Advertised as “Thrills Galore in [a] Wonderland of Joy,” Ramona Park was a place of summertime fun for Grand Rapidians from its humble beginnings as a picnic pavilion in the 1880s to its development into a full-fledged amusement park—complete with a Ferris wheel, steamboat rides, and a roller coaster—in the early twentieth century. Situated on Reeds Lake in East Grand Rapids, the park offered entertainment at every turn, drawing large crowds for concerts and other events.
In the late 1800s and early 1900s, East Grand Rapids, Michigan, was a quiet community with approximately 500 inhabitants. Bordered on three sides by the city of Grand Rapids and on the other side by scenic Reeds Lake, the town was about three and a half miles from the center of the “big city” of downtown Grand Rapids. Today, East Grand Rapids is home to an excellent school system, a charming business district known as the Gaslight Village, and street after street of beautiful homes. Yet, virtually nothing remains of Ramona Park, a 22-acre resort turned amusement park that operated from 1882 to 1954. During those years, it was a source of entertainment, amusement, and “thrills galore” for Western Michiganders.

Ramona Park owes its existence to a transportation company with big ideas. To increase the use of its services, the Grand Rapids Street Railway Company purchased land in 1881 and devised a plan to build a resort, complete with a theater/pavilion, on the west shore of Reeds Lake. Area residents traveled by both horse-powered and steam-engine rail—and later by trolley, electric street car, and bus—to get to the Reeds Lake theater, christened “Ramona” following a citywide contest to come up with a name. After the turn of the century, the resort became popularly known as Ramona Park and began its life as an amusement park.

Ramona Park offered free admission to its attendees who, once inside, could find food, swimming beaches, rides, stage entertainment, sports, and a multitude of other diversions to while away summer days. Gail Snow, in her meticulously researched book Remarkable Ramona Park, said, “Ramona Park was not just a place for indulging in amusements and spending hard-earned coins. It was a place where people went to celebrate. Families held picnics . . . . Companies rewarded employees by treating them to a day-long picnic, providing everything needed for the glorious occasion. Organizations held picnics to celebrate their heritage, emancipation, [and] immigration. Holidays were times of special balloon ascensions, fireworks, concerts, speakers, and parades. The theatre [sic] provided a grand arena for youngsters receiving certificates as they left one phase of education and moved on to another.”

Indeed, Ramona Park was a favored place for local celebrations. Newspaper companies treated their newsboys to special days at the park, local businesses held picnics there, and Boy and Girl Scouts took outings to the site. Holidays—such as the Fourth of July and Labor Day—were also celebrated at Ramona Park.

According to Mary Dersch, curator of the East Grand Rapids History Room, “Grand Rapids was growing, and people were eager to leave the summertime heat and dust of the city. Reeds Lake was already popular for swimming, picnics, and, beginning in 1882, rides on excursion steamboats, notably those of the Poisson family.”

A New Era of Entertainment

In its early days, Ramona Park was simply a picnic destination. The first pavilion, built in 1882, was nestled in a grove of trees and provided a view of the lake. Serving tea, coffee, cold lunches, and non-alcoholic beverages, the pavilion also offered indoor and outdoor seating for picnics and other social gatherings. Over the years, as attendance grew, so did the Ramona pavilion with additions such as a dance hall and enhanced restaurant services.

Around the time that the pavilion was constructed, Ramona Park excursion boats began to sail gracefully on Reeds Lake. Three generations of the Poisson family owned and operated four steamboats, several boat launches,
and a boat livery from 1882 to 1955. The first ship was the *Florence*, then the *Sport*, followed by the *Hazel A*, and finally, the *Ramona*. With a minimal cost to ride, the ships proved an irresistible lure to patrons looking for a soothing way to spend a sunny day.

About ten years after the pavilion was built, the Consolidated Street Railway Company—which then owned the resort—decided that the facility needed to be bigger. The building was demolished to give way to an even larger and grander edifice, which opened in 1893. Daily band concerts were added to the park's schedule. In 1896, a large stage was built for concerts and other events.

Unfortunately, the new pavilion burned to the ground in early 1897. While the ashes were still glowing, plans were devised for a new building of even grander scope and scale with a state-of-the-art theater. Once it was built, a new era of entertainment at Ramona Park commenced. Over the years, famous entertainers took to the stage before an appreciative audience of locals and out-of-towners. Among those entertainers were Bob Hope, Jack Benny, George Burns and Gracie Allen, Edgar Bergen, Walter Winchell, Danny Kaye, the Marx Brothers, Fred Allen, Jimmy Durante, Fanny Brice, and Al Jolson.

The pavilion and steamboat excursions operated for 21 years before Ramona Park opened its amusement park in 1903. More attractions were added each year, keeping visitors from near and far fed and amused.

The Ramona Gardens Pavilion, a stage built in 1912 to showcase large bands, hosted orchestras and groups led by musicians such as Jackie Coogan, Eddy Duchin, Artie Shaw, Bob Crosby, Harry James, Glenn Miller, Woody Herman, Tommy Dorsey, Jimmy Dorsey, and Lawrence Welk. The stage also featured all-girl bands, and what were then called “colored bands”—such as the bands of Cab Calloway and Duke Ellington and McKinney’s Cotton Pickers.

Not all the entertainment was “high-class.” Odd acts that appeared over the years included Unthan, the Armless Wonder, who played violin with his toes; Signor Travato, who played two violins at once; Alice Shaw, the “Coloratura Whistler”; Paul Spadoni, who juggled cannonballs and balanced a chair with his assistant seated on it on his chin; and Wild West and animal shows. Even the famous Prohibitionist Carrie Nation and the lawyer Clarence Darrow made appearances. When the pavilion was not being used for shows, it served as a venue for dancing and roller skating.

**Attractions Galore**

As early as 1903, movies were shown at the Ramona theater. A midway offered games of chance with the opportunity to win prizes. Over the years, Ramona Park

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*We had an amusement park in Grand Rapids called Ramona Park. It was at the end of the streetcar line. It had an old theater, had all kinds of concessions. They had numerous little Coca-Cola stands. They had a roller coaster. They had all the things an amusement park had. Through a friend of mine at South High I got a job working out there . . . moving supplies from one eating place to another. I would work there Saturdays and Sundays. I forgot how much I made—probably $3 a day plus what I ate.”*  
*President Gerald Ford*
offered such diversions as Skee-Ball; miniature golf; a shooting gallery; a penny arcade; and Japanese Rolling Ball—a game that was especially popular with women, for the prize was imported, hand-painted china from Japan.

There were traveling exhibits, such as miniature model cities, a wooden shoe shop, an “Indian village,” and, oddly enough, a baby incubator—advertised in 1912 as featuring “real live, living babies.”

An elaborate merry-go-round was especially popular with children and families. Other rides included the “Joy Wheel,” a wooden platform that revolved at great speed, dizzying its riders; the roller toboggan; and the “Figure Eight,” an early version of a roller coaster. The latter gave way to the “Derby Racer,” a massive, double-tracked wooden roller coaster that opened in 1914. The ride took two minutes to cover its mile-long course.

An unfortunate incident on the roller coaster occurred in 1946 when a young man stood up while on the ride, fell, and was crushed under the wheels. Alcohol was a contributing factor, and his companion was later arrested for disorderly conduct.

Hot-air balloon ascensions were added to the mix and proved a great attraction. Flying over Reeds Lake, an aerialist fell from a great height from a trapeze-like apparatus but was saved by his parachute at the last minute. In 1938, another such daredevil was blown off course and ended up in nearby Fisk Lake, where he was rescued by a ten-year-old girl who heard his cries for help. Oddly, the balloonist did not know how to swim.

Some other attractions that appeared and disappeared over time included the “Laughing Gallery,” which was a hall of mirrors; the “House of Trouble,” a maze of narrow passages with mirrors to confuse patrons; the “Human Laundry,” where park-goers could be washed, ironed, and dried; the “Fun House”; and the “House of Mystery,” which was advertised in 1924 to “bring Thrill [sic] to [the] most hardened.” For the kids, there were slides; a miniature railroad; “Mystic Chutes,” which ended in a watery plunge; swings; airplane-type rides; a Ferris wheel; a “Tilt-A-Whirl”;
the “Skooter,” or bumper cars; and the “Pretzel,” a kind of haunted house in which riders cruised in cars through complete darkness broken by light illuminating scary figures. The park held special children’s days with games, kid-friendly food and drink, and pony rides.

Additionally, baseball games were held in the Ramona Athletic Park. Babe Ruth and other sports stars appeared in exhibitions.

The writing was on the wall for Ramona Park by the early 1950s. The park’s facilities had fallen into disrepair, and its owners were in the red financially. Following World War II, people began to travel more, and local demand for Ramona Park diminished. Furthermore, the residents of East Grand Rapids had grown tired of having an amusement park in their backyard—with all the traffic, crowds, and noise it entailed. Ramona Park closed in 1954, and the lakeside property that it inhabited was purchased by Grand Rapids realtor Harold T. Fletcher for $166,000. Later that year, locals approved Fletcher’s plan to construct a shopping center and apartments on the site. Now, according to curator Mary Dersch, “Nothing of Ramona Park remains but memories and mementos.”

“*My dad used to take me to Ramona Park when I was a child in the ’40s. As a teen, my girlfriends and I used to take the bus there on summer afternoons. As a child, I loved the train. Of course, when I was older . . . we used to take the large boat on Reeds Lake. I was only five or six when World War II ended, and my dad was deferred from the draft, so we went to the park during the war. I always wanted to ride the boat, but, for some reason, Dad never wanted to. He told me the Japanese had the lake mined, and the boat might hit one and sink. Of course, at that age, I believed him.*”

-Annette Marsilea King

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Jane Whittington is a writer and editor based in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She loves meeting new people and writing about them—and wishes to thank those who shared their thoughts and memories of Ramona Park.