

# Rietz Park · History



*The following is an article by Mark Fedder, Manistee County Historical Museum published in the Manistee News Advocate on July 22, 2011. Photographs from the Manistee County Historical Museum.*

*It's very easy to forget about the many marvels (natural and man-made), that we have in Manistee County. Often times we pass by these places so frequently that they become just another familiar place. However, these familiar places still hold a little bit of wonder to them.*

*Years after prominent businessman Charles Rietz passed away, his heirs donated land surrounding his mansion to the City of Manistee. That land would become known as Rietz Park and today it continues to be one of the more unique places in our county.*

*While Manistee's history is full of eclectic lumber barons, perhaps one of the most interesting ones is Charles Rietz. Rietz was born in Germany in 1824 and after serving time in the German army, immigrated to the United States in 1849.*

*After traveling around Illinois and Wisconsin, Rietz, along with his three brothers, eventually made his home in Chicago where he began operating a lumber business. By 1867 Rietz came to Manistee and soon became the owner and operator of numerous sawmills where he provided lumber for the family's retail lumbering yard in Chicago.*

*In 1881, Rietz was the first person in Manistee to drill for and discover salt in the ground which led to a whole new manufacturing division for his and other area sawmills.*

*In 1874 Rietz had a large mansion constructed on a hilltop (in present day Oak Hill) that overlooked one of his sawmills. The mansion, described as a palatial, elegant home, included numerous acres of land in which Rietz had one of the best privately-owned gardens and parks in the city. An article describing that area was published in the Manistee Times and Standard on July 9, 1881:*

*"His grounds are beautifully located on the high table land overlooking Manistee Lake and the city, and embrace about 20 acres under cultivation. The soil is sandy and as light as any in the county; yet through cultivation and irrigation he has realized most bountiful products of all kinds of garden and field vegetables. He has a large field in grapes of the very best variety and every vine is growing luxuriantly. It is safe to say that in quantity and quality, his graperies is unrivaled in northern Michigan.*

*"... and on the south of his cultivated fields and near his house is the celebrated Rietz Park that is fast becoming the rival of the best park in the land."*

*After Charles Rietz passed away in 1890, the house and the land fell into a state of disrepair. A number of years later, his heirs decided to give a portion of the land to the City of Manistee. On Aug. 4, 1908 lawyer A.J. Dovel, on behalf of the family, presented city council with the terms and conditions of which the gift of the park was made:*



Fountain in Rietz Park





*"This conveyance is made upon the express condition that the said premises shall always be kept and properly maintained by the said City of Manistee as Charles Rietz Park for the use, recreation, and pleasure of the people of Manistee and if devoted to any other purposes and not properly cared for or maintained in a suitable manner in such a public park, the said lands shall immediately revert to the said grantors or their survivors or either of them, their heirs, representatives or assigns."*

*During the next several months, many plans were made for the new park. Prominent landscape artist, J. Pomeroy Munson, of Grand Rapids, was hired to design the grounds while ladies from the Lakeside Club were elected as board members for the park.*

*By 1910, the park itself began to take shape. An article published on March 23, 1910 in the Manistee Daily News provides Munson's original design concepts for the new park:*

*"Within it there should be all possible quiet, together with everything that will call to mind the happy peace of the country, and make us forget the town. To this end, the ground should possess as much natural charm as may be, some pleasant variety of surface, with both wood and open ground and some one point from which to view the around and outside."*

*Munson's designs were soon put into motion by the late spring of 1910 when the landscape work began on the park. Included in the original design and landscape was an area, which Munson referred to as "the open space." This space was to be utilized, "so that the area might be used for games such as baseball, tennis, croquet, etc. if thought desirable."*

*The other side of the park was used to enforce the comforts of the countryside in that it was surrounded by foliage with cement walkways winding through the various shrubs and trees. Munson's design concept called for:*

*"... shrubbery, which I would suggest would be of the native growth mostly, with some other kinds which would blend well with the native material. All would be entirely hardy, and require no winter coverings. Most of the trees which would be suggested would be of native varieties: maples, birches, elms, and other deciduous sorts."*

*Today, one of the more unique features of the park is that some of the items that were original to its inception are still there. One of these items is a circular pool which highlighted the park's natural beauty. While today the pool is overgrown with grass, an article published on May 21, 1910 in the Manistee Daily News, provides a brief, early description of it:*



*"Upon entering the park one will first see the pool, a low basin, of water, circular, and fifteen feet in diameter. There will be a circulation of water in the pool, and probably it will be stocked with goldfish."*

*Yet another remaining feature original to the park are the unique drinking fountains that are located near the park's entrance off of Main Street. While not in use today, the drinking fountains were originally provided for use by animals. An article appearing in the Manistee Daily News in May 1910, provides a brief description of the larger fountain:*



*"An especially pleasing feature of the park is the handsome fountain at the entrance, the gift of Mrs. E. Golden Filer. The design is a huge boulder containing the artistically wrought inscription, "Be Kind to Animals."*

*Baseball games later began to be played in the open space portion of the park. Today, the Manistee Saints as well as other area baseball and softball teams continue to play there.*

*Even though Rietz Park was fashioned more than 100 years ago, it still continues to be used for its original purpose — for recreational use by the people of Manistee. However, the park also remains, and will hopefully always remain, a special tribute to Charles Rietz, the original owner of "the best park in the land."*