
Popular Entertainment: Politics and Society in Chicago's Riverview Park

Nathan A. Vemmer

Nathan Vemmer is a junior history and political science major from St. Louis, Missouri. His paper was written for Dr. Lynne Curry's Historical Research and Writing course. He plans to pursue a master's degree in history after graduation.

On May 4, 1886, Haymarket Square entered the American vocabulary not as a location in Chicago, but as a byword for aggressive strikes, brutal oppression, and chaotic violence. That day had the dubious honor of being among the darkest in the history of American labor history; in the wake of a momentous series of strikes for an eight-hour day, strikers, immigrants, anarchists, and dozens more collided with Chicago police in an explosion that left at least eleven dead, including seven police officers. The subsequent backlash against anarchism, European immigrants, and the labor movement in general would convulse all of America. The chaos would culminate in the arrest of fifteen people and subsequent execution of four in an expression of mass hysteria not unlike the future Red Scares. Supporters of worker's rights would find themselves treated as potential terrorists by the population at large, much of their hard-fought goodwill evaporated, and their movement set back decades. The events of the Haymarket Square Riot would become so deeply traumatizing to worker's rights movements, both in America and around the world, that May 1st, the beginning of the inciting riots, would after become known as International Workers' day, or May Day—the single most important day on the labor calendar.

Two years later, a group of German workers and veterans—radicals no doubt among them—would buy up acres of land not far outside the city. Interestingly, as far as can be ascertained, even in this environment of nationwide suspicion, no one seemed to have batted an eye. The police seemed uninterested, the conservative *Chicago Tribune* offered no polemics, nor were there expressions of concern from the city or state governments. Even when veterans began using the land as a firing range, the grounds seemed to have remained largely invisible, not because it was hidden, but because it was not considered particularly important—to the people at large, it was essentially still just a park. That land would later become Riverview Park, the largest amusement park in Chicago and the self-proclaimed largest in the country. Throughout much of its existence, Riverview hosted rallies and events for groups and figures on the political fringe, yet somehow it remained above the political fray. Socialists, pacifists, German nationalists, and fascists all found a home at Riverside. Opinions that might prompt violent retribution on the streets of Chicago were accepted at this amusement park, albeit not always with open arms, yet the only retribution appeared some unfriendly newspaper editorials. Radical politics found a home right next to roller coasters and carnival games. Riverview was not always, as the advertising of the time claimed, the place to “laugh your troubles away,” at least as far as politics went. Instead, it was a place where troubles were tempered and moderated, and ideas were quite literally entertained. A place that would give almost any idea a chance to be heard, so long as it paid its entrance fee. Whereas, Haymarket Square remained bitterly contested territory, Riverview Park hardly seemed to stir passions.

This interpretation of Riverview's role in society—as a platform and engine for political activity—has not historically been a focus for scholarship on amusement parks, although it is far from a foreign notion. The study of amusement parks hardly has been a priority for scholars, and significant works on the topic that do not stray into nostalgia or the minutia of roller coaster architecture are difficult to find. As such, the historiography of amusement parks has in some way

been frozen, with major interpretations remaining in rough agreement for the past 50-some-odd years. A good example of the sort of argument that has historically dominated is Russell B. Nye's *Eight Ways of Looking at an Amusement Park*.¹ Nye presents a number of sociological hypotheses regarding the appeal of amusement parks in society. At times they served as vehicles for childhood socialization, or in other times as a manifestation of the collective social "Id" (a theory shared by the excellent Ric Burns documentary *Coney Island*).² Other writers have also considered amusement parks as elements of the economy and class conflict. Raymond M. Weinstein's *Disneyland and Coney Island: Reflections on the Evolution of the Modern Amusement Park* suggests a dichotomy between parks for the wealthier and poorer elements of society, and discusses how such a divide provides opportunities for class identification and economic frustration.³ Discussions of parks as part of the public and political world has been fairly rare in and of itself, although one could easily extend some of these previous theses to suggest insight into how they function as such. The impact of various individual parks has been analyzed—such as Art Fitz-Gerald's article "Serious Fun: The Politics of Riverview Park, Chicago"—but not as much exists for the role of parks in general.⁴ All the same, this notion—that amusement parks in general and Riverview Park in particular have had historically close connections to political movements and often serve as public forums for such—is far from beyond the academic pale and is a natural extension of preexisting scholarship and thought.

Riverview's aforementioned attraction for the political and controversial began early in its life – in fact, it was among the reasons the park was first built. The early decades of its operation were defined by a deep connection to the Central European immigrant communities that called Chicago their home. The many cultural events, charity rallies, and so on which took place in Riverview were usually operated by Germans, as the largest group and "owners" of the park, until America entered the First World War in 1917. With the war, German groups and rallies became increasingly suspect, and other Central European ethnic groups in Chicago, like the Polish, Czech, and Danish, all also saw their organizations shrink in influence in the wake of the suspicions of the First Red Scare. In time, these populations too would fade into the background as their attachments to their homelands grew weaker and weaker, but in its early years, these immigrant communities would prove to be Riverview's bread and butter. In the process, they would keep the park on the forefront of initiatives for public change.

Indeed, before there was a "Riverview," the site on which the park was later built had connections to immigrants and politics. In 1888, a group of first-generation German immigrants bought a roughly 22-acre plot of empty parkland on the corner of Western Avenue and Roscoe Street.⁵ This group, German veterans of the Franco-Prussian War known as the *Nord Chicago Schuetzenverein*, or "North Chicago Shooter's Club," intended to use the largely empty land as a range to keep up their shooting skills. By 1896, this goal fell by the wayside, as the recent Chicago World's Fair inspired the owners to install a carousel, a ferris wheel, and a few carnival games on the property.⁶ As an increasingly popular meeting place for Chicago's German population, it was natural that politics would begin to follow. William Jennings Bryan, in a portent of things to come, would

¹ Russell B. Nye, "Eight Ways of Looking at an Amusement Park," *Journal of Popular Culture* 15 (1983): 63-75.

² "Coney Island," in *American Experience*, directed by Ric Burns, aired February 4 1991 (New York, NY: Steeplechase Films, 1991).

³ Raymond M. Weinstein, "Disneyland and Coney Island: Reflections on the Evolution of the Modern Amusement Park," *Journal of Popular Culture* 26 (1993): 131-164.

⁴ Art Fitz-Gerald, "Serious Fun: The Politics of Amusement at Riverview Park, Chicago," *Illinois Heritage*, 17, no. 2 (2014): 33-36

⁵ Derek Gee and Ralph Lopez, *Laugh Your Troubles Away*, (Livonia, MI: Sharpshooter Productions), 2.

⁶ Gee and Lopez, *Laugh Your Troubles Away*, 4.

spend his Labor Day that year speaking to the crowds at what was then known as Sharpshooter Park.⁷

The political activism of Chicago's German community at Riverview continued. Indeed, German-Americans would remain a political force of some power in the area for the majority of the park's existence. In the earlier days, however, the community, far from being a one-note interest group, was large and secure enough in their nationality to hold events for themselves that were unrelated to their "German-ness." In 1907, a joint German-Czech-Polish track meet was organized in support of the "United Societies for Local Self-Government."⁸ The next year, the founding of the Illinois chapter of the "Alliance of Germans" was celebrated with an appeal to the Taft White House calling for the end of speech regulation via the Postmaster General's office.⁹ As time went on, Germans continued to meet and politically agitate at Riverview, but events became more and more exclusively centered on the affairs of their community. This shift was helped along considerably by the sudden outbreak of the First World War in 1914, which obviously engendered great interest among immigrants in "German affairs," as well as growing suspicion of the community by the greater population. Events at Riverview during this period were deeply affected by the war. In 1914, for instance, preparations for German Day in Chicago were cancelled at the request of President Woodrow Wilson in the interests of preserving neutrality.¹⁰ As the war went on, many Germans continued to focus on the war effort in their homeland, and Riverview was their meeting place of choice. German Chicagoans could attend a benefit at the park for the Red Cross organized by the German-Austro-Hungarian Relief Association, watch German newsreels smuggled across the Atlantic at the park's theatre, or hold a picnic in the shadow of the statue of Otto von Bismarck that served as the namesake of the surrounding Bismarck Garden, if they were feeling particularly patriotic.¹¹

It seemed as though Riverview had no objections to wearing its sympathies on its sleeves, and allowing its patrons to do the same. However, when the war found its way over to American shores, opportunities to celebrate German sympathies quickly dried up. German cultural events were now deeply suspect, and Germans in Riverview paid the price. At least two peace rallies were held at the park during American involvement in the war, both reportedly with large German-speaking contingents, and both were treated as borderline treasonous affairs by the *Chicago Daily Tribune*—one outright labeled as "Anti-Americanism."¹² Riverview's administration no doubt had dozens of reasons to force them off the property and could have easily used the park's own security or called for Chicago police to do so. Instead, they not only allowed rallies to take place, on one occasion they accepted an event that had already been driven out elsewhere in the city. In doing so, Riverview clearly manifested that it was, if not in favor of the pacifist movement, at least willing to allow Germans to speak their mind. Interestingly, what sources can be found indicate that little attention was paid to the park's political practices, in spite of America's aggressive anti-German sentiments during the war years—a testament to Riverview's place in Chicago society as a publically-acceptable site for fringe politics.

Germans were not the only community that called Riverview home. Other groups of Central and Eastern European immigrants also made it their meeting place of choice on many occasions. An editorial in the Danish-language *Revyen* in 1912 strongly endorsed a speech made at Riverview by

⁷ Gee and Lopez, *Laugh Your Troubles Away*, 4.

⁸ "MUNDT HERO OF THE MEET," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 8, 1907.

⁹ "STATE ALLIANCE OF GERMANS," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 8, 1908.

¹⁰ "'GERMAN DAY' ABANDONED ON WILSON APPEAL," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 20, 1914.

¹¹ "GERMANS GIVE \$2,000," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 22 1916; Gee and Lopez, *Laugh Your Troubles Away*, 71.

¹² "PACIFISTS HOLD ANTI-AMERICAN TALK CARNIVAL," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 20, 1917; "LABOR PICNIC CROWDS HEAR PEACE ORATORS," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 9, 1917.

Kier Hardie, founder of the British Labour Party, seemingly implying that some Chicago Danes were involved in rallies at Riverview.¹³ The Czech community also seemed to feel comfortable celebrating at Riverview. The park hosted a “Bohemian Night” on June 14, 1914, for the benefit of a Czech hospital.¹⁴ Several years later, immigrants still were using Riverview as a meeting ground for their communities and agitation. As late as 1923, large immigrant groups organized a Socialist rally, including Italians and other immigrant groups. The park appeared to welcome the presence of the left-leaning immigrants.¹⁵

This trend could not continue forever. Within a few years, records of ethnic meetings in Riverview dwindled. Yet the kinds of discussions the park now entertained were in some ways a continuation of what immigrants had already been supporting, with native-born Americans picking up the struggle at Riverview in the post-World-War I years—the fight for labor, progress, and socialism. Over the next decades, politics at the park would be defined by these and other related issues, making it a key and obvious location for protests and events of many kinds in the city. Even as Haymarket’s shadow stretched long across the city, with riot widow Lucy Parsons and her supporters struggling with Chicago authorities for speaking permits, Riverview’s rallies remained uncensored, well-attended, and seemingly invisible. During this time speakers at Riverview included the socialist Eugene Debs, progressive former President Theodore Roosevelt, and later New Deal liberal Adlai Stevenson.¹⁶ By the same token, although talk of labor was the language of the day, Riverview was by no means some kind of socialist park. Indeed, a fair number of moderates and conservative-leaning speakers felt welcome at the park, despite standing on and likely paying for the same ground that Bryan and Debs had shouted from a scant few years previous. These people and their organizations would feel increasingly comfortable as Chicago grew larger, Riverview more popular, and the overall politics of the park more muddled and neutral. Nonetheless, for a few decades, Riverview, unrepentantly a for-profit bread-and-circuses institution, would be politically defined by a close association to the populist left.

This trend was not some kind of new phenomenon in Riverview. There is a great deal of overlap in the park’s periods of leftist politics and attraction to European immigrants. William Jennings Bryan spoke at the park about eight years before it even opened. As time went on, the park began acting as an increasingly strong magnet for Chicago’s general working class. In 1913, there was already a public bus line running up and down Western Avenue, right past Riverview, which even by 1947 still charged only 10 cents for a ride and nothing for transfers.¹⁷ Add to that the park’s 1934 creation of “Two Cent Days and Five Cent Nights,” when patrons got heavily discounted prices on Tuesday afternoons, and Monday and Friday evenings, and you have a major source of urban entertainment that was easily accessible and easily affordable for almost every citizen of Chicago¹⁸. This working-class audience drove much of Riverview’s politics, and did so early on. A key example of this is Riverview’s attachment to the Progressive, or “Bull Moose,” Party to the site during its time of influence in the 1910s. In 1913, the party chose the park to celebrate its first anniversary, bringing in about 20,000 guests and boasting major Progressive speakers like future Nebraska Governor Henry J. Allen, Arizona newspaper publisher Dwight Heard, University of Chicago Professor and city Alderman Charles Mirriam, and the Bull Moose himself, Theodore Roosevelt, by way of a letter read aloud.¹⁹ In 1925, over a decade later, the Progressives of Illinois

¹³ (Editorial), *Reynan*, September 21, 1912.

¹⁴ “Bohemian Night in Riverview Park,” *Denni Hlastel*, June 14, 1914.

¹⁵ “The Picnic at Riverview,” *La Parola del Popolo*, nd.

¹⁶ Fitz-Gerald, “Serious Fun,” 35.

¹⁷ Tomaz F. Deuther, “Real Rapid Transit at Least Cost,” <https://i.redd.it/p17pti67a5e11.jpg> and “A Brief History of Chicago Surface Lines,” ChicagoBus.org, Stanley Garmon, Access November 11, 2018, <https://www.chicagobus.org/history>

¹⁸ Gee and Lopez, *Laugh Your Troubles Away*, 123.

¹⁹ “MOOSE TO HONOR BIRTHDAY TODAY,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 30, 1913.

chose Riverview again to commemorate the death of one of their earliest leaders, Senator Robert La Follette Sr., of nearby Wisconsin.²⁰ And given that the party was basically dead by this point, with only about 200 diehards showing up to the event, their choice to meet in Riverview must have been a deliberate one—anyone who would not have cared had already left the party. One could infer, then, that Riverview was an important location for the rebel Progressives, and as such Riverview was tied even closer to the populist left.

Progressives alone did not drive Riverview's left-liberalism. To the contrary, early on the park's politics were fed by a wide variety of sources across the American left, from New Deal Democrats to outright Socialists. In the case of the latter, Riverview entertained no less than the definitive leader of American socialism, Eugene V. Debs, by that point the three-time nominee of the Socialist Party for President. Debs in fact commenced his fourth campaign for the presidency from Riverview in 1912.²¹ In a speech, as was typical for Debs, he issued a searing polemic against capitalism and the two-party system, recounting "battles of the workers in the war of the classes" and calling for "the unconditional surrender of the capitalist class." Like Bryan, the fact that he was doing this in an amusement park, perhaps the most enduring and popular invention of American capitalism, could not have possibly escaped his notice. He not only chose to speak at Riverview in spite of this, but opened his national campaign for president there. For Debs to have even considered that idea, Riverview would have had to be a liberal hotspot, some place where the strength of leftist sympathies could have overwhelmed whatever capitalist associations the park would bring with it. Even park officials themselves exercised some interest in the advancement of American labor: in 1915, Riverview was the first major amusement park nationwide to abolish the "vampire system" for its waitstaff, which required waiters to purchase a certain number of drinks at particular bars to gain or maintain their positions.²² "If organized labor only had a few more of these democratic employers to co-operate with, how much better it would be for all of us," raved a CFL official of park's owners.²³

Besides radicals like Debs, those with generally leftish credentials also politicked at the park. These included Harry Truman, Adlai Stevenson, and later Robert Kennedy. Chicago Mayor William "Big Bill" Thompson, a Republican, also used the park to promote himself and his politics.²⁴ Generally a left-of-center figure, Thompson started the brief tradition of what was variously known as "Kid's Day," "Riverview Day," and "Schoolkid's Day" in 1919, where he would cancel school citywide and provide free tickets to Riverview for every enrolled child in the city.²⁵ This was a baldly populist move, a pandering gesture intended to win votes from parents and others sympathetic to children, and its success was mixed at best. (The claim that Riverview Day was educational because copies of the Constitution and short biographies of Washington and Lincoln were distributed free probably did not help his case.)²⁶ Thompson, in doing this, provided further evidence of the politicization of Riverview. The park also saw use by the political right, if to a much smaller degree. Conservative Republican President Warren G. Harding campaigned at the park, largely for humanizing photo opportunities. Much later, in 1965, the Republican Party held a "Republican Day" at the park, an event without political speeches of any kind.²⁷ For much of its existence, the park

²⁰ "Hold Memorial for La Follette; Push New Party," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 2, 1925.

²¹ Eugene V. Debs, "Political Appeal to American Workers," Eugene V. Debs Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/index.htm>.

²² "Dust Vampire System from Riverview Park," *The Day Book*, September 16, 1915; "Waiter's Mass Meeting; Bill against Employment Bureaus in Saloons Endorsed," *The New York Times*, February 1, 1894.

²³ "Dust Vampire System from Riverview Park," *The Day Book*, September 16, 1915.

²⁴ Fitz-Gerald, "Serious Fun," 35.

²⁵ Fitz-Gerald, "Serious Fun," 35.

²⁶ Fitz-Gerald, "Serious Fun," 35.

²⁷ Fitz-Gerald, "Serious Fun," 35; "No Speeches at Riverview Day Says GOP", *Chicago Daily Defender*, August 11, 1965.

continued like this, semi-regularly hosting various political events and generally providing a platform for the American left to express its ideas and find a receptive audience. Perhaps no other private institution in Chicago could be a viable political tool to both “Big Bill” Thompson and Eugene Debs within a decade of each other, and this would remain the case for some years. As Chicago grew and Riverview became more and more comparatively small, however, its relative security as a bastion of the left grew more and more tenuous.

With crowds from all across the city and surrounding environs growing every year, the left-leaning politics tied to the park grew increasingly faint as time went on. Many more people came to see the park as a platform without bias. Some even felt at home proclaiming beliefs that ran totally contrary to the park’s original political heritage. The American Bund was a case in point. Between the German invasion of Poland in 1939 and the American entrance into the war in 1941, the American Bund, a more recent pro-German organization, commemorated German Day in the park with an disturbing flare, reportedly openly waving swastika flags, praising Hitler, and haranguing Polish-Americans in public demonstrations in Riverview.²⁸ Accounts generally suggest that this was not received particularly well by guests, but this was more out of general distaste for Nazis than any strong leftist sentiments. The fact that Nazis, who despised leftism, felt welcome at Riverview spoke volumes about how the park had changed in recent years.

The changing politics of Riverview also can be seen in a disturbing “attraction” known as “The Dips,” a game renamed several times over its many years of existence between the end of World War II and its closing in 1964, retired monikers included the “Darktown Tangos” and the “Chocolate Drops.” The game was a simple rendition of the old carnival standby of throwing a ball at a target to drop a person into a tank of water.²⁹ But this version had an additional gimmick—all the people to be dunked were black. The attraction’s appeal was completely based on the desire of patrons to at least harass African-Americans, and the park openly encouraged this: employees to be dunked hurled insults at passers-by in the hopes of goading them into buying a few balls.³⁰ In a different time, when socially-progressive agitation was the norm at the park, one might have expected public demand or concerned management to quickly shutter “The Dips.” This did not happen. Instead, the incendiary game’s eventual closure came in the mid-1960s, when the civil rights movement was perhaps at its strongest point. And even then, it only came at the request of a single editorial, not mass public protests or even public notice in any significant sense.³¹ Again, nestled in an amusement park, the “attraction” remarkably escaped public notice. Elsewhere, the obvious bigotry at the core of the game would have prompted protests, not at Riverview.

Two decades of tolerance for the “Dips” does suggest, however, a significant change in the park’s core ethos. Once defined by left populism, Riverview was now willing to allow politics—or at least a game with harsh political implications—totally contrary to the ideals of many of their old speakers and rallies out of either a desire for greater profit, or simple ambivalence. Take into account that during this same period, Haymarket Square, the site of the 1886 riot—by then around 70 years old—still inspired two bombings in downtown Chicago within a year. The indifference of politics at Riverside in comparison seems even starker.³² One is also struck by the reaction of Chicago’s black community to the game, or lack thereof. References to it in the *Chicago Defender*, the chief civil rights newspaper in the city, were few and far between. References to “The Dips” came in letters-to-the-

²⁸ Fitz-Gerald, “Serious Fun”, 36.

²⁹ Gee and Lopez, *Laugh Your Troubles Away*, 145.

³⁰ Gee and Lopez, *Laugh Your Troubles Away*, 145.

³¹ Gee and Lopez, *Laugh Your Troubles Away*, 145.

³² James Green, *Death in the Haymarket* (New York: Anchor Books, 2007), 314-316.

editor, not officially sanctioned news stories.³³ One might be tempted to think that the lack of an African-American reaction might be due to impressions that Riverview was a “white” park, but this is not the case. On the occasion of the closing of Riverview the *Defender* carried a small sidebar quoting reactions from various African-Americans in the city, which were not only strong, but strongly in favor of the park.³⁴ There are several conclusions some might draw from the seeming ambivalence of the black population to “The Dips,” but it is most likely that the park simply no longer functioned as a platform for the radical left. Such racist attractions were not considered worth serious attention, particularly considering the state of Chicago race relations overall and the relative benignity this attraction possessed.

Given the decline in left-leaning politics in the park over time, it seems fitting that Riverview should close in 1967, the year before the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, as well as the election of Richard Nixon. The reasons for the closure are not fully known, and explanation are many: some said it came as a result of crime and racial tension making the park unsafe, others said it was the result of a struggle among shareholders to make as much profit as quickly as possible, and yet another group claim it was brought on by rising land values which made the park more profitable sold than maintained.³⁵ In any case, Riverview died, alongside its old ideological allies, a very changed institution. At its birth, it was a mecca for European immigrants in Chicago, which made it a site where the undervalued of society might express their political views. However, growth eventually pushed the park towards political moderation (with occasional detours into the politics of bigotry and intolerance), and by the time it closed, very little seemed to remain of Riverview’s progressive past. One thing did remain true of Riverview throughout its lifetime, however, even into the later years of its life: it was a park where controversy was welcome, debate was common, and politics was omnipresent. By the time it shut its gates forever, Riverview had become as much of a public forum for the everyman and—women of Chicago as city hall and newspaper columns. Moreover, it was one of the few political venues where opponents could walk alongside one another and mutually agree that although they held clashing view, they were not going to start some kind of fight. They might sneer or sigh at the crowds swarming the park wearing identical elephant or donkey buttons, but Riverview was a place for families and relaxation, a place where common people could publicly stand by their values in peace, no matter their radicalism. Given that, perhaps it should come as no surprise that it was untouched by the sort of chaos that haunted Chicago’s Haymarket Square; why would people hunt for political enemies in an amusement park?

³³ “WHAT THE PEOPLE SAY: Riverview Park Exhibit Disgusting,” *Chicago Defender*, July 1, 1944; “What The People Say: Rap Riverview Park,” *Chicago Defender*, July 8, 1950.

³⁴ “QUESTION: HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT RIVERVIEW PARK BEING TORN DOWN? IF THE MATTER COULD BE VOTED UPON, HOW WOULD YOU VOTE?” *Chicago Defender*, October 9, 1967.

³⁵ Gee and Lopez, *Laugh Your Troubles Away*, 146 and Fitz-Gerald, “Serious Fun,” 36.