

Parsons Field in East St. Louis, Illinois is familiar to virtually everyone who grew up in East St. Louis between 1930 and 1990, as well as to thousands of others in St. Louis and southern Illinois who went there to compete with the city's powerful high school sports teams.

Owned by the East St. Louis School District, Parsons Field was the home stadium for football and track events for both East St. Louis Senior High School and Lincoln Senior High School. Olympic gold medal winner Jackie Joyner-Kersey reportedly trained there. Assumption Catholic High School also played its home football games at Parsons Field until it built its own field on its campus. Since Assumption was an all-male school, St. Teresa Academy provided cheerleaders.

When you consider the different public and Catholic leagues that these schools played in, as well as the inter-school rivalries, you get a picture of the thousands of teenagers from all over the metropolitan area who visited every other year at Parsons Field. It's actually hard to believe that parents let their kids leave the house on Thanksgiving Day, but many of the parents came along. It was a tradition to actually go to football games long Parsons Field to meet new friends and to cheer their teams.

Those were fun times. The East St. Louis Senior High School (aka "East Side") players were known as the "Flyers", a name chosen to represent the pioneering role the East St. Louis area played in development of the aviation industry. Parks Air College and airport, then located in nearby Cahokia and now part of St. Louis University, was the first federally approved aviation college in America. The Assumption High School kids were known as the "Pioneers" and were taught to avoid conformity while seeking new frontiers. There was a great deal of bravado at each of the area high schools.

Before television became an obsession, the high schools held their famous Thanksgiving Day football game between East Side and its rival public school Belleville High School West. This was a big, exciting game held before everyone started spending Thanksgiving Day watching football games on television.

There were other big rivalries at Parsons Field. Assumption and East Side had an annual game, but were ill-matched. East Side was three or four times the size of Assumption and had more money, better facilities, and a bigger pool of players. On those rare occasions when Assumption triumphed, it was a really big deal. When Assumption beat East Side in 1960, the students were actually given a day off from school to celebrate. Assumption also had a big rivalry with Althoff Catholic High School in Belleville, and played other Catholic schools from St. Louis and southern Illinois as well.

One of the City's Many Playgrounds

I only recently learned that Parsons Field may once have been considered part of Jones Park. Although Parsons Field is located just west of the park, it never occurred to me that they may have once been a single entity.

Jones Park was an incredible 130 acre park where all the kids and teenagers and their parents spent countless hours. No comparable sized city in America (under 100,000 population) had a larger park. Its list of amenities is impressive: It had a big cement grandstand overlooking Ball Diamond #1, a running track, a public swimming pool, tennis courts, huge picnic areas with tables, a large brick bandstand pavilion/boathouse, huge lagoons for boating and fishing, several softball diamonds, several baseball diamonds, a formal rose garden, statues, a fountain with a nightly colored light display, gardens, public restrooms, a war memorial, concession stands, and lots of places to just relax. There were as many as 400 park benches scattered around the park.

In 1932, East St. Louis completed Lake Park, another huge city park, after 28 years of planning and at a cost of \$5 million. It was the third largest municipal park in the nation (after Central Park in New York and Forest Park in St. Louis). Unfortunately, it was too expensive to maintain so it was sold to the state of Illinois for \$1 and renamed Grand Marais. Today it is known as Frank Holten State Park.

Besides football games, Parsons Field was used for other gatherings. I particularly remember a big Cub Scout Pow-Wow I participated in around 1960.

All the Cub Scout Packs in the city prepared for months for our big pow-wow. We studied about Indians, learned dance steps, prepared crafts, and made costumes. The Indian costumes were simple to make. We wore tight swim trunks with felt flaps in the front and rear decorated with felt cut outs and beads. We made arm bands out of flat Mason jar lids to which we glued feathers and beads. The decorated lid was secured to our bicep by an elastic band. We also wore headbands with feathers, face paint, moccasins, and even made Indian necklaces out of wallpaper beads. We really felt like we were Indians.

Some Boy Scouts helped us, too. They were the “chiefs” and wore extravagant feather headdresses. They built tepees on the field made out of clothes poles and blankets. My brother was one of the Boy Scouts who helped at the pow-wow, but he denies that it ever happened. We spent the entire day on the field at Parsons Field playing games, dancing, and putting on quite a show.

Another fond memory is of the visit by the Three Stooges to Parsons Field on a Saturday in the early 1960's. There was a kid's parade and then we all walked onto the field following the Stooges who were on a flat trailer being pulled by a car (like a float without the flowers). The Stooges were never very wealthy during their lifetimes and were pretty much “has-beens” by 1960, but we loved them. They gave a nice show and we had a great time. Who knew that they would become cultural icons and that they would still be on television almost fifty years later? In fact, they are on television right now as I write this.

Not all the memories of Parsons Field are happy ones. In the late 1960's I remember a game between Assumption and East Side that almost turned into a riot. Since both schools shared the same stadium, they alternated years in which either school was the “home” team. The home team, of course, sat in the grandstand instead of in the bleachers and provided the

band which had a specific place in the grandstand in which to locate its instruments.

During one game when Assumption was the “home” team, the East-Siders decided that they didn’t want the white kids in “their grandstand” and forced the band and the early arrivals to vacate. Since it was very difficult to set up a band in the bleachers, no one knew what to do. As more kids arrived and learned of the hostilities, tempers began to flare and violence seemed to be a real possibility. Adults began to arrive and called the police as the two schools were getting ready to rumble. It was the ugliest high school football game I ever attended. It is probably why Assumption decided to abandon Parsons Field and build its own stadium.

East St. Louis High School Histories

(Information below compiled primarily from *East St. Louis, Illinois Year-By-Year Illustrated History*, by Bill Nunes, 1998)

East St Louis Senior High: In 1865 the School Board opened an Upper School in the basement of St. Patrick Church. In 1872, the first East St. Louis High School opened in a wooden building at 5th and St. Louis Ave. In 1888, the high school moved to the third floor of the Baptist Howe Institute at Tenth and College. After the cyclone of 1896 destroyed the Howe Institute, the city built Rock High School at 9th and Summit. In 1917, a new high school opened at 10th and Ohio. In 1958, a new \$4.5 million building opened at 4901 North State. Its new athletic stadium (replacing Parsons Field) opened there in 1991. The school today has an enrollment of nearly 2000 students.

Lincoln Senior High School opened as Lincoln School (for African-Americans) in 1886 at 6th and St. Louis in East St. Louis. It was named after Abraham Lincoln who issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Known for many years as Lincoln Polytech, it centered on teaching the practical skills advocated by Booker T. Washington. These skills included plastering, masonry, piano tuning, electricity, orchestra, band, cooking, sewing, carpentry, and plumbing. A new Lincoln School was built at 11th and Broadway in 1905. In 1947, East St. Louis elementary schools became

some of the first in the nation to integrate. In 1949, a new Lincoln High School opened at 12th and Bond Ave. In 1950, ten students transferred from Lincoln to East Side to officially integrate the high schools. Lincoln Senior High School merged with East St. Louis Senior High School in 1998.

Assumption (Catholic Boys) High School was founded in 1929 as Central Catholic High School at Wabasha and St. Clair Ave. in East St. Louis. It moved to 6th and State Streets in 1931. In 1953, it moved to a modern building at Kingshighway and St. Clair Ave. and changed its name to Assumption High School. Heidemann Field (football) opened on its campus sometime after 1970. The school became co-ed in 1974 and closed in 1989. Its campus was purchased by the State of Illinois and, after major renovations, re-opened as Southwestern Illinois Correctional Center (a state prison) in 1995.

St. Teresa (Catholic Girls) Academy opened in 1894 as an elementary boarding school for Catholic girls and developed into a four year secondary school during the late 1920's. It offered college prep courses but was also much like a "finishing school" with outstanding art and drama departments. Located at 25th and Ridge Ave., it closed in 1974.

Althoff High School at 5401 West Main Street in Belleville opened in 1964 as a replacement for the Cathedral High School for boys. The new school changed its name to Althoff and admitted girls from certain parishes and then became fully coed in 1967. When the Academy of Notre Dame girls high school in Belleville closed in 1972 due to damage caused by ground subsistence, the girls transferred to Althoff. When Assumption High School closed in 1989, 45 of its students transferred to Althoff.

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