

MINNESOTA HISTORY/ARCHITECTURE INVENTORY FORM

Project: CSAH 81 Hennepin ROBBINSDALE, Hennepin County, Minnesota

Identification				
Historic Name	Graeser Park			
Current Name	Graeser Park			
Field #	Segment 2 - 408			
Address	CSAH 81 and TH 100			
City/Twp	ROBBINSDALE			
County	Hennepin			
Legal Desc.	Twp	Range	Sec	QQ
USGS Quad				
UTM Zone	Datum			
	Easting	Northing		
Property ID (PIN)				

SHPO Inventory Number	HE-RBC-025
Review and Compliance Number	
Form (New or Updated)	Updated

Description	
Resource Type	Park
Architect/Engineer	Arthur R. Nichols
Style	Rustic
Construction Date	1939
Original Use	Roadside Area
Current Use	Roadside Area

Description

Graeser Park is located in a moderately sloping land surface and lowland. Geological testing indicated that sand from Twin Lakes shoreline and old TH 52 (CSAH 81) roadbed material were placed over the lowland to create the landscape seen today. This natural landscape was altered gently in order to create the park.

Graeser Park is the largest and most intact of the original wayside parks that contributed to the scenic quality of Lilac Way (TH 100). It is situated on the north side of TH 100, at the intersection with CSAH 81. West Broadway Avenue runs along the southwestern boundary, and Lakeland Avenue (CSAH 81) forms the eastern border. Reflecting the naturalistic landscaping and rustic architecture that characterized the WPA parks and rests stops, Graeser Park consists of well crafted limestone picnic tables, benches, walls, fireplaces, a view station, rock garden, and other structures buffered from the surrounding roadways by grassy areas, mature evergreen and deciduous trees and shrubs. The structures and a great majority of the plantings are primarily clustered at the west and southwest sides of the present grounds. As originally planned. The park constituted approximately six acres, with the clustering of structures and vegetation allowing space to the east for the construction of a cloverleaf grade separation at the TH 100/TH52 (CSAH 81) intersection (MDH, RDP, SP 2735-03:1941). The cloverleaf was never built, however, and instead a simpler turn ramp was constructed. When in 1984, this ramp was realigned, the area of grassy space to the northeast of the original park was increased.

Graeser Park today clearly reflects the original design. A 1988 academic study concerning the restoration and adaptive reuse of the facility revealed that the grounds were essentially intact, though suffering from neglect (Dombrowsky 1988). Although the rock garden, distinguished by elaborate stonework and fountains is overgrown, the structures retain their basic integrity of design and materials. Other key features, including the limestone view station and adjoining retaining walls, beehive oven, and the assortment of stone tables and benches, remain intact and in place (the majority of these structures, however, are in need of repair). The surrounding vegetation also reflects the original planting scheme. While elm trees have been lost to Dutch Elm disease and replaced by other species not included in the original plan, numerous original evergreen trees and deciduous trees and shrubs exist (Dombrowsky 1988). Several features, including the rock garden waterfall and refuse containers no longer exist. A concrete post and wood plank sound wall that was completed in 2006 now separates the park from site from TH 100.

Related Outbuildings

Integrity

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The reconstruction of TH 100 has resulted in numerous alterations to the park and its setting. As of 2006, the original design is still evident and the northern and western sections of the park retain a relatively high degree of historic integrity. The overall integrity of the park however, has been significantly compromised by the TH 100 reconstruction project. As a result of the TH 100 reconstruction, the park has lost its physical connection to Lilac Way, which was a fundamental key to the significance and function of the park. Several contributing features of the park, including the rock garden, waterfall and refuse containers, were lost. A concrete post and wood plank sound wall was erected along TH 100 and obscures the historic views towards the highway. The overall disruption of the historic setting as a result of the TH100 reconstruction and the loss of several contributing features has significantly compromised the overall integrity of the park.

EVALUATION AND ANALYSIS

Historical Context

residential district

Historical Narrative

Graeser Park, located at the intersection of TH 100 and CSAH 81 (TH 52), was dedicated in 1939. The park was the largest and most elaborate of the three waysides along Lilac Way (TH 100) and rapidly became not only a popular rest stop for motorists but a focal point for the Robbinsdale community. Graeser Park was a favorite place for family outings and church and school picnics (Williams 1988; Dombrowsky 1988). The rustic design, which survives largely intact, included a rock waterfall and limestone pool surrounded by benches, a beehive barbeque, rock garden, fireplace, picnic tables, a semi-circular patio, refuse containers, concourse, walkway, and two stairways (Williams 1988). These features were sited amidst clusters of evergreens, deciduous trees, and shrubbery, particularly lilacs (Dombrowsky 1988; MDH, RDP, SP 2735-03:1941).

Significance and Recommendations

Graeser Park reflects the design concepts of Arthur R. Nichols. During the 1930s and 1940s, Nichols was employed as a consultant for Minnesota Highway Department, and worked on numerous projects throughout the state. In both his work and his writings of this period, he emphasized the need to integrate the existing topography and native vegetation with utilitarian engineering objectives. While his ideas reflected the current thinking in the profession, nationally expressed in the parks and parkways of the New Deal, Nichols was among the foremost practitioners and proponents of incorporating scenic values into practical highway design.

Graeser Park represents the work of the state's WPA craftsmen, who often used native stone to fashion park buildings and other structures. Thus the park expresses environmentally sensitive, naturalistic designs that are highlighted by indigenous vegetation and rustic limestone architecture. Graeser Park was dedicated in 1939. The park was the largest and most elaborate of the waysides along TH 100. The park rapidly became not only a popular rest stop for motorists but a focal point for the Robbinsdale community. Graeser Park was a favorite place for family outings and church and school picnics (Williams 1988; Dombrowsky 1988).

Graeser Park is a contributing element to the Lilac Way Historic District. The proposed three-mile Lilac Way Historic District is the most intact portion of the original western segment of TH 100. The segment of TH 100 between Bridge Number 5399 and CSAH 100 encompasses the greatest concentration of man-made and natural topographic elements historically associated with the design of this scenic highway. The construction of four-lane TH 100, the western portion of the belt line highway around the Twin Cities, was a major solution to the city's growing traffic congestion in the 1930s, and encouraged economic development. Outstanding for its beautification plan, the route highlighted the native lilac bushes. Lilac Way, as it was proudly called, was considered the most picturesque public highway in the state. Moreover, the road construction was one of the major federal relief

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projects in the state, and was largely completed with Works Progress Administration funds and labor. The design, which incorporated roadside parks, and lush indigenous plantings, epitomizes the extensive WPA efforts to build and improve roads in Minnesota and throughout the country, and clearly reflects the distinctive construction methods and roadside landscaping campaigns associated with the Works Progress Administration.

Although Graeser Park was determined to be eligible for the NRHP in 1995 as a contributing property to the proposed Lilac Way Historic District and was later determined to be individually eligible for the NRHP; the SHPO recently determined that "Graeser Park has lost any National Register eligibility due to modifications to the site and setting."

Sources

106 Group, Phases I and II Cultural Resources Investigation Trunk Highway 100 Reconstruction Final Report, February, 1995.

Dombrowsky, Peter W.

Graeser Park. Unpublished Master's Thesis, Department of Landscape Architecture, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 1988.

Gimmestad, Dennis

1995, 11 May Letter to Joe Hudak, on file at the SHPO, St. Paul

Schmidt, Andrew

1994 Minnesota History/Architecture form for Graeser Park.

Minnesota Department of Highways, RDP, SP 2735-03:1941.

Williams, J.

Robbinsdale Park is Still a Jewel on Highway 100. North Hennepin Post, 1988, March 17.

National Register Status

Contributing to Eligible District

National Register Eligibility Recommendation

Not eligible

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Date

10/16/2006

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Property Photograph



Facing W

Property Photograph



Facing W