

Moody Park: From the Riots to the Future for the Northside Community

By Robinson Block

Moody Park stands four miles north of downtown in the heart of what Houstonians now call the Near Northside, an area that grew up in the 1890s, largely around the Southern Pacific rail yards. Development of the Irvington Addition, where Moody Park is located, started in the 1920s and continued into the 1930s. European immigrants, including Italians, Germans, Poles, and Czechs, called the Irvington Addition home.¹ The western edge of the thirty-five-acre park is bounded by Little White Oak Bayou. Fulton Street is to the east, the middle-class Silverdale community is to the north, and the Irvington Village Public Housing Project is to the south.

According to the Houston Parks Department, “The City of Houston purchased all or parts of approximately 120 lots of it in 1923 for \$18,000 in order to build a public park. Another 6 lots were purchased that year from the estate of the Cetti family for \$8,000, and Moody Park was born.”²

The park, named for Alvin S. Moody, a Democratic politician of the era, was founded in 1925.³ The city added the park’s amenities incrementally as funding allowed. A *Houston Chronicle* report indicated that “[in] about 1939, the current small gymnasium and meeting rooms were built in the northeast corner; the pool was installed about 1953; the popular baseball diamonds have been added since the ‘40s through last year [1977].”⁴

In the 1950s, many new immigrants to the Moody Park area were Mexican and Mexican American. At the time of the 1970 census, the area’s inhabitants were “approximately fifty percent (50%) Mexican American, thirty-five percent (35%) White, and fifteen percent Black (15%).”⁵

Many people who lived in Houston in the 1970s hear “Moody Park” and immediately think of the Moody Park Riots, which took place on May 7, 1978. The riots resulted in forty arrests, more than a dozen individuals hospitalized, and hundreds of

thousands of dollars of property damage to neighborhood businesses and police department vehicles.⁶ Strained police community relations, particularly in the Mexican American community following the police killing of Jose Campos Torres, motivated the riots. The aftermath carried significant implications for race relations in Houston and accelerated political reforms in the city and police department. The event continues to impact the Northside and Moody Park today.

The Moody Park Riots had deep roots in Chicano political activism of the late 1960s and 1970s in Houston. The Mexican American Youth Organization’s (MAYO) Barrio Chapter, based largely in the Near Northside, began pushing for social justice and civil rights in their community. In 1970, MAYO youth took over the Juan Marcos Presbyterian Church, located at 3600 Fulton, across the street from Moody Park, in order to turn it into a com-

munity center that served free breakfasts and provided educational programs for children and adults.⁷ Moody Park hosted community meetings to protest a flawed Houston Independent School District (HISD) integration plan and became home to *Huelga* (strike) Schools that taught the history of Mexican Americans and challenged HISD policies. Other *Huelga* Schools formed in the Northside, including one at Holy Name Church.

The riot reflected the larger Chicano movement, as well as other social movements of the era, that demanded social justice and an end to discriminatory policies against Mexican Americans and other minority groups. The Houston Police Department, infamous for its brutal treatment of minorities and young people, drew particular animosity, especially in response to the notorious events surrounding the death of Jose Campos Torres while in police custody. On May 5, 1977, Houston police officers took Torres, a Chicano Vietnam veteran from Houston’s East End,



The mural “Uplift our Culture” was commissioned by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and created by the Museum of Cultural Arts Houston and thirty-five children, teenagers, and adults during the summer of 1998. It is still featured on the exterior of the Moody Park Community Center.

Photo courtesy of Avenue CDC / GO Neighborhoods.



Children dance at a celebration in Moody Park in 1973.

Photo courtesy of Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

into custody at a bar. The officers severely beat him before taking him to jail, but the jail refused to accept him until he received medical treatment for his injuries. Instead of taking him to a hospital, the officers took Torres to 1200 Commerce Street where they beat him again before throwing him into Buffalo Bayou. Torres's body was discovered on May 8 near the McKee Street Bridge.

Prosecutors charged two of the officers with murder and three others with misdemeanors. Claiming that their clients could not get a fair trial in Harris County, defense attorneys successfully moved for a change of venue, and the case was tried in Huntsville, Texas. After month-long proceedings, the jurors found the officers guilty of negligent homicide, a misdemeanor with a sentence of probation and a one-dollar fine. Most observers agree that the case sparked the riots in Moody Park.⁸ Looking back, former police chief Harry Caldwell remarked, "It was the greatest miscarriage of public trust by police officers in my 27 years of wearing a badge."⁹

Accounts differ about exactly how the riot began. May 7, 1978, marked the park's Cinco de Mayo celebration, and throughout the day, thousands of people assembled. In the early evening, according to most reports, a fight resulted in a call for police assistance. When the police entered the park, people attending the celebration attacked them. The people threw bottles and eventually overturned patrol cars. The disturbance subsequently engulfed Fulton Street, where rioters broke windows of businesses, looted merchandise, and set some buildings on fire.

The police arrested forty people during the riot, including three people that they attempted to present as ringleaders. Travis Morales, Mara Youngdahl, and Thomas Hirschi were members of an organization called People United to Fight

Police Brutality that was active in the Chicano community following the murder of Jose Campos Torres. The police painted a picture of the "Moody Park 3" as instigators of the riot, chanting "Kill the pigs" and "Burn it down."¹⁰ Their defense attorneys produced eye witness testimony stating that although the three had been at the park earlier in the day, when the riot started, they were elsewhere at a barbeque.

Support for the defendants included representatives of the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), a nationwide Maoist group that worked on behalf of its members, some of whom came from California to protest on the defendants' behalf. Other defendants received aid from an alliance of community groups like the Barrios Unidos en Defensa (United Neighborhoods in Defense), which contacted defendants, helped find them lawyers, and raised funds by selling tamales and taking on other tasks.¹¹

Although the district attorney ultimately dropped the charges against many of those arrested, he prosecuted some



The People United Against Police Brutality demonstrated at the park in 1978.

Photo courtesy of Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.



Youth from the Northside get backpacks with school supplies at the 2011 Back to School Health Fair at Moody Park, hosted annually by State Representative Jessica Farrar.

Photo courtesy of State Representative Jessica Farrar's office.

defendants aggressively. One of those charged, Amparo Rodriguez, had recently been released from a mental hospital and pleaded insanity at her trial. The judge in her case admonished the district attorney saying that he was prosecuting her “as if she had murdered the president.”¹² Ishmael Iturralde, charged with a felony for stabbing a news reporter, had his charges reduced to a misdemeanor when it became clear during his trial that the police arrested him before the stabbing took place.¹³ Two of the Moody Park 3 were charged with instigating a riot, but sentenced to only a fine and probation. One of the jurors in the case described the testimony of the government witnesses bluntly, “some just told blatant lies.”¹⁴ The criminal prosecutions of those involved in the Moody Park Riot concluded in 1980, but the impact of the riot on the police and the park have endured.

Following the riots, the park continued to be a center for flash points in the community. In 1979, some Hispanic residents of the area sought to change the name of Moody Park to Marcario Garcia Park. Garcia, a Mexican immigrant to Fort Bend County, served in World War II and received the Medal of Honor for bravery in combat in Germany. After returning to Texas, he again made headlines when the police arrested him for fighting with a restaurant owner who refused him service based on his ethnicity. At the Houston City Council meeting on August 15, 1979, Rogelio Hernandez read a statement in Spanish requesting the name change of the park. Numerous Northsiders with European surnames objected to the proposal,

Programs at Moody Park in 1976 included magicians and clowns to entertain the children.

Photo courtesy of Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.



including A. E. Johnson of the North Side Civic Club who presented a petition from people who opposed any name change.¹⁵ The name change did not take place, possibly in part because the Garcia family believed that the move was designed “to cover up memories” of the 1978 riot.¹⁶

The Moody Park Riot caused a great deal of suffering in the Northside, but it also acted as a catalyst for significant structural change in the Houston Police Department and its relationship with communities of color. Police Chief Byron Bond resigned in June 1977, a month after the death of Jose Campos Torres, and the new chief, Harry Caldwell, made a number of reforms. The Houston Police Department established a permanent Internal Affairs Division and a Spanish language program for officers. It set up police store fronts in minority neighborhoods and became the first in the country to launch a recruiting team composed of black and brown officers. The number of Hispanic officers in HPD grew from 164 on March 31, 1978, to 472 officers in April 1988.¹⁷

News stories published after the riot examined the conditions in the Northside and Moody Park and found insufficient amenities for a community with a great deal of need. A *Houston Chronicle* report a week after the riot described the park as having only, “One drinking fountain and one small circular toilet compound in this central section [to] serve the entire park . . . Near the old gymnasium, two cement shuffleboards appear impossible to play — strips of grass break through the surface . . . The Main baseball diamond overlaps with a soccer field that has one sideline running roughly through first and third bases.” The same report observed the park’s extreme popularity, “Residents of the park area say Fulton regularly becomes so congested on Sundays, that city buses have to detour through back streets to avoid being bogged down.”¹⁸

Moody Park became the location of the *Vaquero* statue, created by renowned native-Texan, Chicano artist Jose Luis Jimenez. The city and the National Endowment for the Arts purchased it for \$34,000 in 1978 and installed it in Moody Park in 1982.¹⁹ While many regard *Vaquero* as the most important piece of public art in Houston, its reception by some community leaders was far less positive. Even though a replica of the statue was installed in front of the Smithsonian



Free Zumba classes take place at Moody Park every Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday. Attendance generally tops 100 people.
Photo by Rob Block.

American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., in 1990, two years later, the civic clubs of North Central, Lindale Park, Silverdale, and B.O.N.D came together to request that the sculpture be removed from the park. Leaders of these civic groups contended that the statue, which depicts a Mexican cowboy riding a horse and holding a pistol, sent the wrong message about violence and crime, and they sought its removal. Jimenez came to Houston in 1993 and argued that *Vaquero* represents a proud heritage of Mexican Americans who made up a third of all cowboys. The statue still remains in the park despite some opposition.

In 1986, the city rebuilt Moody Park's 12,400 square foot community center designed by architect W. Jackson Wisdom. Park bond funds and a community development block grant paid \$1,055,100 for its construction.²⁰ In 1988, Ben Reyes, city council member at the time, described the situation: "Moody has never been the same since. We spent a lot of money on it, fixing it up, making it beautiful, but the people still have a fear about what happened there that night. It has a stigma attached to it, and it'll take a lot to set that aside."²¹

In 1994 under Mayor Bob Lanier's Parks to Standards program, Moody was again overhauled. Improvements included additions to the community center, the creation of a running trail, construction of a gazebo, and resurfacing ball fields, tennis courts, and parking lots.²² In 1997, a new pool named after Bob and Elyse Lanier opened there.

While working on this article, I met with Debra Grisby, the facilities manager of Moody Park since 2005. On a cloudy Friday afternoon, Grisby shared her views on the park's past, present, and future. The Houston Parks Department has employed Grisby, a Louisiana native, for fourteen years. She initially felt apprehensive when she took the position of facility manager; many parks department employees told her stories about the riots, the frequent staff turn-over, that the park had been on "America's Most Wanted," and that the predominately Mexican American community might receive her, an African American woman, poorly. Seven years later, she is still happily nurturing numerous programs at the Moody Park Community Center and has friendly relationships with the diverse population that uses the park.

Today, Moody Park is the site of a number of important civic and community events. For example, it serves as the early voting site for its surrounding neighborhood, the only

parks department facility to do so. Jessica Farrar, the area's state representative, hosts an annual back-to-school health fair and backpack give-away for hundreds of youth and parents each August. Farrar's office also sponsors a "Monster Mash" every Halloween, providing a safe environment for children to get candy and observe the holiday. Each year the North Central Civic Club hosts an Easter egg hunt for children at Moody. The park holds an annual "Trash Bash" cleanup of the Little White Oak Bayou, a regional event of the Houston Galveston Area Council hosted by the M. D. Anderson YMCA, which inherited it from the Silverdale Civic Club.²³

Moody Park also serves as a mecca for recreation opportunities and organized sports. With an indoor basketball court and two covered outdoor courts, the park attracts athletes from as far away as Greenspoint. It has frequently hosted amateur basketball events, like the Big Blacktop Battle 3 on 3 tournament, sponsored by the Houston Rockets. Baseball in the park has a long but fractured history. Lindale Little League, a private association founded in 1950, left Moody Park soon after the riots and moved its games to Robertson Park at Cavalcade and Robertson. In 2003, the Lindale leadership felt comfortable moving the games back to Moody Park.²⁴ Soccer now reigns supreme there, however, with both regular pickup games and a youth league organized with support from the Houston Dynamo available to park patrons.

The Community Center hosts a wide variety of activities: senior programs, martial arts classes, an after school program, and Zumba classes that regularly attract 100 people and meet on Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday. The Center's meeting rooms provide space to all kinds of groups, from civic clubs to organizers of high school reunions. In Grisby's seven years at Moody, attendance has slowly climbed for many of the programs and facilities in the park. But many who remember the area before the 1978 riots say that use of the park today pales in comparison to earlier times when it was packed every weekend with birthday parties, ball games, and barbeques.



Vaquero by Jose Luis Jimenez.
Photo courtesy of Houston Parks and Recreation Department.

Moody Park and the surrounding Northside community are currently undergoing a new series of transformations. Fulton Street, in front of the park, is under construction for the northern extensions of Houston's Red Line, which will connect the park and adjacent neighborhood to downtown, the Museum District, and the Medical Center. The construction process has been tedious with Fulton frequently closed to through traffic and construction vehicles taking up parking lots. However, the city's recent focus on the area has led to a plan to remodel and expand the park's community center under the direction of Houston-based Clark Condon Associates, which planned the 1994 remodel. It will close in September 2012 and reopen a year later. The plans expand the building, especially the popular weight room, and add amenities like an archery course, a first in the Houston Parks Department.

Grisby is taking everything in stride. Anticipating the disruptions that the park's remodeling inevitably will bring, she is working with the Wesley Community Center and neighborhood churches to make sure seniors have a place to continue socializing and assisting instructors to find new venues for their classes. Although these changes present inconveniences in the short term, the new light rail line to the area and community center will bring new positive attention to the Northside and to Moody Park.

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Elizabeth Baldwin Park

Elizabeth Baldwin Park claims one of the most unique histories of any park in the city. The Houston Parks Department acquired the land in 1905 after receiving a bequest of \$9,250 from Baldwin's estate to establish the park. Baldwin was the daughter of Houston's first mayor and the second wife of William Marsh Rice, businessman and benefactor of Rice University. The Rices moved to New York City to escape tropical diseases found in Houston, but later returned hoping the warmer climate would help other health issues that Elizabeth experienced.

During this time, Elizabeth Baldwin had her attorney prepare a secret will that would give her half of her husband's estate based on Texas residency and community property. When she predeceased Rice in 1896, a legal battle ensued over whether the couple lived in Texas or New York to establish her entitlement to half of Rice's fortune.

The delay caused New York attorney Albert Patrick who represented Baldwin's residency claim to grow impatient. He arranged for Rice's valet to slowly poison Rice with mercury. After the 1900 storm hit Galveston and Rice was spending money to reestablish his businesses, Patrick feared his share of the wealth would be lost and ordered Rice's murder in September 1900. Patrick then tried to cash a forged check, and the whole scheme unraveled. He was sentenced to death, but the conviction was overturned despite testimony against him by the valet. In the end, Baldwin's estate received \$200,000, including the funds used for Baldwin Park, freeing money from Rice's estate to establish Rice Institute.

In 1912, Elizabeth Baldwin Park came full circle with the addition of a fountain named after her aunt, Charlotte Allen, a founding matriarch of Houston. The city upgraded it again through bond initiatives in 1930 and 1931, establishing a popular tennis

court. Most recently, a 2003 bond sale by the Midtown Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone (TIRZ) brought many renovations to the park. The TIRZ added a Vietnamese Heritage Plaza, honoring the many Vietnamese residents in the area, that welcomes visitors in several languages. New trees were planted and an irrigation system installed to rejuvenate the green space. The park sports a crushed granite jogging trail, picnic tables, and chess tables for those that like to enjoy a breath of fresh air. A calm and serene park, Baldwin is located on Elgin near Highway 59.¹

The pieces scattered throughout this issue on neighborhood and special interest parks in Houston were prepared by *Houston History* intern **Naveen Inampudi**.



A ribbon cutting ceremony took place in the Vietnamese Heritage Plaza to mark the rededication of Baldwin Park on November 13, 2006.

Photo courtesy of Houston Parks and Recreation Department.