

A Poet By Any Other Name

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PHOTO: LENORE SCHULTZ

Residents are surprised to find out the identity of Joyce Kilmer and other secrets about the park in the South Bronx

Located in one of the busiest areas of the South Bronx, Joyce Kilmer Park serves as a place for recreation, relaxation or simply a wonderful spot to enjoy the day, yet its historical importance remains a mystery to the people living and working in its vicinity.

"I have always wondered about the history behind these statues," says 22-year-old Hunter College student Lisa Bradshaw, as she whistles at her German Shepherd in full pursuit of a squirrel some 12 feet away in the park. "I have lived here on the Concourse all my life and walked my dog in this park for years, but honestly, I don't really care how this park got its name."

This attitude seems to be shared by many of the people in this neighborhood. With

Yankee Stadium only two blocks away, the Bronx Borough Hall, Family & Criminal Court houses and the Concourse Shopping Center all in walking distance, Joyce Kilmer Park appears to play the least important role in this section of the South Bronx.

Joyce Kilmer Park, also once known as Heine Park and Heintz Park, which stretches from 161st to 164th Streets between the Grand Concourse and Walton Avenue, is the long time abode of the Louis J. Heintz Memorial and the Heinrich Heine Fountain, also known as the Lorelei Fountain.

Most of the neighbors of Joyce Kilmer Park are unaware of the historical origin of the statues and the park. "Whoever she was, she must have done something good," said Juanita Lopez, a 53-year-old Ecuadorian babysitter. It is also a common mistake that this newly re-opened park is named after a woman. Possibly the name Joyce Kilmer, or the woman resembled on the park's infamous Lorelei Fountain confuses Bronxites about whether this park is named after a man or a woman.

Joyce Kilmer Park is dedicated to the memory of a man. Killed in action in World War I, soldier and poet Alfred Joyce Kilmer (he never used his first name) was born in New Brunswick, New Jersey in 1886. The Rutgers College and Columbia University alumnus held a brief career as a

teacher before moving into publishing. He worked as an editor for the Standard Dictionary for the Funk and Wagnall Company, as a literary editor for a newspaper called The Churchman, and was a member of the staff of the New York Times in 1913.

Many of his poems, such as "Prayer of a Soldier in France," express his deep religious beliefs. He is remembered mainly for his poem "Trees," which was published in his book *Trees and Other Poems* in 1914. This famous poem is said to have been inspired by a majestic tree that stands on the grounds of today's Cooke College.

In 1917, when the U.S. declared war on Germany, Kilmer, a family man with two children, enlisted as a Private in the Seventh Regiment of the New York National Guard. At the time that Kilmer voluntarily entered the military, he was considered the premier American Catholic poet alive. He later assumed the position of Senior Regimental Statistician at Headquarters Company and once in France, he quickly attained the rank of Sergeant. On July 30, 1918, while on a scouting mission in Germany, Kilmer's life was ended at the age of 31 by a sniper's bullet. He was said to have been a very courageous soldier.

Because of his courageous deeds, this Bronx park was named after him. Joyce Kilmer Park also honors two other people

of great achievement. At the southern end of the park, the bronze statue of Manhattan-born Louis J. Heintz stands on a granite pedestal. The monument, designed by William Welles and sculpted by Pierce Feitu was presented to the city in 1909 in honor of Heintz. As the very first Commissioner of the area, which is now known as the Bronx, Heintz proposed a Grand Concourse in 1890 and is honored for his contributions to the prosperity of the borough. He lived only to age 31, dying from complications of appendicitis.

Joyce Kilmer Park is best known for the Lorelei Fountain, which now stands at its original location at the southern most end of the park, opposite the Bronx Borough Hall. The Lorelei Fountain, which has needed numerous restorations over the years due to vandalism and deterioration, is the center of confusion when it comes to the name of the park. Many neighbors assume that the fountain is a sculpture of Joyce Kilmer.

The white marble Heinrich Heine (Lorelei) Fountain honors the great 19th Century German poet Heinrich Heine. The fountain, installed in 1899, celebrates one of his most popular poems, "Die Lorelei," a poem about the legend of a siren (woman) whose irresistible singing led several sailors to their deaths in Germany's Rhine River.

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