

When Stevens Memorial Park was initially being created, there was no golf course.
 First plan for the new "Stevens Park", published in *The Dallas Morning News* -- 14th of November 1923, page 13.

A TALE OF TWO GOLF COURSES: A Brief History of the Coombes Creek Greenbelt

Jim Barnes – 10th August 2008 (with minor alterations: January 2011; pictures added etc. 7th May 2017)

The general layout of the Kessler-Stevens Park district was created during the 1920s. George E. Kessler, famed American landscape architect and city planner, was hired by the Dallas Improvement League (a subgroup of the Dallas Chamber of Commerce) in 1921 to design routes for a new Boulevard (now known as Colorado Boulevard) and two parallel Parkways running along each side of the heavily wooded Coombes Creek between Beckley Avenue and Davis (then known as the Fort Worth Pike, the main highway westward). He also proposed that "as much as 500 acres or more" be set aside for "a large and beautiful city park". This especially scenic linear greenbelt was then to be lined with "desirable" homes in what others called "high class, restricted residence sections". Kessler touted it as "Dallas' finest opportunity for a truly beautiful and extensive park and boulevard".

After Kessler's unexpected death on the 19th of March 1923 various Dallas civic organizations called for the construction of his plan for the Coombes Creek valley to be moved

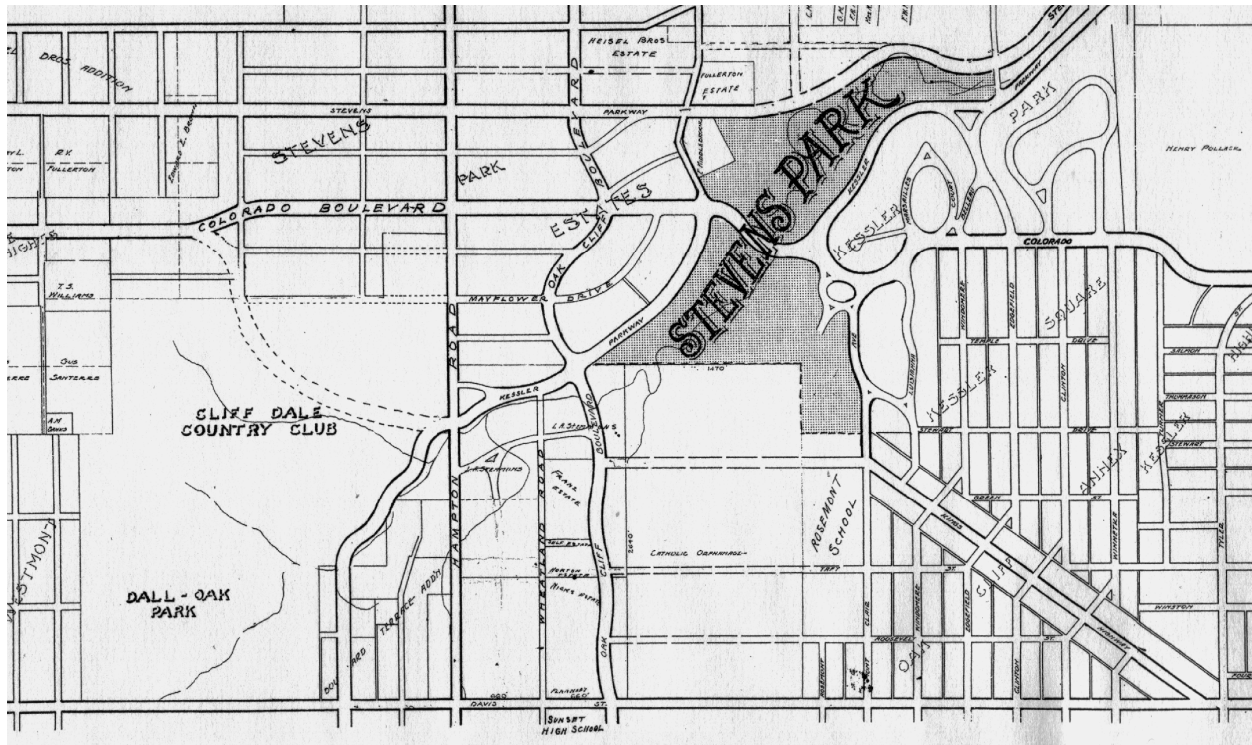
forward to completion. In July of 1923, the major landowners organized a Kessler Improvement District league. Leadership of this new property-owner group included L.A. Stemmons, Walter Stevens (brother of Annie L. Stevens), G.B. Dealey (head of the *Dallas Morning News*), and Everett Owens of the North Texas Trust Company. The group was led by C.S. Mitchell of the North Texas Trust Company, a firm who had recently acquired the site for creation of its new Kessler Park subdivision. The Kessler Improvement District announced its intention to preserve 350 acres for parks, including a nine hole golf course (at some undesignated location) as well as tennis courts and camping facilities along Coombes Creek.

Even before George Kessler had completed his roadway layout for the Coombes Creek district, a campground, run by the Dallas Automobile Club, opened in the area that is now the park at the Colorado Boulevard bridge. This campsite, with playground equipment, a rudimentary bridge across the creek, restrooms, an artesian well, and fire pits, opened in October of 1921, about half a year before George Kessler presented his final layout for the Parkways and the new Boulevard which was to cross the creek at the campsite. The free private campground advertised that it could accommodate up to 75 parties and had a small “commissary” selling firewood and food at its entrance off of old Wheatland Road on its western side. The *Dallas Morning News* reported in February of 1922 that the Tourist Park’s board of governors had a ten year lease agreement.

The next property to announce participation in Kessler’s greenbelt was the new Dal Oak golf course, established by a group of private investors led by B.C. Warlick. On the 23rd of September of 1923, the *Dallas Morning News* published news of their plans to open a 184 acre country club on the west bank of the Coombes Creek between modern Hampton Road and Davis Street. The new facility was to have one 18 hole and one 9 hole golf course as well as a swimming pool, tennis courts, and other amenities. Jim McKenzie of the Lakewood Country Club was to design the new private golf courses. I have found no newspaper account of any second nine-hole course ever opening, but an 18 hole course along with swimming, tennis, and other party facilities operated on the site for the next two decades. Signing of the club’s lease of the land was reported on the 30th of September 1923 and construction started immediately thereafter.

Two months later, on the 14th of November, the *Dallas Morning News* announced the consolidation of another 75 acre tract to become a new City owned park. Land was donated by the Stevens family estate, or leased (with a purchase option) from the Kessler Park subdivision. The original newspaper article’s map of this park (which included most of the land of the northern nine holes of the present Stevens Park Golf Course) showed only passive landscape uses, though the accompanying newspaper story mentioned the possibility of starting a new nine hole golf course on the site. The former Dallas Automobile Club campsite was relocated to the southeast and vanished a few years thereafter. The actual gift deed from Miss Annie L. Stevens to the City of Dallas transferring ownership of the original 40 acres of the *Stevens Memorial Park* wasn’t signed until December 4th. It mentioned no golf course.

Meanwhile, four days after the initial announcement of the gift of the Stevens land to the City of Dallas, the private Dal-Oak golf course opened its first 9 hole golf course for public play on the 18th of November 1923.



Detail from a 1924 map of the area, showing the new **Stevens Park** and private country club. (source: Dallas Public Library)

Despite the presence of the private club nearby, plans quickly congealed for using the new Stevens Park land to create a separate new municipal golf course. The problem with using Stevens Park as a golf course has always been its size, the site is too small. As it was originally established the new City park site was too small for even a nine hole course and the City went back to the Stevens family asking for an increase to the size of the donation, moving the old Wheatland Road slightly up to the west and carving the new Kessler Parkway (now called Plymouth Road) into the hillside between modern Colorado Boulevard and North Oak Cliff Boulevard in order to provide sufficient space for a golf green, tee, and fairway along the gentler terrain of the former roadway. This revised gift deed wasn't signed by Annie L. Stevens, sole owner of the Stevens family estate, until June 15th of 1925.

Play on Stevens Park Golf Course's nine hole golf course started on the 15th of May in 1924. A more official formal opening of the Dal-Oak Amusement Park was held on the 5th of August and a similar formal ceremony dedicating the clubhouse and Stevens Park Golf Course was conducted two weeks later, on the 16th of August 1924. The *Dallas Morning News* called Stevens "the shortest golf course in Dallas". Today it is altogether only about 120 acres, two thirds the size of the original Dal-Oak.

What is completely unclear in all of this is how anyone expected the two golf courses to survive side-by-side on the far outskirts of western Dallas. What seems to have been the prevalent thinking in 1924 was that the private golf course was going to be a highly profitable fat-cat country club with exclusive and coveted private memberships while the municipal golf course was going to be a less affluent public facility "for the poor man". But managing golf clubs was a relatively new business in Dallas. The City had only opened its first municipal golf course on a leased site along Cole Avenue near Turtle Creek (now long closed) the year before Stevens Park golf course had opened. Tension Golf Course in east Dallas, another Dallas

municipal golf course on a site gifted to the City, had opened only two weeks prior to the first play on Stevens. Few people at City Hall had any actual experience with either municipal or private golf course operating expenses or profit records. Today, the Stevens Park Golf Course is proud of its long history of paying its own expenses. Reportedly it has operated at a profit continuously since within a year or two after its initial opening. But the Stevens course never had to pay corporation or real estate tax, nor did it ever have to make any lease or mortgage payments for the cost of its site. It never had owners who expected to earn profit on their investment funding and most of the high cost improvements that enhanced and slowly upgraded the Stevens Park Golf Course over the years were financed by legislative appropriations independent of its bookkeeping accounts. The adjacent Dal-Oak private club had none of these advantages; though during the next two decades, when both courses were open to the public, both charged identical fees. The *WPA Dallas Guide & History*, compiled between 1936 and 1942, reports that both Stevens and El Tivoli golf courses charged 50 cents for weekday play; and 75 cents on holidays and weekends.

Irregardless of the eventual outcome, during the relatively prosperous years of the early 1920s the start must have seemed grand. The Dal-Oak golf course was hailed as “one of the most popular golf courses in Dallas” by the *Dallas Morning News* in an article of January 1925 which also touted the value of its capital stock, which had been allowed to increase from \$1,000 to \$100,000. In May of that year the 400 member strong Dal-Oak Golf Course changed its name to the Oak Cliff Country Club (a name which was revived many years later under a different incorporation at a different location).

In October of 1925 the opening of the Stevens Park Estates residential subdivision was announced. During the following March a new community group, the Stevens Park Improvement League was organized by the citizens living in the new district. One of their primary goals was to enlarge the Stevens Park golf course from nine to eighteen holes. Negotiations with the Roman Catholic Church were initiated, the goal being to acquire 60 acres out of the old Bishop Dunne boys’ orphanage site that was southwest of the Stevens Park golf course’s temporary stucco clubhouse at the hilltop along Montclair Avenue.

Throughout this period the grand design of Kessler’s Coombes Creek greenbelt was being quickly realized by the paving and opening of the Kessler Boulevard and a Kessler Parkway along one side of the creek, as well as the ongoing acquisition of a ribbon of public park running downstream from the golf courses. The Kessler Plan Association was a citywide civic group organized to inform the citizens of Dallas about various components of the overall 1910 Kessler Plan for Dallas and to promote adoption of its different elements. One of their published maps (probably from about 1927) entitled “*Plans for Dallas West of the Trinity River*” (a copy of which is archived in the Dallas Public Library) shows the Kessler Plan Association’s clear intention of creating a gigantic future public park in western Oak Cliff, a continuous greenbelt running along both sides of Coombes Creek from Beckley Avenue up through the Kessler-Stevens District to the creek’s headwaters, south of Clarendon and west of Westmoreland. The Dal-Oak country club and the Stevens Memorial Park were graphically coded together as “*Existing Parks*”.

During 1926 the Dallas Park Board debated whether or not to acquire 56 acres from L.A. Stemmons and Annie L. Stevens in order to extend the Stevens Park Golf Course southward up the creek to abut the Dal-Oak private golf course. Contracts to purchase those golf course extensions were finally approved by the City during September of that year and the south nine holes of the Stevens Park Golf Course opened, albeit in a somewhat truncated form, in June of

1927, making it the City's third 18-hole municipal course. The Roman Catholic Church still held onto its property near the clubhouse, part of the site that the Stevens course wanted for expansion. In 1930 a new dinner-dance club, called El Tivoli, opened at the Dal-Oak amusement park site, now called the Cliff-Dale golf course. The name of the entire amusement park was changed to El Tivoli in 1931. Also in January of 1931 a new 12 acre Dallas public park at the southern headwaters of Coombes Creek was named in honor of Martin Weiss (*wɪs*). That acquisition marks a zenith for George Kessler's plans for Coombes Creek, which henceforward were increasingly undermined by a failing economy and competition from newer schemes for the district.

During the early 1930s, after years of dickering, George Kessler's idea of creating an Inner Loop boulevard throughout Oak Cliff was finally abandoned when the city and County made Hampton Road into a major connecting thoroughfare and the State of Texas created the modern Fort Worth Avenue as the transcontinental highway entrance into downtown Dallas. A new 175 acre site was given to the city by Edwin Kiest in 1930 and whatever funds the Depression-racked municipal government might have had for acquisition and expansion of the Coombes Creek greenbelt were thereafter preempted by Oak Cliff's newer Kiest Park. In 1932 Walter A. Stevens, who had been the Stevens Park Estates' civic spokesman, suddenly died. And that same year the North Texas Trust, who had established the Kessler Park subdivision development, quietly went into receivership during adverse bankruptcy proceedings. As the national economy continued to falter, the rapid building of new homes in the high-priced luxury residential district George Kessler had envisioned in 1922 slowed to a crawl.

In retrospect the economic stress on the Dal-Oak/ Cliff-Dale/ El Tivoli golf course is fairly evident. The original organizers sold out their ownership interest in 1926 for \$25,000, a quarter of the \$100,000 stock value previously suggested by the *Dallas Morning News*. The subsequent facility name changes and management replacements suggest underlying financial hardships. The Oak Cliff Country Club simply disappeared from newspaper stories, probably due to a lack of sustainable private membership funds during those Great Depression years. There was a brief article reporting that a lumber supplier had petitioned the Courts for a bankruptcy proceeding against the new El Tivoli dinner-dance hall not too long after it opened in 1931, but that money problem apparently was resolved without foreclosure.

On October 1st of 1938 El Tivoli manager Nick Paulous signed a new five year lease promising to pay \$200 a month to rent 75 acres of the amusement park site. I have not researched the ownership of the remaining acreage of the El Tivoli golf course site, but it appears that it was owned (at least in large part) by one of Dallas greatest real estate developers, L.A. Stemmons. In retrospect if one needed to point to a single event that doomed the El Tivoli golf course, I think that it would probably be appropriate to cite the unexpected death of L. A. Stemmons at the age of 62 on the 15th of October 1939. Since George Kessler's death, no one else involved in the formulation of the Kessler-Stevens district seems to have had Stemmons's combination of long-range vision and real estate acumen. The 75 acres of El Tivoli that Paulous had re-leased in 1938 was owned by the Roman Catholic Church.

The entire site of the El Tivoli golf course was formerly the site of the famed utopian socialistic commune, the La Reunion Colony. A portion of the Colony land along the Coombes Creek on the north side of Davis Street had been purchased by colonist Maximillien Reverchon in June of 1870, as the communal ownership of La Reunion was dissolving. Reverchon had come to Texas from France to join LaReunion in 1855 with his son Julien. Maximillien was an experienced agronomist and his son, Julien Reverchon, was a botanist of international renown.

Julien spent the next several decades exploring Texas and identifying species of native flora. At their new Coombes Creek homestead they had built a small stone house which they named "Rose Cottage" and during the 1870s they cultivated the premier botanical garden of north Texas. Maximilien died and was buried there. Upon the death of his wife Marie in 1901 Julien, whose two sons had both died from typhus in 1884, signed a Will bequeathing his former botanical garden lands, along with all of his other property, to a young man the Reverchons had treated like a replacement son, Robert M. Freeman, with a special stipulation that if Freeman died without children of his own, then the estate would pass to "Saint Vincent De Paul Institution or order for the care of the Sisters of that order in Dallas, Texas". Julien Reverchon died at Rose Cottage in 1905. In 1909, surrogate son Robert Freeman and his wife Anna sold their interests in the Coombes Creek property to St. Paul's Sanitarium, the Dallas hospital run by the order of St. Vincent De Paul. [I am indebted to Elizabeth Dolen Deihl's *El Tivoli Place: My Neighborhood: Dallas, Dallas, Texas: 1855-2005* for land entitlement records.] Though few people may have been aware, the Roman Catholic Church remained the invisible landlord leasing those 75 acres to the El Tivoli Golf Course managers. Their lease agreement with Nick Paulous stipulated that the golf club was to preserve and maintain the Reverchons' old stone "Rose Cottage". In May of 1940, for \$7,410 the St. Paul's Hospital sold that 75 acre portion of the El Tivoli golf course to the St. Cecilia Church, the nearby local Roman Catholic parish situated on the former Bishop Dunne home site, east along Davis Street at modern Marycliff.

Meanwhile, the City of Dallas continuously pressed forward with the development and expansion of the municipal Stevens Park golf course. During the 1930s numerous federally funded work projects (WPA, CCC, and NYA) built a stone park pavilion, comfort station, stone picnic benches and tables, pedestrian bridges, and installed and improved numerous landscape features in the Stevens Memorial Park. In early 1941 the city wanted to use federal money to build a new stone clubhouse at Stevens, but "the stalemate over obtaining the property has made it impossible for the park department to erect a new clubhouse already planned" the *Dallas Morning News* reported. The City wanted 23 acres out of the old Bishop Dunne site, but the St. Cecilia Church administration insisted on a price of \$23,000 plus having a similar additional value of nearby road improvement work provided by the City. In April of 1941 exasperated unnamed City officials were quoted in the *Dallas Morning News* as favoring condemnation proceedings to acquire the land. Within weeks the Roman Catholic Church agreed to sell 12 acres for \$12,000 if the City agreed to build a steel fence protecting the remainder of the Church's undeveloped property. The deed Bishop Joseph Lynch signed the following August stated that the fence was needed because "past...users of said golf course...were continuously invading and trespassing" upon the Church's land. The City quickly started federally funded work on the new Stevens Park golf course clubhouse, which still stands today in an enlarged and remodeled form. City "Corporation Court prisoners" were brought to Stevens to labor on re-surfacing work and to rebuild golf course greens and fairways as the young men originally hired for the federal work projects left for military duties.

In December of 1941 the United States had suddenly entered World War II following the Sunday morning surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. Miss Annie L. Stevens, owner of the Stevens Park Estates and donor of the original Stevens Park Memorial Park, died suddenly at her Swiss Avenue home in east Dallas the next weekend.

When the five year lease on its part of the El Tivoli Golf Course expired at the end of September 1943, the Roman Catholic Church apparently already had a new buyer ready and waiting. Within a few weeks they had completed the sale transfer of the old Reverchon lands to

a new residential subdivision builder. The Church was paid \$25,010 for 59 acres (the part west of Plymouth Road) for a sum that amounted to over 10 years worth of their previous monthly lease payments. The old stone “Rose Cottage” and all of the old golf course features were then quickly razed to build 190 houses in the new El Tivoli residential subdivision. Only the El Tivoli name and a few of the old trees remained. The houses were leased to war production factory workers, providing new units of housing that booming wartime Dallas desperately needed. After the war, the homes were sold to individual owners.

And so it came to pass that in 1943, without public discussion or bereavement, half of the existing open space of George E. Kessler’s envisioned Coombes Creek greenbelt plan simply disappeared.

Much of the remainder of the former Dal-Oak country club site was filled during World War II with a temporary wooden barracks-style housing complex called “Mustang Village”. These units were later removed and various residential apartments and other developments filled the remainder of the old El Tivoli golf course site during the 1960s. Significant erosion damage along Coombes Creek started being reported in the *Dallas Morning News* in the spring of 1949.

First hand accounts from people alive today who still remember playing the now lost golf course recall that by the time it closed the private El Tivoli course was noticeably inferior to the Stevens Park municipal links. Decades of continuous improvement to the municipal course had left the private facility a poor comparison to its publicly financed competition. Furthermore, in the early 1940s the El Tivoli site was still on the fringes of Dallas’ urban development and any advantage of having future open urban green-space in the district was not at all visually evident at that time. The Depression had been a terrible financial setback. Kessler’s 1922 plan for a district of luxurious high-priced homes was no longer as compelling as the acute need for lower priced affordable housing felt by Dallasites during the 1940s. The people who had lived in the district in the 1940s were not the farmland “stake-holders” who had adopted the Kessler Plan in the early 1920s. By 1943 almost all of the original leadership of 1923’s Kessler Improvement District league were gone and there was not yet any of the sort of modern governmental regulatory mechanism to hold their former vision intact. When Kessler laid out the parkway route in the 1920s the city didn’t even have legalized zoning. There was no institutional policy or power to propel Kessler’s greenbelt scheme forward. Kessler’s big plan vanished as land development resorted to piecemeal decision making by individual owners and financiers.

The story of George E. Kessler’s plans for a greenbelt along the Coombes Creek turns out to be a bit like the proverbial “glass half-full -- half-empty”, at least so far.

(End)

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FORMAL OPENING

Next Tuesday, Aug. 5th

—of—

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FREE ADMISSION TO THE GROUNDS!

Something Doing All the Time! Special Big Features for Opening Day!



At 5 o'clock the following aquatic sports will be put on:
Life-saving demonstration by Mr. Alphonse Hagland of American Red Cross.
SWIMMING RACES
1st Event—50-yard dash for women.
2d Event—50-yard dash for boys.
3d Event—50-yard dash for men.
4th Event—100-yard dash for men.
5th Event—50-yard back-stroke for men.

Gold medals will be awarded the winners in each of the above events; handsome silver medals for second place in each race.
Bring your lunch baskets Tuesday and have a big time, or you can procure sandwiches, ice cream and all kinds of refreshments on the grounds.

An intermission in the aquatic program will give every one time to spread his own and eat "out next to nature," after which will be given demonstrations of men's and women's fancy diving.

In conclusion a beautiful program of fancy diving will be enacted by Miss Kay Tutweiler and her famous team of diving nymphs.

GOLF

match between Al Badger of Dallas Country Club and O. S. Carlton Jr. of Houston, former State champion, amateurs, and Fred Greenhill, professional of Cedar Crest, and Carl Baker, professional from Brook Hollow.



Time, 3:30 P. M. Tuesday
Free Admission to Gallery.

The golf program originally scheduled for Tuesday has been postponed until Saturday, Aug. 9, on account of amateur exhibition Tuesday, but on Saturday, Aug. 9, the original program for golf players will be put on and numerous prizes will be offered. Call O 2636 and Dave Cuthbert, the professional, will explain the details of Saturday's program.

FIREWORKS
Magnificent Fireworks Display at 9 o'Clock P. M.

FREE! Coffee and Iced Tea! FREE!
Delicious H. & H. Iced Tea and H. & H. Coffee will be served all day long absolutely free.

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Unquestionably Dallas' most delightful Pool!

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The water—pure artesian and natural crystal springs—by this combination fortunately is always just at the right temperature.

The hand of man has further beautified this wonder spot with hundreds of bright lights over pool, dell and woodland, sand wading beaches for the children, numerous spring boards, diving boards and aquatic equipment of all kinds. Plenty of shade all through the day with brilliant lighting at night.

Truly, DAL-OAK has more than you ever dreamed of "your boyhood swimmer's hole"—and every precaution in the form of complete sterilization has been made under the direct personal supervision of Dr. Landon C. More, director of sanitation.



HOW TO GET THERE Drive out the Fort Worth Pike! Dal-Oak is only 4 1/2 miles from the Courthouse. Drive in at the second or third gate. Right on the road—you can't miss it. Or catch the Fort Worth Interurban (Locals) and get off at the first station—Dal-Oak!

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You'll Have the Time of Your Life!

—and That Ain't Maybe!



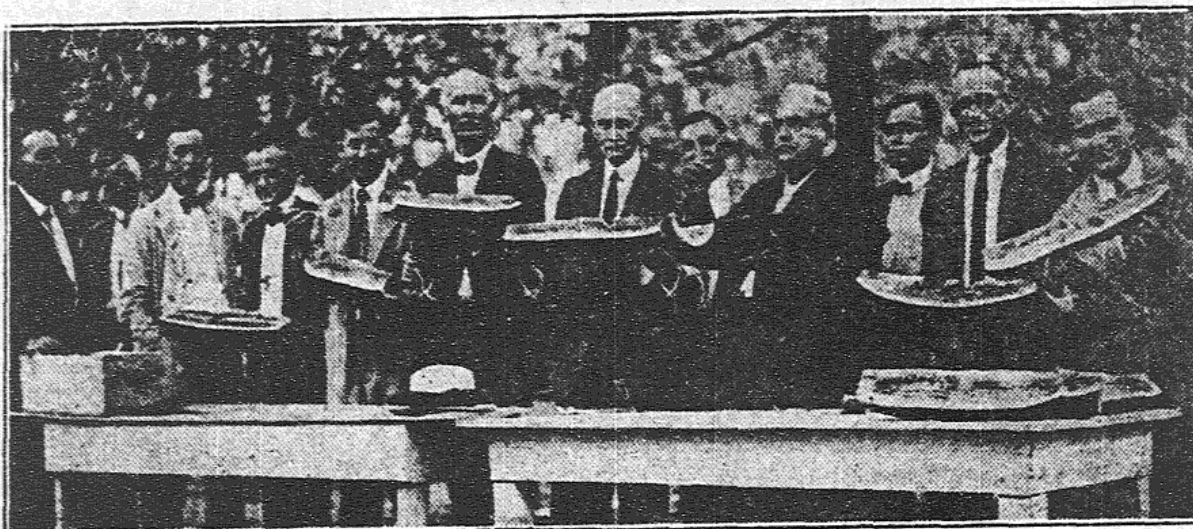
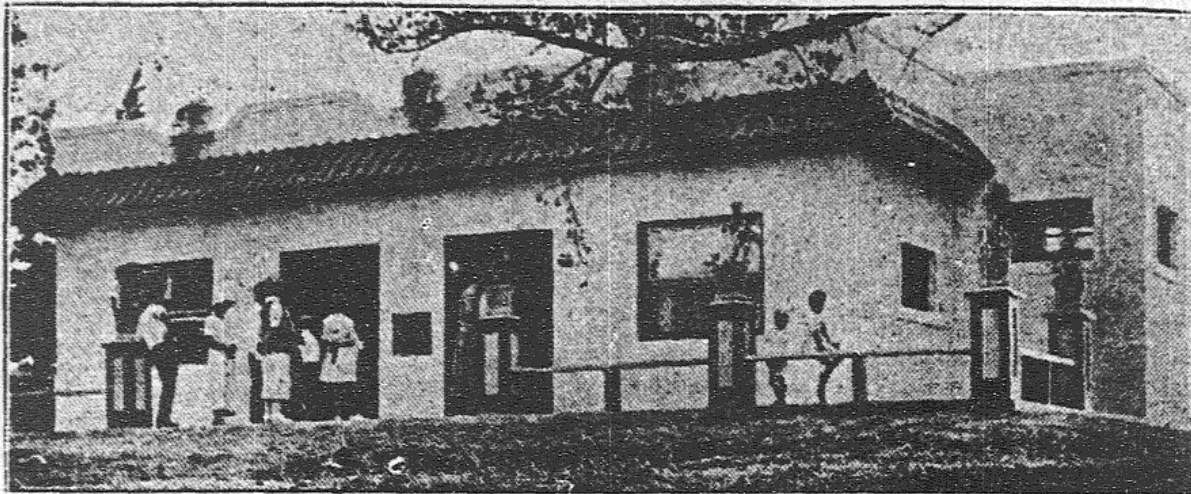
Dal-Oak is the Campers' paradise. Everything one could desire—gas lights, water, fire wood, free showers. Dal-Oak is the official tourist camp of Dallas Auto Club and adopted by C. A. M. A. A.



Watch for the Sky-Writer (capsule No. 2) 10 a.m. on, courtesy of the U. S. Army Aviation Corps, will write "Dal-Oak" daily over Dallas' skyline.

Though it had opened for play on the 18th of November 1923, the Dal-Oak Country Club held its "formal opening" on August 1924. Advertisement notice published in *The Dallas Morning News* on the 3rd of August 1924.

**STEVENS PARK CLUBHOUSE AND GROUP ENJOYING MELONS
DURING OPENING CEREMONIES SATURDAY AFTERNOON**



—News Staff Photos.

Civic officials sliced the first melons at Stevens Park. They are, above, from left to right: Milton H. McConnell, secretary of the Oak Cliff-Dallas Commercial Association; H. C. Burroughs, chairman of the watermelon arrangements; Harvey S. Trewitt, Park Board member; W. H. Adamson, principal of Oak Cliff High School and master of ceremonies; Mayor Louis Blaylock, Col. S. E. Moss, Park Board member and honor guest; W. Foster Jacoby, park director; John M. Fouts, principal Lagow School and chairman of program committee, and George W. Dealey, member arrangements committee.

*Though play had started on May 15th, the Stevens Park Golf Course held its "opening ceremonies" on the 16th of August 1924, two weeks after the formal opening of the Dal Oak Country Club. Article showing the original clubhouse, published in **The Dallas Morning News** on the 18th of August 1924, page 7.*