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The Baltimore Sun September 23, 2002 Monday

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September 23, 2002 Monday FINAL Edition

SECTION: LOCAL, Pg. 1B

LENGTH: 1316 words

HEADLINE: Remembering a park for all;

Beach: The sale of the Beechwood Park site evokes bittersweet memories of a man's effort toward racial equality.

BYLINE: Jackie Powder

SOURCE: SUN STAFF

BODY:

There once was an enchanted forest along the Magothy River, where children rode a Ferris wheel and played arcade games, families picnicked by the water, the faithful were baptized in the river and James Brown performed for Saturday night revelers in the dance pavilion.

Beechwood Park was a short-lived summer sanctuary in Pasadena that catered to black residents in the Baltimore area and beyond who wanted to spend a day by the water - a simple pleasure often denied them in a segregated society in which many local beaches served whites only.

Now crumbling foundations and overgrown woods are the only reminders of Hiram E. Smith's bold effort on behalf of racial equality. The Baptist minister and businessman lost the property to foreclosure in 1963 after falling behind on mortgage payments because of ill health, and died a year later.

Although Anne Arundel County acquired the 71-acre property this year for almost \$1.3 million and plans to preserve it as open space, Beechwood Park continues to evoke bittersweet emotions for Smith's children, who helped their father clear the forest to build the park, spent summers working there and still harbor painful memories of how the family lost the land. "It's just upsetting; there was a whole lot of sweat that went in there," said Gerald Smith, 67, a Baltimore attorney and the third of Hiram Smith's seven children. "It was a family project, getting that place ready. He had us go in there and clear away the underbrush, but I can't say that we didn't have fun. Every Saturday and Sunday, we were working the gates and collecting the money, keeping an eye on things."

The children remember not only the good times, but their father's struggles to keep the park open in the face of repeated legal challenges from nearby white residents. It took a state court's application of a Supreme Court ruling to let a black man run his waterside carnival.

Still, Gerald Smith said, he's pleased that the former beach and amusement park property will remain forested instead of becoming a residential subdivision - the intention of the last owner of the land.

"The last major use of the property was Beechwood Park," he said. "It won't be remembered as a place where somebody developed it and built a lot of houses."

Hiram Smith opened Beechwood Park in the mid-1940s, advertising the resort as "Maryland's finest interracial beach and amusement park."

The announcement was not well-received.

"There were all kinds of nasty letters about it, and he was roundly criticized for 'mongrelizing the nation,'" said Gerald Smith, recalling that his father took the attacks in stride. "He just laughed - he enjoyed it. My father was basically a renegade."

Smith, who ran a successful real estate business in Baltimore and founded Mount Lebanon Baptist Church in the city, bought the 65-acre Beechwood Park site in 1943, despite restrictive covenants. The restrictions barred the sale of land to anyone "of Negro, Chinese or Japanese descent," according to newspaper accounts.

In what was a common practice at the time, Hiram Smith had a white business associate buy the land in a straw purchase and then transfer it to him.

A handful of white residents near Beechwood Park filed a lawsuit against Smith in 1945, seeking to enforce the restrictive covenants. But in 1949 the Maryland Court of Appeals sided with Smith, applying a Supreme Court ruling from the previous year that found restrictive covenants unconstitutional.

Despite the legal obstacles, Smith and his family made Beechwood Park a success, with busloads of Baltimore church groups arriving each weekend to swim and enjoy the outdoors. There were other beaches south of Annapolis designated for blacks - Carr's and Sparrow's, in particular - but Beechwood Park was geared more toward the church picnic crowd.

Members of Smith's Mount Lebanon church came for baptisms in the Magothy. Businesses, including Black & Decker and Westinghouse, held company picnics at the park because it was the only place in the area where white managers could attend with black employees.

Three motorboats - the Deborah, the Elsie and the Miss Beechwood Park - ferried passengers down the Magothy to the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. Children rode a miniature train that circled the park, and adults played the slot machines and flocked to appearances by black celebrities.

A 1948 newspaper report noted that champion boxer Joe Louis and famed actor and singer Paul Robeson were to be judges in the annual "Beechwood Park interracial beauty contest," although Gerald Smith said that park patrons were overwhelmingly black.

"All the big name stars were down there at the time - James Brown, Ike and Tina Turner," said Warren Carroll, 57, who occasionally helped the Smith children with park maintenance. 'A lot of waterfront'

In 1949, Hiram Smith enlarged his park by 16 acres when the owner of nearby Beachwood Grove - an all-white resort - sold Smith his land.

"We ended up with 3,000 feet of waterfront," Gerald Smith said. "That was a lot of waterfront for a black man in those days."

Although Beechwood Park was built as a refuge from segregation, its proximity to all-white neighborhoods meant that tensions inevitably surfaced. The house that the Smith family lived in on park land during the summer months was vandalized routinely by egg-throwers.

But an incident on the water took on more sinister overtones.

When Gerald Smith was about 13 or 14, he was out one afternoon canoeing on the Magothy when white residents from across the river began to circle him in larger boats, stirring up waves in an attempt to capsize his canoe.

"My father, knowing what might happen, trained him how to ride waves," said one of Hiram Smith's daughters, Deborah Jones, 69, who recalled that her brother made it to shore safely. "It was pretty ugly, but we were trained to hang in there. We were civil rights brats."

Business at Beechwood Park fell off sharply in the early 1960s, after desegregation began to take hold.

"People had a lot of other options," Gerald Smith said. "Things slowed down to a crawl."

Hiram Smith's deteriorating health was also a factor. At the same time, his children - who had always been responsible for most of the park's upkeep - were heading off to college and starting lives of their own.

Neither Jones, nor Gerald Smith can remember the park officially closing.

"It just faded away," Jones said.

According to county land records, the Beechwood Park property was sold at a public auction May 16, 1963, to Stanley I. Lapidus of Baltimore for \$22,500, after Smith had defaulted on the mortgage.

The land stayed in the Lapidus family until this year when Anne Arundel County bought it for nearly \$1.3 million in state and county funds, said Jack Keene, chief of planning and construction for the county parks department.

Over the years, Keene said that the Lapidus family had explored development of the land, and in 1989 filed a plan to build 43 homes. But he said options were limited because the waterfront property is subject to the state's critical area regulations.
Beechwood revisited

This month, Jones and Gerald Smith visited the former Beechwood Park resort for the first time in many years. They stepped gingerly through the brush and visualized the place in its glory days.

"This is the dining hall and dance hall too, the kitchen was back there," said Gerald Smith, pointing to the ruins of a cement foundation. He hadn't been back since he was in law school. "And there was a row of cottages over there somewhere."

Jones stood at the top of a set of steps leading to the water.

"On the weekends there was breathing room only down there," she said.

Smith said that the land appears as it did when his father bought it nearly 60 years ago.

"It conjures up old memories," he said, "and reminds me of what used to be."

GRAPHIC: PHOTO(S) / MAP(S), 1. Gerald Smith (left), son of Hiram E. Smith, who founded Beechwood Park in the 1940s, and his brother-in-law Alphas Jones visit the site of the former park. "It was a family project, getting that place ready," Gerald Smith recalls.; 2. SITE OF

THE OLD BEECHWOOD PARK BEACH; 1. LLOYD FOX : SUN STAFF; 2. LAMONT W. HARVEY :
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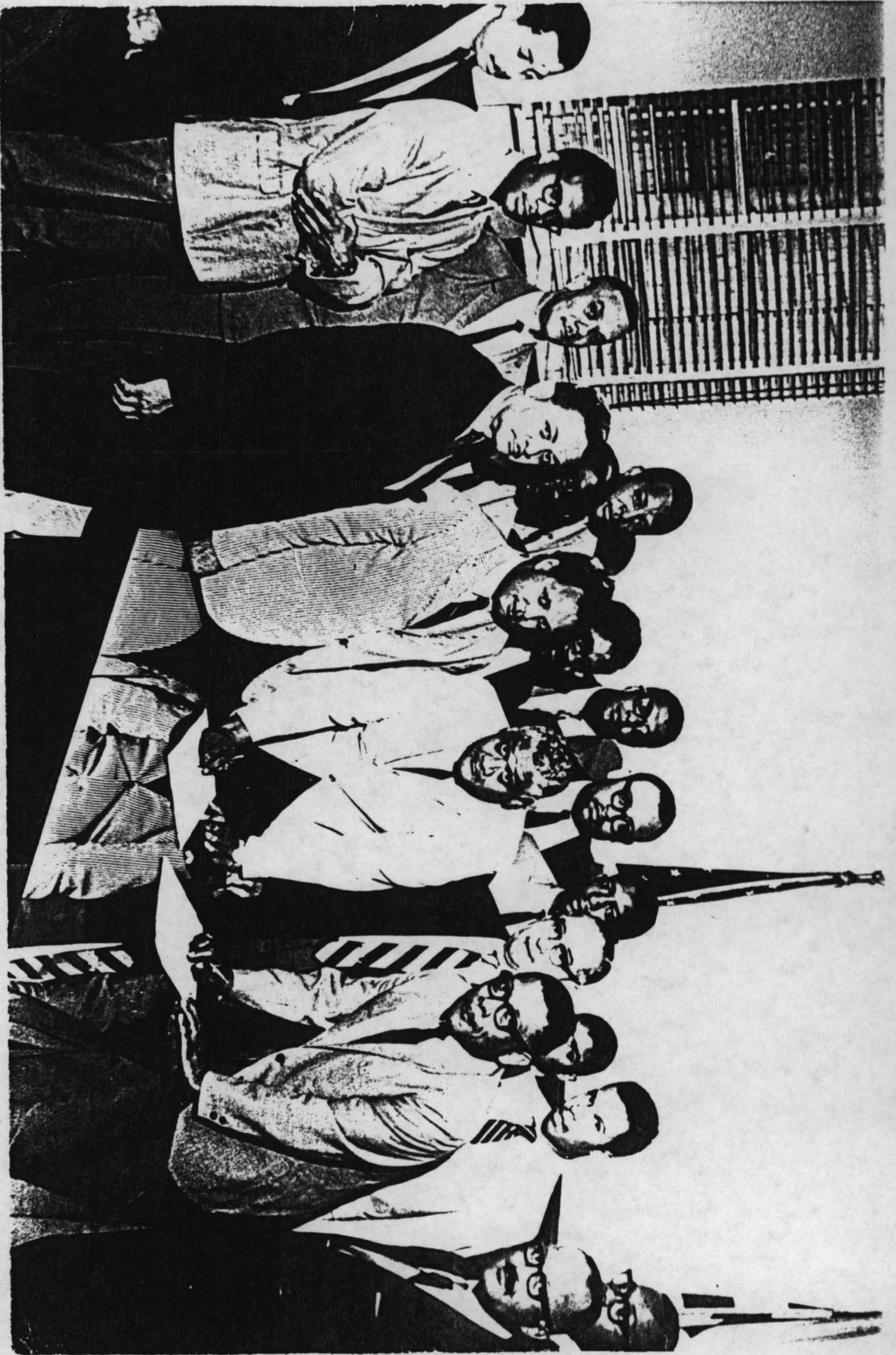
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Joseph Howard & Archie Williams Filing for Primary Election, 1968

Left to right: Benjamin Brown, Larry Gibson, William Toadvine, Charles Howard, Solomon Baylor, William Hicks, Gerald Smith, DeHaven Smith, LeRoy Carroll, Joseph Howard, David Allen, Charles Williams, Loyal Randolph, Archie Williams, Turhan Robinson, Louis Hudnell, William Murphy, Sr., Charles Watts

LS Gibson pic

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