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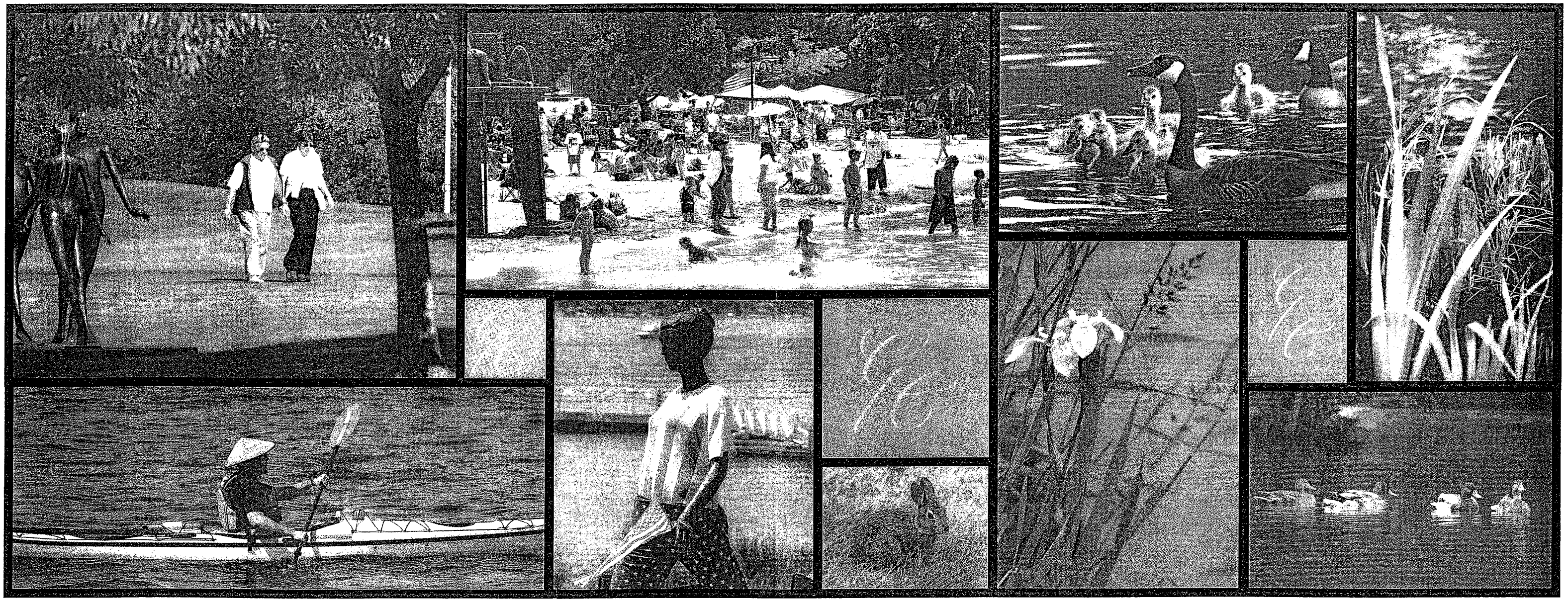

Gene Coulon Park: A haven for water enthusiasts and family traditions

By Andrew Fickes / Photos by Denis Law

In the early 1950s, the southeastern corner of Lake Washington in Renton was swampland. Today, it's the 57-acre Gene Coulon Memorial Beach Park. Like the man who envisioned it more than 40 years ago, the park is a treasure and asset to Renton.

Gene Coulon was city parks director for 30 years—the longest term for a parks director in Renton's history.

"Gene Coulon was one of the greatest people I ever knew—a real asset to Renton," says veteran park board member Ron Regis. "He was always ahead of the game. He had an idea of attaining more parks for Renton. He could envision that park when it was just a swampland."

Originally named Lake Washington Park, development began in 1968 with 23 acres. Between 1969 and 1973, an additional 34 acres was aquired Following Coulon's death in 1977 the park was named after him, and development was completed in 1982. Ivar's and Kidd Valley opened at the park in the summer of 1983, making it the only park in King County with restaurants.

The public showed its support in 1982.

"Tax payers supported the project by passing a bond issue to help with the completion of the second phase of the park," says Leslie Betlach, city parks director. "Even U.S. Senator Henry 'Scoop' Jackson came to support the completion of the park in 1982."

Coulon Park is home to the largest boat launching facility on Lake Washington—equipped with eight boating lanes.

It's a place where family traditions are made. Ten thousand or more people attend Fourth of July festivities, and in December, the Clam Lights Festival attracts upwards of 15,000 people from Renton and surrounding areas.

Other major events include limited hydroplane races in the spring, Cascade Canoe and Regatta and Boatstock during Renton River Days, and fishing tournaments with C.A.S.T. For Kids.

The park is home to many kinds of wildlife and water fowl, including turtles, craw fish, salmon, wild rabbits, ducks, geese, eagles, and blue heron.

It boasts "extraordinary" playground equipment, notes Betlach. On the waterwalk between Ivar's and the north picnic shelter, play areas cater to two age groups—2-to-5 year olds and 5-to-12 year olds.

Interpretive signage lets people know of the many different plant species that fill the park. There are 15,00 trees, including giant sequoia, bald cypress, larch, and live oak. Other vegetation includes 76,000 shrubs, 16,000 water plants and five acres of grass sod.

Visitors can enjoy a breathtaking view of Lake Washington and the Bellevue/Mercer Island skyline.

Alf Van Hoose, a computer contractor living in the Renton Highlands, is a frequent visitor. He considers the park a nice oasis from the busy city and says that it offers one of the more scenic views among parks in the county.

"I'm glad the city has taken the time to take care of the park the way they do," he says.

Regular park hours are 7 a.m. to 9 p.m., Monday through Sunday. From June 16 through Labor Day the swimming beach is open from noon until 8 p.m. No bicycles, skateboards, rollerblades, or dogs are allowed on the premises.

Betlach says development at the park has not ended. She says the city hopes to one day have a connection from the park to the boathouse at the mouth of the Cedar River Trail.

Gene Coulon Memorial Beach Park in numbers

Approximately 10,000 people attend Fourth of July festivities.

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Upwards of 15,000 people attend Clam Lights in December.

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City projects to earn $94,000 in boat launch revenue for 2007.

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309 scheduled picnics at Gene Coulon for summer 2007.