

*The Story of the  
Judge Joseph E. Cook Park  
in Southeast Denver  
and  
The Story of the  
Cook Park Neighborhood Association  
1991 — 1997*



*By  
Virginia L. Wielgot*

*Published April 2009*

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*Dedicated to Diane Wolta  
President of the  
Virginia Village/Ellis Community Association  
who encouraged me to write this story for historical records.*

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## Contents

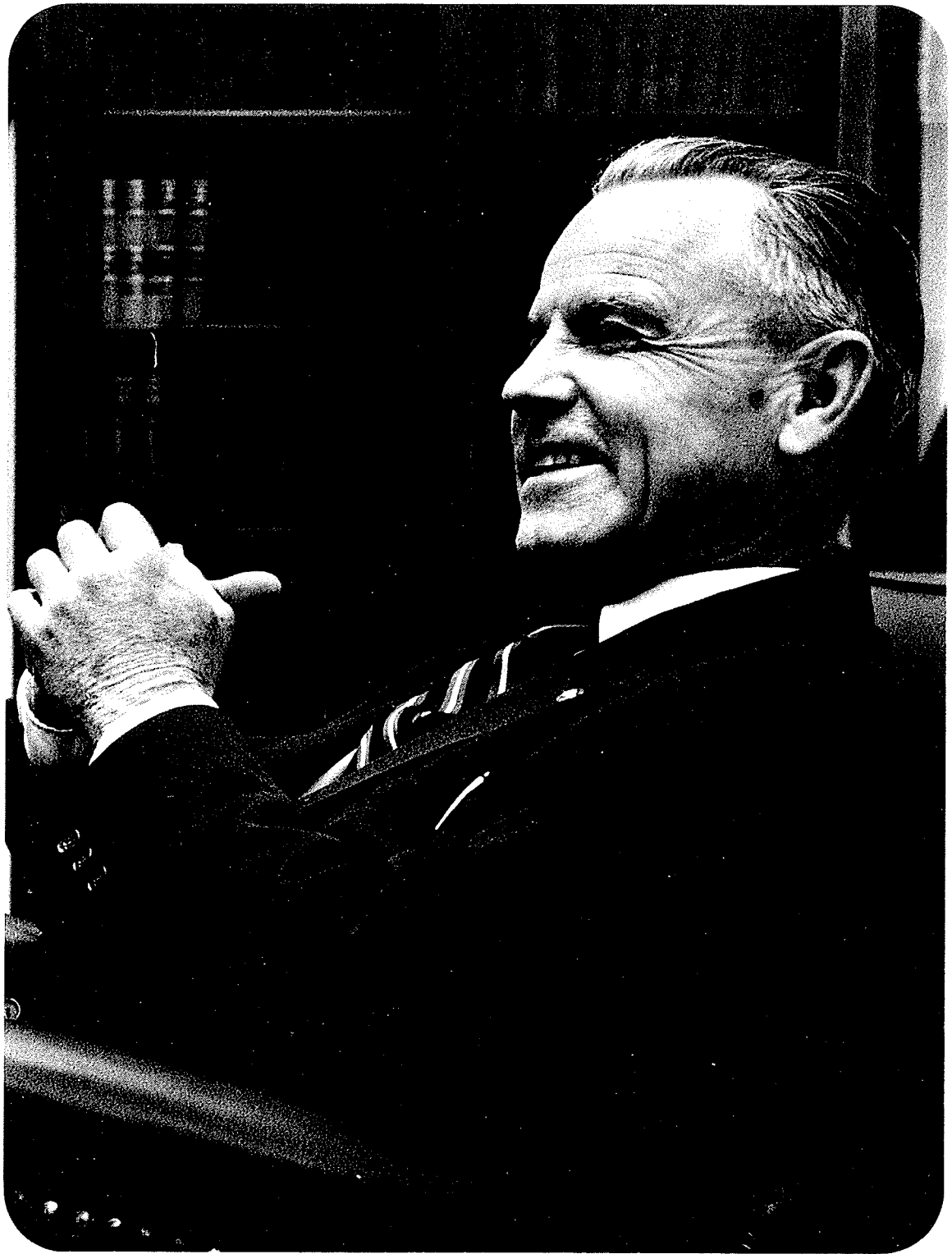
<i>Biography of Joseph E. Cook</i> .....	1
<i>Picture of Joseph E. Cook</i> .....	2
<i>The Promise of a Park</i> .....	3
<i>The Naming of the Park</i> .....	4
<i>Park Dedication</i> .....	5
<i>A Million Dollar Lawsuit</i> .....	5
<i>A Neighborhood Association</i> .....	6
<i>Goldsmith Gulch Flood Control Project</i> .....	7
<i>What a Mess!</i> .....	9
<i>An Art Project</i> .....	10
<i>A Double Celebration</i> .....	10
<i>Recreation Center Expansion</i> .....	11
<i>Cleanliness is Next to Godliness</i> .....	11
<i>Time for a Change</i> .....	12
<i>The People Who Made a Difference</i> .....	14

*Google™ Map of Cook Park*

*Pictures of Cook Park taken in 2009*

*CPNA Accomplishments 1992-1997*

*About the Author*



And then there was a salamander which found a home in our unfinished basement. But the nicest pet of all was a little bunny rabbit. It was captured on Good Friday, so Easter became its name. Its home was our entire fenced-in back yard, and along with the rabbit food purchased at a nearby granary on Holly Street just north of Evans, it dined on the lettuce and other veggies we had planted for ourselves! Small shrubs provided hiding places for Easter when our toy terrier was out in the yard.

As promised, the development of the 33-acre park began in the spring of 1965. The welcome sounds of earth-moving equipment began to transform the acreage from prairie to park. The long-established cottonwood trees along the gulch shaded a new picnic area with permanently placed tables and benches, and the land along the gulch was contoured to provide protection from overflows when sudden thunderstorms engulfed the area. Trees and grass were planted within the park's original boundaries, which extended along Monaco from Cherry Creek to Mexico, and from Mexico to Oneida Street. At that point, there was no "street" on Oneida from Mexico to Cherry Creek, but that was the eastern boundary of the park. Paved pathways provided a place for pedestrians and bicyclists. Rest room facilities and a playground completed the original park development. (A recreation center and swimming pool were added later on the Cherry Creek side of the park.)

### **The Naming of the Park**

The park was ready for its dedication. But first, what would be its name? I suppose a little politicking and salesmanship are involved with the naming of a park. It's my belief that Jim Treece, an attorney and neighborhood activist, used his persuasiveness in City Hall to see that our city's newest park was named for the late Joseph E. Cook, a well-known and well-liked District Court Judge. Jim was the master of ceremonies at the park's dedication and very likely organized the celebration. He and his wife lived in an older, refurbished home at 1770 S. Locust Street — probably the first home in the neighborhood. It was just west of what became the Skyline Swim and Tennis Club, located on Jewell between Monaco and Locust. Jim was our original "neighborhood organizer." When decisions were required on issues such as safety, aesthetics, commercial development and zoning, word got around our neighborhood that an informal get-together would take place at the Treece home. About 20 or 25 of us gathered in the home's spacious

Alarmed at the prospect and upset by the devious placement of the sign, about 20 of us gathered in the living room of the family whose home was kitty-corner from the proposed development. Many of us, drawn together by mutual concern, were meeting each other for the very first time. Following a lot of discussion, the consensus was that we opposed both the density of the project as well as the proposed continuation of Oneida Street to Cherry Creek Drive, which we feared would draw more traffic into our neighborhood. As our frustration mounted, one of our neighbors, an attorney, suggested the filing of a temporary restraining order with the Denver District Court to delay construction of the project. We all agreed to that strategy and left the meeting with a feeling of relief that "our attorney" would take care of the paper work.

When the owners of the property were notified of our action, they were livid! They took immediate action to file a lawsuit against our group for \$1 million. Ed and I were shocked to learn that the lawsuit showed up on our credit rating! Thereafter, if a new major appliance was needed, we had to pay for it with cold, hard cash. Our attorney urged us to stay calm and tried to convince us that everything would be OK. Unknown to us, there were behind-the-scenes negotiations going on, which eventually resulted in the city purchasing the property to expand Cook Park, and the lawsuit was dropped.

## **A Neighborhood Association**

Sometimes it is difficult to keep a neighborhood association active. That is what happened to the original association in the Cook Park neighborhood — a lackadaisical president who didn't schedule meetings, and officers who didn't much care. Thankfully, in the fall of 1991, Dorothy Wells and Eldon O'Neal, next door neighbors who lived in the 1500 block of South Locust Street, took it upon themselves to reactivate the Cook Park Neighborhood Association. Dorothy was a well-liked and respected homeowner, and Eldon, another longtime resident, was a well-respected authority on city zoning issues. About 30 of us showed up at the Cook Park Recreation Center, and we all agreed that there was a need for an active community association. The first order of business was to elect officers; Dorothy Wells was elected president, and I was elected vice president. The boundaries were: Cherry Creek Drive on the north; Evans Avenue on the south; Holly Street on the west; and Quebec Street on the east. There were approximately 1200 homes and 75 businesses within the boundaries. We focused on many neighborhood issues, but the park itself was always a major consideration.

personnel met with neighborhood residents. Tempers flared, and the Bible Park people continued to block the project. Finally, Mayor Federico Peña threw up his hands in despair! The Goldsmith Gulch project was put on the back burner and declared untouchable by the mayor's office.

As time passed, every severe rainstorm brought the waters closer to the homes and businesses in the flood plain, sometimes spilling into basements. Cook Park became a "lake" on numerous occasions, putting the picnic tables and benches completely under water and flooding the playground.

To get the project back on track, agreement was needed by three key people: the mayor, the city council member for the Bible Park neighborhood, and the city council member for the Cook Park neighborhood. By then, Denver had a new mayor, Wellington Webb, and the council member for the Bible Park neighborhood had resigned to take an appointment in the new mayor's office. Our own council member, Mary DeGroot, had supported the flood control project from day one, so that left two people to convince.

I wrote to Mayor Wellington Webb on behalf of our neighborhood association to request a meeting with him. I visualized a large group from the Cook Park neighborhood walking into the mayor's office to plead our cause. In my mind, he would be so overwhelmed by the strength of our numbers that he would quickly give in to our request. Lo and behold, there was no response to my letter, so I followed it up with another, then a few phone calls, until I finally received an appointment to meet with him on April 12, 1993. The stipulation from his office was that *I alone would meet with the mayor*.

The fateful day arrived, and Mayor Webb escorted me into his very large office and sat behind his very large desk. I was seated opposite the mayor. The mayor was (and is) an imposing figure — tall and large-framed — and I was a bit intimidated, even though I have always found him to be cordial. After exchanging some pleasantries, he said to me, "Well, Virginia, I understand that there was a court decision prohibiting the use of Bible Park for flood control measures." Thank goodness I had worked in the Colorado Attorney General's office and was familiar with legal terminology. I replied, "Oh no, Mayor, there was no *court decision*; there was merely a *legal opinion* by an attorney, and that legal opinion was never contested in court." Surprised at that information, he agreed to look into the matter further, which resulted in his eventual support of the flood-control project.

## **An Art Project**

Large construction projects in Denver include sums of money to be used for art projects. The Goldsmith Gulch flood control project qualified for the sum of \$80,000 to be used in the three sites impacted by the project: Cook Park, Bible Park, and the Hiff detention area (a large excavated area which temporarily holds storm waters until the danger of flooding is over).

Andrew Dufford was selected by the city from 75 applicants to create his vision of three contemplative spaces, each containing a sculptured seating stone of granite. The one in Cook Park has petroglyphs of three leaves. Andrew's own words give a personal meaning to his selection as the artist. "I have a long history with this site. I was raised in a house 3 blocks from Cook Park when the area was not park but prairie. These sites are important places to me."

## **A Double Celebration**

*All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.* Many of us are familiar with that expression. In the case of our neighborhood association, that was certainly the case. Our monthly meetings were semiserious, addressing problems, seeking solutions, and proactively looking for improvements to our neighborhood. Our board meetings, held in my home, began with coffee and dessert and a bit of socializing but then turned to serious business.

However, in the fall of 1996, we had occasion to plan a celebration for two auspicious reasons: (1) the completion of the Goldsmith Gulch Flood Control Project; and (2) the 30th anniversary of the dedication of the Joseph E. Cook Park. Flyers were delivered throughout the neighborhood, and folks brought their picnic lunches to the park on Sunday, September 15, 1996. The event was held near the picnic shelter area on the south side of the park. What a joyous occasion! Lively music was provided by the Denver Municipal Band, cake and punch were provided by the CPNA, and city dignitaries were present as well as the design and construction people who had worked on the Goldsmith Gulch Project. Alan DeLollis of Denver TV's Channel 8 arranged for coverage of the event, which was then televised many times during the following month. A great time was had by all.



hundreds of beer and pop cans, tiny empty liquor bottles, paper cartons, hardware, pieces of wood — you name it, it was there. And then there was the removal of hundreds of weeds and filling in the area around the evergreen shrubs with about 20 bags of top soil. A “bonus” was finding lots of pennies, dimes and quarters!

Our association applied for and obtained a \$500 grant to purchase concrete trash containers for two locations on Evans to help keep it free of litter. We also sponsored a luncheon at the Palace Restaurant for the Evans business people to discuss traffic, safety, appearance, etc.

New projects cropped up with regularity:

- When City Councilwoman Mary DeGroot ran for Mayor instead of reelection to City Council, five candidates announced their intention to run for her council position. We conducted a “Meet the Candidates” forum in April of 1995 at Place Middle School, which was televised on TV’s Channel 8.
- The association promoted the Neighborhood Watch program to encourage residents to assist the Denver Police in crime prevention.
- Zoning violations were reported to city officials, sometimes requiring court appearances.
- The grand opening of the Virginia Village Library provided us an opportunity to publicize the event and participate in hosting the festivities.

There was a nucleus of officers, board members and others who provided most of these services, but other individuals and families pitched in to help when asked.

### **Time For a Change**

It was time for a change. In the fall of 1997, I decided that I would not run for reelection as president of the CPNA. It was time for new blood and fresh ideas

## ***The People Who Made a Difference***

The story of Cook Park and the neighborhood association would not be complete without recognizing the following key people who tirelessly worked for the good of our park and neighborhood. Other residents, too many to name, just "showed up" whenever the call went out for special projects.

### **Dorothy Wells**

Dorothy, along with Eldon O'Neal, was responsible for reactivating the Cook Park Neighborhood Association. She served as its President for two years, then as Director at Large and later as Treasurer. Dorothy represented the association at meetings of Inter Neighborhood Cooperation and was honored by that organization for her dedication to neighborhood concerns. Whenever a social occasion arose, Dorothy took charge of its organization and refreshments and was a perfect hostess.

### **Eldon O'Neal**

Eldon was Dorothy's next door neighbor, and the two of them reactivated the Cook Park Neighborhood Association. He served as Zoning Coordinator, and his technical expertise in this field alerted us to zoning violations as well as proposed zoning changes within and adjacent to the CPNA boundaries.

### **Pat and Boyd Barker**

Pat served as an efficient and reliable secretary for all of the years that I was involved with CPNA. Boyd was the photographer at special events.

### **Dan Kutz**

Dan served as Vice President. Because of his young family, his primary interest was in the neighborhood schools.

### **Ralph Gilbert**

Ralph served as Treasurer and was an active participant in board meetings. (Ralph and my husband, Ed, both worked for Mountain Bell Telephone Company, and my husband and I became friends with Ralph and his wife, Ruth, when we all lived in Salt Lake City.)

### **Mats and Helma Sjodin**

Mats was our liaison with the construction people and city workers when the flood control project was underway. He attended weekly project meetings and took pictures as construction ensued. He also served as Director at Large. Helma took charge of flyer distribution and volunteered at social events.

### **Barbara Fallon**

Barbara's accomplishments were many: she was Membership Chair, Director at Large, Vice President, and, later on, President of CPNA. She served as liaison with the businesses along Evans from Monaco to Holly. Barbara became well known for her efficient organization of neighborhood garage sales.

### **Jo and Don Garrett**

The Garretts were the owners of Sir Speedy at 11th and Lincoln, and reproduced the CPNA monthly newsletters at no cost to our association.

### ***Goldsmith Gulch Flood Control Project***

The massive planning and construction project was handled with professionalism as well as concern for the inconveniences that residents of the neighborhood endured. The cooperative efforts of the men listed below and of all the people working for them made a difficult period tolerable.

**Dave Lloyd**

Project Administrator  
Urban Drainage Flood Control District

**Chuck McKnight, P.E.**

Consulting Engineer  
Sellards & Grigg, Inc.

**Dan Meyer**

Project Engineer  
Tiersdale Construction Co.

**Steve Bello**

Denver Wastewater Management  
City's Project Engineer



Above: The playground is on the Mexico Avenue side of the park. The original playground was very basic, and in the fall of 1993, it was enlarged and upgraded, as shown above. Below: A covered picnic area was constructed close to the playground.







Above: The Cook Park Recreation Center was expanded in 1997 from 8,000 sq. ft. to 17,000 sq. ft. This picture was taken in 2009. Below: Another picnic shelter, this one on the Cherry Creek side of the park near the recreation center, was constructed in the summer of 2002.



### ***Goldsmith Gulch Flood Control Project***

Initiated discussions with city officials to begin construction of the long-delayed project.

Appointed liaison to monitor construction and safeguard interests of neighbors.

\$10 million project completed in 1996.

### ***Involvement with other citizen groups***

Maintain membership in Inter Neighborhood Cooperation (INC).

Maintain membership in United South East Denver (USED).

Work cooperatively with neighboring community associations.

### ***Lollipop Lake Improvements***

Initiated steps to execute the renovation of the lake, including construction of two drop structures on Cherry Creek, removal of silt from the bottom of the lake, installation of an impervious clay lining, and the drilling of two non-potable water wells.

### ***McMeen Elementary School***

Publicized the need for volunteers to assist teachers.

Distributed dictionaries to third-grade students on behalf of INC.

### ***Neighborhood Appearance***

Make a Difference Day 1995 — outdoor cleanup at Place Middle School and Ash Grove School.

Glad Bag-A-Thon Day 1996 — sidewalk sweeping north side of Evans, Monaco to Holly; Cherry Creek cleanup.

Applied for and obtained \$500 grant to purchase trash containers at two locations on Evans.

Cleaned the bus stop, northwest corner of Monaco and Evans, on a weekly basis.

Arranged with store owners to empty trash from containers at above location.

Arranged for trees to be planted by city at Jewell and Monaco and at Asbury and Monaco, said trees to be watered by nearby homeowners.

Presently promoting the planting of trees and shrubs and installation of a privacy fence around the city's trash transfer station at Quebec/Cherry Creek/Jewell.





#### ***About the Author***

Virginia (Johnstone) Wielgot was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois, as was her husband, Ed. They moved to Denver, Colorado in the early 1950s, and two sons (Glen and Larry) completed their family.

In 1958 the four of them moved to Salt Lake City, Utah, for a period of five years, returning to Denver to live in the Cook Park neighborhood.

In 1965, Virginia began a 26-year career with the State of Colorado, beginning as secretary at the Colorado State Patrol. Her next position was as legal secretary in the Colorado Attorney General's office. Following that, she became Administrative Assistant to the Executive Director of the Colorado Department of Highways (subsequently Colorado Department of Transportation). At the time of her retirement in 1992, she was Administrative Officer in the Personnel Branch of the Transportation Department.

Widowed in 1987, she continued to live in the Cook Park neighborhood until 2000 when she moved to Heather Gardens, an Aurora community for active seniors.

Following her retirement, Virginia became involved in community and political activities, and is the author of several publications:

*The Journey of a Lifetime* (autobiography)  
*The Martyrs of Tolpuddle* (Wielgot family history)  
*George Washington: First in the Hearts of his  
Countrymen?*

She also edited a book entitled *Remembering the Cosmopolitan Hotel* by Virgil Kidwell.