

OAK KNOLL PARK.....a closer look at its distant past

Written by James W. Sherby

Today people of all ages from the communities surrounding Clayton enjoy Oak Knoll Park, its natural beauty, buildings and convenient location at Big Bend Boulevard and Clayton Road that arose from a combination of luck and significant planned and unplanned events. The 15 plus acre property that makes up the park is located on a hilltop of large, mostly oak trees, with a gradual southern slope down to a small pond next to Clayton Road on its southern boundary. Big Bend Boulevard is on the east, with the subdivisions of Claverach Park on the west, and Southmoor on the north.

Early history

Looking back in time, the first European settlers in this region came from France and established the village of St. Louis in 1764, on the west bank of the Mississippi River that was claimed and governed as the Upper Louisiana Territory by Spain. The village itself and later large parcels of land were granted by Spanish authorities to prominent local French citizens to gain their allegiance and to compensate for their governing roles. Over time in the later part of the 1700's the Spanish land grants of thousands of acres extended westward 7 to 8 miles from the village westward into and around area of Clayton today.

Several large Spanish land grants and later New Madrid certificates for land issued after 1817 surrounded but did not include the present day site of Oak Knoll Park, allowing a narrow triangular shaped heavily wooded parcel of 76 acres to momentarily remain unclaimed.

The triangular 76 acre parcel was bordered on the north by Marie Louise Chouteau Papin's 2,722 acres; on the east by Charles Gratiot's 6,396 acres, and on the west his 629 acres located just beyond a New Madrid Certificate number 465 issued to Bartholemi Tardiveau for 204 acres; and on the south another New Madrid Certificate number 11 of 640 acres held by Joseph Farland. Early farmers passed the 76 acre triangular parcel up as too forested, when grass prairies nearby offered better ground. The configuration of these large early parcels leaving a small area untouched between them greatly helped preserve the Oak Knoll site for its eventual special role in our community as a site for two beautiful homes for many years and eventually a uniquely situated public park.

Shortly after the Missouri territory came into the Union in 1821 as the 24th state, and the New Madrid Certificates 465 and 11 were placed adjacent to large parcels of land, Joseph Papin purchased the 76 acre triangular parcel that includes the site of present day Oak Knoll Park. About thirty four (34)

years later, in 1855, Papin divided the triangular parcel in 4 parts, breaking up the 76 acres and selling the northern 20 acres (present day Forest Ridge subdivision) to the farm owner to his west, Benjamin Franklin Thomas, the next 21 acres to the south (present day Southmoor subdivision) was sold to Adam Grosch who built his home there, and the next portion to the south, 15 plus acres (present day Oak Knoll Park) sold again to Mr. Thomas. The narrow 15 plus acres to the south of Clayton Road was purchased by Ed Bredell, who added it to his 117 acres on the west.

The owners of the eventual Oak Knoll parcel, Benjamin and Julia Thomas lived with their family of four children on an adjacent 150 acre farm they called "Claverach". Their children played in the woods on the east side of their property, present day Forest Ridge, Southmoor and Oak Knoll. In 1883, Benjamin F. Thomas sold the 15 plus acres (Oak Knoll site) to his son John R. Thomas, who still lived with his sister, Catherine Thomas Boland and her husband, John L. Boland and their family at the Claverach Farm. The hill top then took on the name of "Uncle Johnny's woods" and remained a quite wooded hill top where the Boland kids loved to escape and play. Both the Thomas and Boland children enjoyed playing in the woods while they grew up at Claverach.

After the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, land developers began to pay premium prices for land west of Forest Park including land next to Uncle Johnny's Woods to subdivide for residential development. Forest Ridge subdivision and Southmoor subdivision both to the immediate north of "Uncle Johnny's woods" were subdivided in 1909 and 1913 respectively.

In 1914, John Thomas decided to sell his 15 plus acres to Claytonia Land & Investment Company, with Charles M. Rice as President, through a straw party William Cady, as was the common practice for \$50,000, a price of over \$3,000 per acre. His sister, Catharine Thomas Boland, a few years later sold the 200 plus Claverach farm and estate at the same price per acre. Even though all the land in the area was being developed for residential subdivisions, the Rice and Goldman families had different plans for their 15 plus acre site. They would join together and develop the site, name it "Oak Knoll" and each have a country estate that would allow them to move away from their city homes. Charles loved nature, fresh air and the outdoors and having woods surrounding his home was a dream come true. Also, as he suffered from asthma, the country estate would allow him to escape the smoke and pollution of the city at the time.

In the years 1914 to 1916, Charles and his wife, May Goldman Rice together with her brother, Alvin D. Goldman and his wife Blanche Lesser Goldman began to design and develop their two parcels in Oak Knoll by putting in a private road curving up the hill from Clayton road through the middle of the property then over to then Pennsylvania Boulevard now Big Bend Boulevard at the northeast corner of the property. (A walkway in the

park following the original private road has now replaced this road.) Each entrance is marked with limestone columns, capped with a decorative acorn finial.

In 1916, Alvin Goldman added to the “old John Thomas parcel” by purchasing a 3.5 acre triangular parcel on the west side that extended northward from the north side of Clayton Road from Henry and Blanche Ittleson of New York City for \$17,000 to complete the 18 plus acres Oak Knoll site.

Oak Knoll would remain in the Rice and Goldman families until late 1957, when May Goldman Rice, widow of Charles Rice sold #1 Oak Knoll to her sister in law, Blanche Goldman. Shortly afterwards in June of 1958, Alvin and Blanche Goldman sold the entire property and structures for \$350,000 to the City of Clayton with the understanding that the property would be developed into a park. Clayton financed the purchase through a publically supported bond issue evidencing voter support for the acquisition of the site as a public park.

Charles Marcus Rice and May Goldman Rice

The story of the Goldman and Rice families is a vital part of the heritage of Oak Knoll and follows.

Desiring to live in the fresh air and country surroundings, the creation of Oak Knoll can be mainly attributed to Charles Marcus Rice (1882- 1950). Charles was born in St. Louis to Jonathan and Aurelia Stix Rice, very successful St. Louis retail merchants. He was the only surviving child of three born to Jonathan and Aurelia. Charles received his undergraduate degree from Washington University in 1904 and his law degree from St. Louis University Law School in 1907. A year later, in 1908, he and May Goldman (1883- 1960), Jacob Goldman’s daughter were married. Their first child, Erna Sarah Rice was born in 1910 (1910-), and in 1912 they had a son, Jay Goldman Rice (1912-).

In February of 1915, the family moved from 51 Kingsbury Place, a home in the Central West End given to Charles by his mother in 1908 upon his wedding to May Goldman, to their newly constructed native limestone 22 room home at Oak Knoll, #1 Oak Knoll. The building permit application at Clayton indicates that the house cost \$30,000 to build. In 1916, their third child, Jonathan Charles Rice (1916-2001) was born. Oak Knoll #1 located on the east side of the property was then the only home at Oak Knoll for six (6) years until 1922, when #2 Oak Knoll was built and occupied by May’s brother Alvin and his wife, Blanche Lesser Goldman, and their family of three similarly aged children to the Rice family. The six

cousins actively enjoyed Oak Knoll daily with its tennis court, pond, and trees.

Charles was a prominent lawyer in St. Louis, starting the law firm of Lewis and Rice in 1909 with Joseph W. Lewis, and served as a member of many boards for businesses and charitable organizations, including the St. Louis Academy of Science, Boy Scouts, Jewish Hospital, and Jewish Community Association. He was an avid naturalist, and outdoorsman, frequently spending time on their 600 acre country property 30 miles south off Highway 21 in Jefferson County. On this property a cave was discovered by Charles which led to the family's increased interest in exploring their cave and other caves in the nearby area.

Charles' son Jonathan recalls in his memoirs kept in the archives of the Missouri History Museum Library and Research Center an event they undertook in preparation of caving in a new cave. Through their caving friends, a cave was located that had only a vertical entrance requiring a 15-20 foot ladder. Charles and his two sons Jay, and Jonathan and some of their friends decided they better practice first aid to be sure they could raise the heaviest of the group, Charles, by a rope, in case he could not climb the ladder. It was decided to practice this procedure at #1 Oak Knoll over the banister from the second floor to the lobby by the front door with the rope tied to Charles. The boys pulled him up off the floor about 4 feet when the door bell rang and a group of May's symphony friends from out of town came in, and screamed at the sight of his dangling feet, which then caused the boys to let go of the rope, and Charles crashing to the ground, fortunately unhurt at the feet of the startled visitors.

Charles later through his interest in caves ended up owning and operating Onondaga Cave near Sullivan Missouri through strange set of circumstances, and later sold it off after a few years.

At age 68, Charles died at #1 Oak Knoll in 1950, survived by his wife, May and three adult children who already moved out of their childhood home.

May Goldman Rice was nicknamed "Mamoo", a name that had been used by Charles' ancestors for their grandmother. When May was 12 years old her mother died and May then assumed the role of hostess to her prominent father, Jacob Goldman and his friends at social events in their grand home on Hortense Place in the Central West End. As Mrs. Charles M. Rice, May was described as charming, powerful, a volunteer executive, THE hostess, and a leader in the Jewish community. She was known for having big parties at #1 Oak Knoll, with elaborate menus, and excellent food. May loved music; as a young lady she studied music and singing in Vienna, Austria chaperoned by Rosalie Kaufman. She served on the board for St. Louis Symphony, and was active with the Red Cross, garden clubs, Missouri Botanical Gardens. All this could be accomplished with the aid of their

faithful servants: a gardener, cook, downstairs maid, chauffeur who resided at #1 Oak Knoll also. Many of the help served for over 25 years.

The Rice and Goldman families spent summers at Charlevoix, Michigan together in a large summer home that slept 15. Many parties were held there and songs composed with words about family events written to the popular music of the time. The song sheets were typed and distributed among the impromptu choir members and sung with May or Erna at the piano.

One of my favorite historic pieces uncovered in my research on May Rice is a full page newspaper advertisement during World War II of Ward's tip-top bread that features May seated at a piano, as she was vice president of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, offering extensive quotes on the fine quality of the bread.

May and Charles' granddaughter, Ellen Post, the daughter of Erna Rice Post recalled stories told her by her mother about growing up at Oak Knoll, and the fun her Mom enjoyed growing up on heavily forested property. During the summer months, the children were told to stay away from the gypsies who stopped by the pond at the south end of the property.

Ellen recalled being told by Erna that a shooting took place on the property when a maid was shot and killed by her husband that suspected her of being unfaithful. Small articles in the Globe-Democrat and Post-Dispatch newspapers covered the homicide. This death may explain the inclusion of the Oak Knoll homes on the list of haunted houses published in Robbi Courtaway's 1999 book entitled *Spirits of St. Louis, a Ghostly Guide to the Mound City's Unearthly Activities*, also mentioned earlier in Jim Creighton's 1975 Post Dispatch article entitled "*Ghosts in St. Louis Lack Character*".

We'll come back to this story later in this article and I'll try to shed more light on this ghostly question, but first let's look at #2 Oak Knoll built in 1922 next door to the Rices by Alvin and Blanche Goldman and their family.

Alvin D Goldman and Blanche Lesser Goldman

Alvin D Goldman (1881- 1958) and Blanche Lesser Goldman (1885-) were both born into wealthy St. Louis families that were well acquainted as business partners in the cotton merchandizing business. Their fathers were partners in the very successful Lesser-Goldman Cotton Company. Alvin attended public and private schools, graduated from Harvard in 1903, then attended Washington University law school for a short time before joining the Lesser-Goldman Cotton Company, where he worked as an officer of the company until he retired in 1945.

In 1907 Alvin and Blanche Lesser married and lived in a large home at 4615 Lindell Boulevard.

Blanche is the daughter of Julius Lesser, one-time president of the St. Louis City Council and officer and director of numerous commercial, philanthropic and social organizations. She served as vice president and director of the St. Louis Maternity Hospital, St. Louis Jewish Scholarship Foundation, Women's Exchange, and Mary Institute Alumni Board.

Alvin and Blanche had three children: Jacob Lesser Goldman "Lesser" (1909- 1951), Lenore (1912-1940), and Jacob D. Goldman "Jack" (1915- 2001), all in the same age range as their cousins in the Rice family next door at #1 Oak Knoll.

In March 1921 the City of Clayton issued Alvin and Blanche a permit to construct at #2 Oak Knoll a 2 story native limestone residence measuring 128 x45 for \$60,000, and a stone dwelling with garage measuring 70 x 35 for \$30,000. The young Goldman family moved in to their new home at #2 Oak Knoll in May of 1922, and the 6 cousins then joined up to enjoy Oak Knoll. Oak Knoll remained a quite wooded hilltop corner while over the next decade the property to the north and west was built out with homes and families moving in regularly.

The shared properties on Oak Knoll worked well, with the husbands of both families remaining to live out their lives there. Charles died first in 1950, and Alvin died in 1958 both after living at Oak Knoll for 36 years.

Creation of Oak Knoll as a Park

A few months before Alvin's death in 1958, and after acquiring the Rice parcel at Oak Knoll late in 1957, Alvin and his wife Blanche sold the entire Oak Knoll property, consisting of three dwellings and 15 plus acres to the City of Clayton for a reported \$350,000. The Goldmans apparently earlier investigated the idea of subdividing the property into residential lots for development as a subdivision. During that process, conversations with Clayton's Planning committee chairman, Roy Jordan resulted in the idea of preserving the homes and the land as a public park instead. Given the extensive wealth and charitable interest of the families, creation of a public park was accepted as a solution to the disposition of the properties.

Museum of Natural Science (Science Museum) 1960-1985

In 1959, #1 and #2 Oak Knoll received their first non family occupants when Clayton leased both structures to the Museum of Natural Science. The Museum was founded in 1858 as the Academy of Science, and the organization where Charles Rice served as a member of the Board of Directors. In 1971 voters in the City and County of St. Louis approved a tax for a Special Cultural Tax district that included the Museum of Natural Science, Art Museum and the Zoo and generated about \$400,000 annually for the Science Museum. Over \$100,000 was used by the Science Museum to repair and maintain Oak Knoll during this period.

In 1983, the Science Museum out grew their space, and could not obtain approval from Clayton to tear down the homes at Oak Knoll and build a larger facility with more parking, so the Museum joined with the McDonnell Planetarium in Forest Park to obtain an increase in the Special Cultural tax for the Science Museum. With this additional funding the Science Museum moved after 26 years from Oak Knoll to the Planetarium in 1985.

For some time, both #1 and #2 Oak Knoll remained seemingly unoccupied, while Clayton searched for suitable tenants. In 1990 the Clayton Child Care Center moved into #1 Oak Knoll after making renovations. Today they remain as the tenant serving the local community. In 1995, the Saint Louis Artist's Guild, founded in 1886, moved from Webster Groves into #2 Oak Knoll again after extensive renovations and repairs and remains as the tenant with their studios open to the public. Private parties are commonly held at #2 Oak Knoll throughout the year and especially during the warmer months when a tent on the south porch expands the available space for the facility.

Back to our ghostly investigation and inquiry:

I have been able to locate factual details of the homicide from sources in: (i)local newspaper articles, (ii) the Appellant's Brief on appeal to the Missouri Supreme Court in 1943 from a conviction of Murder in the 2d degree in St. Louis County Circuit Court with a sentence of 15 years in the State Penitentiary, (iii)the Missouri Supreme Court 1944 decision reversing and remanding the case for a new trial,(iv) but not the trial court file from March 8, 1942 to May 1945, which is missing/destroyed or cannot be located in the archives of the St. Louis County Circuit Court .

Here is what I learned, in summary:

On March 8, 1942, William Bradley age 50, a faithful and long term servant of the Rice family, worked as a chauffeur primarily for May Rice and performed other odd jobs around #1 Oak Knoll. He was married to Molly Rice, 15 years younger at age 35 and they lived on the third floor of #1 Oak Knoll. They had been married about 7 years, during which time Molly had separated from William at least twice, and had recently returned from a 6 month period separation in California.

On the morning of March 8th 1942, Molly after sleeping on a couch separate from William packed her two suit cases and planned to again leave William, most likely this time for good, as she had met another man, who incidentally was a porter on the railroad and gave her the suit cases while traveling on the train back from California. While she was in the bathroom on the 3rd floor getting ready to leave at 8:30 in the morning, William went downstairs and asked the son of Charles and May, Jay Rice, age 30 and an officer in the Army, who was eating breakfast with his wife at the time, if he could shoot a hawk that was in the tree next to the house. As it was customary for William to shoot hawks and keep them away from the smaller song birds, Jay said it was OK.

William then put a 12 gauge shell into a shotgun that was upstairs, and took the safety off. Then he first went into his bedroom, turned around and went down the hall towards the bathroom so he could shoot through the open window without a screen, and while approaching the bathroom.....here is what the only living witness William Bradley said.....with the shotgun in hand, he tripped on his loose sole of his left shoe, and stumbled into the bathroom door causing the shotgun to discharge, hearing a moan, he then saw his wife, Molly on the floor behind the partially opened door. He then came down stairs and encountered his first witness, a maid and trembling he asked her to please call a doctor, that he had tried to shoot a hawk, but stumbled and shot his wife, Molly.

William was arrested and charged with the murder of Molly. In January 1943, a St. Louis County jury heard many witnesses including several of Molly's family who stated William repeatedly threatened Molly in front of them that if she ever left him again he'd kill her. The jury convicted William of murder in the 2d degree. The Missouri Supreme Court reversed the conviction because an improper instruction given to the jury regarding the elements of proof of the offense. On retrial in 1945, William was found not guilty of murder in the first degree. William had moved to Ohio and worked there after the homicide.

Molly's bags were packed, in preparation for leaving her husband at #1 Oak Knoll; she encountered a sudden and unexpected death preventing

her departure. Is her spirit settled or still seeking to leave #1 Oak Knoll? Did it leave and take up residence in #2 Oak Knoll?

To investigate these stories of ghosts, sometime before 1985, the director of the Museum of Science and Natural History and a television newsman resolved to spend the night in #1 Oak Knoll, but as they approached the home that evening, the director's small dog whimpered and refused to enter the lobby of #1 Oak Knoll. They chose instead to stay in the lobby of the Natural History Building at #2 Oak Knoll. The dog went right in without hesitation, and they spent the night without a visitation or disturbance.

This ghostly story simply adds to the history of Oak Knoll Park, but does not overshadow the park in our community. Many families preserved the land and later built architecturally significant homes that today serve the community. Walkways beneath large trees pass by fountains, a historic pond, and rain garden. Playgrounds are filled with happy active children. Parties, concerts, and receptions are regularly scheduled. Quiet benches in the shade and picnic tables invite visitors. Nature and people come together at Oak Knoll just like Charles Rice always wanted. His dream of being away from congestion with fresh air in the shaded woods is still alive and shared with others.

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