

BIDWELL PARK

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Chico

Butte County

California

HALS CA-69

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

National Park Service

U.S. Department of the Interior

1849 C Street NW

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HALS NO. CA-69

Location: Between Mangrove Avenue at the east, Villombrosa Avenue to the north, South Park Drive to the south and extending approximately five and one half miles to the east. Chico, Butte County, California
Lat: 39.734953 Long: -121.830361 (South end of Sycamore Pool, Google Earth, Simple Cylindrical Projection, WGS84)

Significance: Bidwell Park is significant because of its association of John and Annie Bidwell. John Bidwell was part of the first wagon trains that arrived in California, he discovered gold in 1848, laid out the town of Chico, served in the House of Representatives, lobbied for California statehood, and ran for President of the United States in 1892. Annie Ellicott Kennedy Bidwell was the daughter of Joseph C.G. Kennedy, Superintendent of the U.S. Census and was an advocate for prohibition and the suffragette movement.

Description: Bidwell Park is the third largest urban park in the United States. It is a linear park varying in width from 400 to 1600 feet in the lower portion. The park is divided into three parts referred to as lower, middle and upper park. These divisions are also referred to as 1 mile and 5 mile referring to the distance from the Bidwell mansion.

The lower portion of the park is closest to downtown and is the most developed with several entry points from adjacent residential neighborhoods. The main entry is off South Park Drive west of Mangrove Avenue. This entry is flanked by a pair of simple, rough-hewn, granite columns, each topped with a stout, rectangular light. Each has a modest bronze commemorative plaque embedded in the front face, and an ornamental gate spans the opening. A similar, more modest gate is at an entry from the north side of the park at Villombrosa Avenue.

Amenities in the lower portion of the park include picnic facilities, open lawn areas, a baseball field, horseshow pits, a themed children's play area called "Caper Acres", and Sycamore swimming pool formed by the damming of Chico Creek. The water flows rapidly through the pool, which is about 600 feet in length and 95 feet wide, and then exits via a spillway at the east end. A footbridge crosses over the spillway. Native sycamore trees line one side of the pool. Chico Area Recreation District Community Center and a Campfire Council Ring are also in the lower portion of the park.

The middle portion of the park consists of trails and a single, one-way drive that lie beneath a continuous canopy of trees. Summer temperatures in Chico are typically in the 100s, so these trees and the swimming pool are essential amenities. Tree species are predominantly valley oak (*Quercus lobata*), and native sycamore (*Platanus*

racemosa). The understory is mostly grasses, willow and spice bush (*Calycanthus occidentalis*). Big Chico Creek continues through the middle and upper portions of the park, and there are individual picnic facilities along the drive, each with a barbecue. Every few yards there are entry points from the neighborhoods with narrow footbridges where needed to cross the creek.

Facilities in the Upper portion of the park include an 18-hole golf course, a driving range, an observatory, a fishing pier, a rod and gun club, Horseshoe Lake, picnic facilities, equestrian trails and some 68 miles of hiking trails of varying steepness. Just east of Manzanita Avenue is the Hooker Oak Picnic Area – named for the Hooker Oak – the largest known valley oak until it fell in a 1977 storm. The Easter Cross is located off the North Rim Trail. Small parking areas are provided throughout the park and are discretely tucked in and screened to be convenient but unobtrusive. The entire park has a rustic, informal quality. There is very little irrigated, mown lawn. Instead the park brings the wilderness into downtown.

History:

On July 10, 1905 Annie Bidwell signed a grant deed donating 1903 acres to the people of Chico for a public park. She said at the time that this grant followed the desire of her late husband, expressed for some time before his death. On May 11, 1911 she gave a further 303 acres of park land, mainly along the north side of Upper Park to become effective upon her death. Approximately 37 acres were added to the Park in October 1921 when the "Forestry Station" parcel was purchased from the University of California. Another 20 acres, the "Kennedy Estate field", were added in the 1930s or 1940s. The City added another 1420 acres, on May 16, 1995.

Five-Mile Area. The first Five-Mile dam was built on Big Chico Creek around 1859, in order to supply water to Bidwell's flour mill. A sheep camp was located below the dam, and the shepherd's cabin was used as a dressing room by bathers who swam in the pool behind the dam. In 1887, John Bidwell built two roofless dressing rooms at the Five-Mile pool, which were not replaced until 1922. In 1925, the pool was renamed, "Hooker Oak Swimming Pool". From 1964 to mid-1969, the Five-Mile area was closed to the public while the Big Chico Creek - Mud Creek flood-control project was under construction. A dam was built to replace the old structure, and picnic sites and a footbridge were built. The old road that passed into Upper Park along the north side of the present Five-Mile picnic areas was cut by excavation of a diversion channel, so a new access road into Upper Park was built north of Lindo Channel.

Hooker Oak. This famous tree was named after Sir Joseph Hooker, a renowned English botanist who examined it during a visit to the Bidwells in 1875. It was a valley oak (*Quercus lobata*) located at the north end of the parking lot that forms part of the Hooker Oak Recreation Area. Its spreading branches had reached a circumference of about 500 feet and its age was widely reported as 1100 years when approximately the eastern half fell during the Columbus-Day storm of 1962. Ring counts of the largest branch to fall suggested an age of 400 years or less. Despite

efforts to preserve it, the remainder of the tree fell in a windstorm in 1977.

The area around Hooker Oak, proposed in 1904 as a site for a US Plant Introduction Station, was used for many years as a hayfield and prune orchard. In 1950, a Recreation Committee (formed in 1946) relocated a softball field at Chico High School to a spot just east of Hooker Oak. The Chico Area Recreation Department developed the Hooker Oak area in 1957, and the next year began a 25-year lease from the City to operate it as a recreation area.

Forestry Station and Kennedy Tract. The Forestry Station tract of land includes the present-day sites of the deer pen, Chico Creek Nature Center, and the "world of trees" grove to its west. John Bidwell, who was interested in silviculture, donated about 37 acres to the State in 1888 for use as a forestry station. The State Forestry Board began experimental plantings of exotic (non-native) trees at the Chico Forestry Station, which eventually held many thousands of trees. In 1893, title was transferred by the State to the University of California, which continued the earlier forestry work and established the still-extant grove of cork oaks (*Quercus suber*) trees. The City purchased the site from the University in November 1921, with funds raised by popular subscription. In succeeding decades, it was used as a Park headquarters that included maintenance, storage, and an office and home used by the Park ranger or Park superintendent.

Just east of the present building of the Chico Creek Nature Center is a large wood barn, said to have been used for storage by John Bidwell. A small zoo was maintained near the barn from 1954 to 1958. The deer pens were already on the site having been started some years before. The small "rock house" adjacent to the Center on its south was constructed around 1980 and used as a museum and nature center. The Chico Creek Nature Center building was erected 10 years later. Public interest in a nature trail among plantings of the old forestry station first appears in the Bidwell Park and Playground Commission (BPPC) minutes of 1963 but the "world of trees" nature trail was not established until 1976.

Approximately 20 acres at the present site of the walnut orchard along North Park Drive were owned by the Kennedys, relatives of Annie Bidwell. It became part of the Park before 1950, probably in the late 1930s or 1940s. The walnut trees were planted in 1953.

Chico's 9-hole Municipal Golf Course south of Horseshoe Lake was established by 1921. A new golf course clubhouse was built in 1925, and again in 1945 and 1952, with various repairs and modifications during the intervening years. The City turned over operation of the course to various private groups beginning in 1939. Nine more holes were constructed in an olive grove east of the old course during 1954-57. In 1993, two holes of the old course were modified, resulting in relocation of part of the road giving access to Upper Park.

One-Mile Area. The dam that backs water for the Sycamore swimming pool was built in 1923 and 1924. The next year the BPPC agreed that the choice of a name for the 4th Street and Five-Mile pools should be left to the Chico Art Club. The Club proposed "Sycamore" and "Hooker Oak" Swimming Pools as the formal names. The Sycamore Pool fish ladder was built in 1957 as part of an agreement by the State to clear an obstruction to fish migration.

Rifle Range. The rifle range near Horseshoe Lake actually was two rifle ranges. The older one was built in 1926 for the local military company. The only visible evidence of it today is the concrete-lined target pit located in a small mound just northeast of an arm of Horseshoe Lake. The firing line was located more than 400 yards to the southwest. For 6 years, the National Guard had an exclusive-use lease on the site. A skeet shooting area was established in 1936, but a permanent site, also northeast of Horseshoe Lake, was not developed until 1948. A second rifle range, for several years referred to as the "small-bore" range, was developed in 1950. Use of the rifle range and skeet area continued to decline, and their last use was in the late 1980s. The wooden building next to Horseshoe Lake was built by a local gun group over a two-year period beginning in mid-1957.

A **pistol range**, constructed during 1953-54 was located south of the eastern 9-hole portion of the golf course. It was built for the Chico Police Department, but was also used by various military units and law-enforcement classes from Butte Junior College. Use declined in the 1970s and was eventually discontinued.

Day Camp and Archery Range. The old day-camp and archery-range sites are in Upper Park. An archery target area was established by an archery club in 1946. Day Camp began when the director of the City's Recreation Department received permission to hold a five-week, summertime "day school" in conjunction with Chico State Teachers College, in the area of the archery range. The name "Camp Cha-Da-Ka" was attached to it. In 1953, another archery group asked to develop an archery range, opposite the day camp, and in 1957 they expanded it from 14 to 28 targets.

Park Roads. BPPC minutes of July 1935 note that the new road through the "Upper Area" of Bidwell Park is to be graveled by SERA, the Depression-era predecessor of the WPA (Works Projects Administration). North Park Drive, considered controversial at the time of its construction, was built in 1939. The road that now forms the main access to Upper Park was rerouted in 1955 so as to pass between the golf course and the rifle range. As part of the construction of the Five-Mile flood-control complex (1964-69) the "alternate" road became the main access route. In September 1993 the main road was rerouted near the golf course in order to allow modification of two holes of the course.

Horseshoe Lake. A restraining dam was built between 1936 and 1937 by the WPA to provide a water supply for the golf course. A small spillway dam was added in the late 1950s to better control runoff. At various times the lake was referred to as the

Park Lake, the Park Reservoir, the golf-course reservoir and by 1961, "Horseshoe Lake".

Live Oak Grove. This large grove of trees is located between the Five-Mile diversion channel and the Manzanita Avenue access road into Upper Park. A local midget-car racing group built a 250-ft-long track inside the Grove in 1955. Three years later, a motorcycle group received approval to build an oval racing track at the site. It was used only intermittently and, in 1966, the permit to use the track was rescinded. Before 1964, the access road into Upper Park passed through the southern part of the grove.

The Easter Cross has been at its present site for a long time. A wooden cross was cut down by vandals and replaced by a local group in 1958. Ten years later, it was replaced by a steel cross made from a surplus light standard. Also in 1958, a local group built a dirt track east of the Easter Cross, for use in soapbox-derby contests. Increased erosion resulted in closure of the track in the 1970s.

Sources: Site visit on 26 April 2011.

Much of the history section was taken from the: Friends of Bidwell Park website by Phillip A. Lydon, January 1997. His articles appeared in the "Park Watch Training Manuel". Information for the statements made in his document came from the minutes of the Bidwell Park and Playground Commission (BPPC), various contracts, leases, and deeds to which the City was a party, several books, pamphlets, and articles on one or both of the Bidwells, microfilms of various newspapers published in Chico, oral interviews, and a few other sources. Portions are based on tapes dictated by Janece Webb in May 1992. Web.
< <http://www.friendsofbidwellpark.org/>>.

Map of Bidwell Park provided by the Chico Visitor Center, City of Chico.

Historian: Chris Pattillo, Historic Landscape Architect, PGAdesign, 444 17th Street, Oakland, CA, 94612, pattillo@PGAdesign.com. Date: June 26, 2011



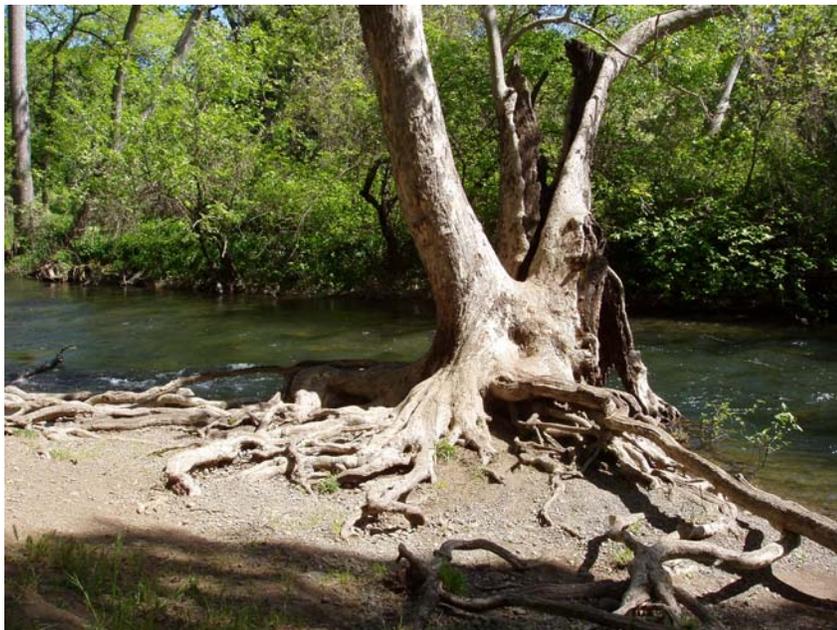
The main entry at South Park Drive east of Mangrove Avenue with paired granite columns on each side, topped with stout rectangular lights, and an ornamental iron gate. A white flowering dogwood (*Cornus nuttallii*) accents the left side and a valley oak (*Quercus lobata*) casts shade over all. (Chris Pattillo, April 26, 2011).



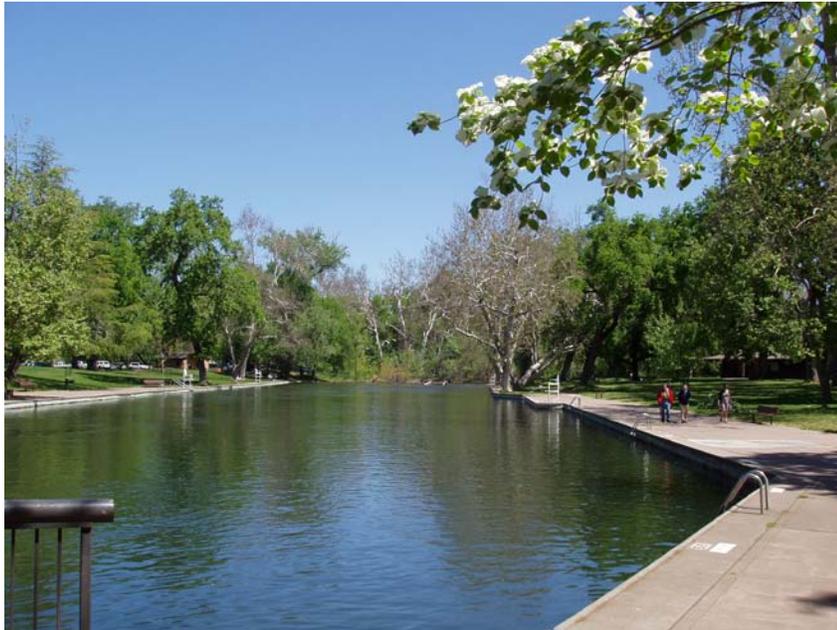
The middle section of the park and much of the Upper portion consists of tall grasses and a canopy of valley oak (*Quercus lobata*) (Chris Pattillo, April 26, 2011).



A one-way road runs east to west through the middle portion of the park. Separate equestrian and footpaths run parallel for miles connecting the lower and upper portions of the park. (Chris Pattillo, April 26, 2011).



Big Chico Creek flows throughout the entire park and feeds the Sycamore pool in the lower portion. Here the roots of an old native sycamore (*Platanus racemosa*) are exposed along the bank. (Chris Pattillo, April 26, 2011).



Sycamore pool is formed by the damming of Chico Creek. Native sycamore at the far end and south side. Pool depth varies from 3 to 6 feet and is marked on the sides with tile inlays. (Chris Pattillo, April 26, 2011).



The ball field located in the lower portion of the park, north of South Park Drive and west of where Highway 99 crosses overhead through the park. The field is surrounded by valley oaks (*Quercus lobata*). (Chris Pattillo, April 26, 2011).



Small parking lots are provided throughout the park, adjacent to amenities, and are nicely tucked in and screened to be unobtrusive but convenient. (Chris Pattillo, April 26, 2011).