training camp called Camp Logan. During construction in 1917, the 3rd Battalion of the 24th U.S. Infantry, an all-black unit of soldiers from Illinois, was sent to guard the camp. On August 23, 1917, a group of these soldiers armed themselves and went out into the streets of Houston in response to the discriminatory treatment that they faced and the abuse of their fellow soldiers by police. Violence erupted with white citizens and black soldiers being killed. In the aftermath, the largest court martial in history took place, with over 110 indictments of black soldiers, nineteen were executed and sixty-three received life sentences in federal prison. No white officers or civilians faced punishment. Another regiment of black soldiers was brought in to replace the 3rd

## Memorial Park by the Numbers<sup>8</sup>

- 10,000 runners use the Seymour Lieberman Exercise Trail daily.
- 65,000 rounds of golf are played annually.
- 42,000 tennis court reservations are made yearly.
- 20 miles of trails, 4 sand volleyball courts, 5 softball fields, 1 baseball field, 2 rugby/soccer fields, and 1 croquet court.
- 72nd largest city park in the U.S., beating Central Park in New York City.

battalion and they were allowed to move onto the camp grounds along with the 33rd division of white soldiers there for training. While stationed in Houston, the soldiers of the 33rd maintained a prominent presence in the community as Houstonians welcomed them into their homes and provided them with transportation. The division fought in France during the war where thousands were wounded or lost their lives. The camp closed in 1919, after the war, but the hospital remained open to treat wounded soldiers under the direction of the Public Health Service. In 1923, the hospital also closed, leaving the camp deserted.

The idea to turn the camp into a park was hatched in the pages of the *Houston Chronicle* during the summer the hospital closed. Columnist Ilona B. Benda wrote a tribute to the soldiers of Camp Logan that prompted Catherine Mary Emmott to write a letter to the newspaper suggesting that the city purchase a portion of the land and turn it into a park "in memory of the boys." The *Chronicle* published Emmott's letter, and her suggestion led to a meeting for the park.<sup>2</sup>



*Memorial Park's Vale-Asche Foundation Playground is ninety percent accessible for children with mobility issues. It represents the first play area in Houston Parks and Recreation Department's Playgrounds Without Limits Campaign to create playgrounds that surpass ADA requirements and give children of all abilities the opportunity to join in the fun.*

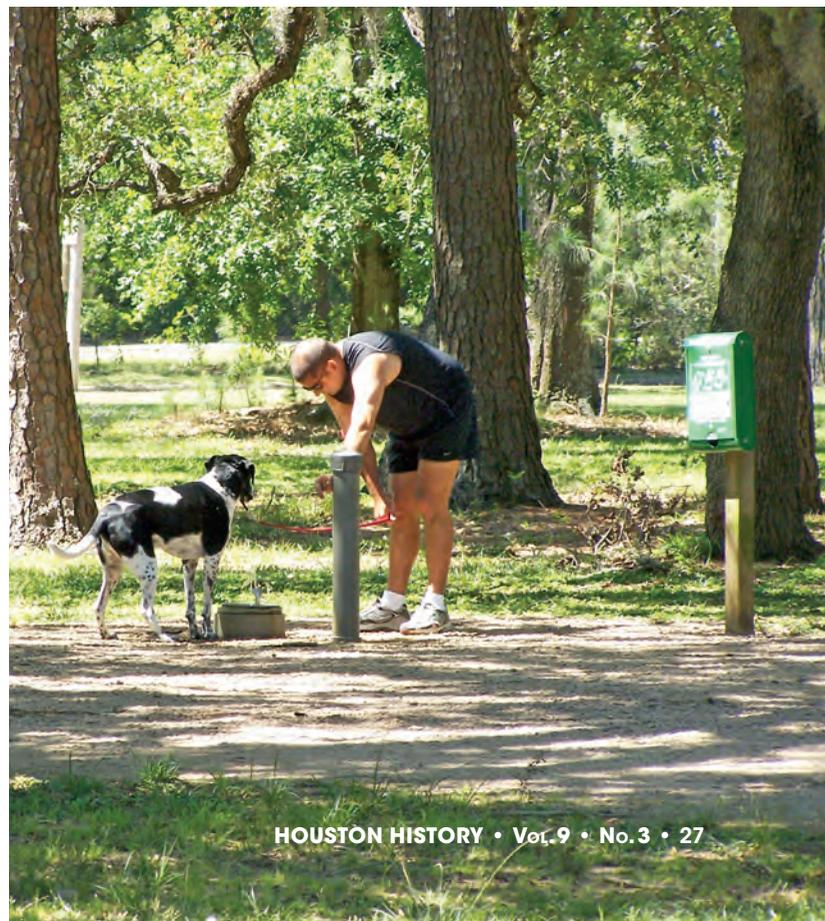
Memorial Park became a reality after the Hogg family bought some of the land and sold it to the city at cost with a stipulation in the deed that it serve as a park, otherwise ownership of the land would return to the Hogg family. The city took over 1,503 acres of land in 1924 and added another 8.84 acres in January 1942, from Mr. and Mrs. H. C. Wiess. At the time of its founding, some Houstonians thought Memorial Park was unnecessary because the city already had so much accessible land for public use.<sup>3</sup> Now it is one of the most treasured parks in Houston. The Memorial Park Conservancy estimates that the park has four million visitors a year, including 10,000 runners daily. Other popular activities include baseball and softball with six fields available for public use, tennis with 42,000 tennis court reservations made annually, hiking and biking over the twenty miles of trails, weight training in the fitness center, swimming, volleyball, rugby, soccer, croquet, and children's playgrounds.<sup>4</sup>

The golf course and arboretum are two other popular destinations for recreation at Memorial Park. Previously a nine-hole course, the contemporary eighteen-hole golf course at Memorial Park opened in the summer of 1936. Golf course architect John Bredemus designed the course and called it, "my greatest golf course ever."<sup>5</sup> It has a history of hosting various tournaments with professional and celebrity golfers. In the early 1990s, a campaign to restore the golf course arose after it had been neglected for several years, but controversy ensued over privatization. The course, which received an upgrade in 1994, remains under

the city's control. Patrons play an estimated 65,000 rounds of golf there every year.

Although it is a separate entity, the arboretum is a 155-acre "urban nature sanctuary" with five miles of trails located at the edge of Memorial Park. In addition to providing a retreat from the city, the arboretum has a twofold goal of preserving native plants and animals, as well as educating children about nature. Ecologist and educator Robert A. Vines introduced the idea to develop an arboretum in

*The Seymour Lieberman Exercise Trail is friendly to canine exercise enthusiasts. Here a jogger takes a water break at one of the water fountains along the trail where there is a permanent water station for dogs as well as humans, and bags available to pick-up after your dog.*





*Evidence of the 2011 drought is quite drastic in Memorial Park where many trees lay fallen or visibly dried-up. The Memorial Park Conservancy is part of Re-Plant Houston, a multi-year reforestation campaign coordinated by the Houston Parks and Recreation Department. The campaign planted 25,000 trees throughout Houston. Here a group of new trees were planted opposite older trees in the park.*

1950, but the money was not budgeted for the project until 1964. The arboretum has received many generous donations over the years to restore the grounds and develop a nature center building, discovery room exhibits, and most recently, a raised walkway for bird watching. Approximately 200,000 visitors enjoy the arboretum annually.<sup>6</sup>

### Future of Memorial Park

As they look to the future, conservationists continue their vigilance of Memorial Park, ensuring that its evolution is respectful of the natural surroundings while catering to its multiple public uses. Together, the City of Houston, the Memorial Park Conservancy, and the Houston Parks Board Inc., developed a Master Plan project for Memorial Park under increasing pressure for new park facilities. For example, in 2009, workers completed construction of the Living Bridge over Memorial Drive connecting the north and south sides of Memorial Park. It enables pedestrians and cyclists to access both sides of the park without having to compete with traffic on Memorial Drive, while offering a visually pleasing natural environment.

The bridge represented just one part of a \$10 million dollar capital campaign spearheaded by the Memorial Park Conservancy to add multiple new amenities to the park.<sup>7</sup>

The campaign includes a now-completed tennis center plaza, a running trails center in the design phase to include locker rooms located south of the living bridge, and an outer trail on the opposite side of Memorial Loop East to serve as an alternative to the trail along Memorial Drive. Other aspects of the Master Plan project involve improving all of the trails, and a forestry plan currently focused on the clearing of dead brush as a result of the 2011 drought. The most urgent project scheduled for the fall of 2012 is the conservancy's planting of thousands of new seedlings.

Memorial Park remains one of the largest urban parks in the United States thanks to the foresight of those who proposed its establishment and fought for its preservation over the years. As a space for outdoor recreation, Memorial Park remains one of my favorite places to run and picnic, and more recently for playground visits. A couple of years ago, I started running longer distances in preparation for a half marathon, and I always figured out a route that would take me through a trail in Memorial Park. There's still something about those runs that makes me feel at home.

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