

THE MAIN STREET “CUT”

A portion of Parkville’s Main Street a few blocks north of the business district is known for its strange configuration which divides the street into two lanes, one at least 15 feet higher than the other. Each lane is one way – the top level heads downhill to the south and the lower level grinds uphill to the north. This split begins a bit below 8th Street and again becomes a two lane street a few blocks to the north.

This split was not the original lay of the land, but was cut and scraped out of a hillside which had always made many of the city lots on the east side of Main unusable. The first mention of this development appeared in the November 7, 1901, issue of the *Platte County Gazette*. “Work has begun on the Main Street cut. A great deal of rock will have to be taken out and the work will, necessarily, progress somewhat slowly.” The cut was so deep that a month later the city council “ordered a railing on Main Street to prevent someone rolling over the bank near Alderman Breen’s home. It was also decided to build a flight of steps at Mr. Hon’s property [now the site of 900 Main] as he was left so high by the recent grading...” (*Gazette*, December 5, 1901). No reason was given for this development.

Other information is sketchy until 1910 when the December 22 *Gazette* announced that “The contract was let Monday by Park College to Harry Stevenson to grade the row of lots on the east side of Main Street adjoining the cut recently completed... A row of lots will be brought to grade on the east side of Main and the lots fronting on East Street will also be shaped up. It is a big piece of work and will make a great change in ‘the lay of the land’ in that region.” After that, little was written about the condition of the cut or construction of houses until 1933.

The most important improvement of the cut was the construction of the huge stone dry-laid retaining wall. This was accomplished by laborers who were employed by the Civil Works Administration (CWA), one of the government’s programs created to provide funds for communities to hire workers who were unemployed due to the Great Depression. Parkville civic leaders successfully petitioned for funds and two projects were approved, “...the building of the stone retaining wall in Main Street where the street divides and the building of a retaining wall in front of the city cemetery at the north side of town.” (*Gazette*, December 1, 1933). Much of the stone was quarried just across the street near the location of the present Presbyterian Church which was built in 1948. Both retaining walls are firmly in place and have been for 86 years.

The CWA workers were initially supervised by John Daniels who was later joined by master stone mason and local civic leader, Charles Patrick Breen. It was later noted by Parkville Mayor Howard Dean that when he realized Mr. Daniels needed assistance, he had asked Mr. Breen "...if he would oversee the work as much as he was able. Mr. Breen very willingly responded and gave almost his full time to the work without any remuneration whatever." He was publicly thanked by the aldermen at their January 20, 1934, meeting. (*Gazette*, February 2, 1934).

Meanwhile, as reported in the January 5, 1934, *Gazette*, after the Main Street wall was completed, another huge CWA project had been approved for funding. "Work is now underway in the construction of heavy retaining walls around the public school property at Main and 12th streets and Highway 59 [which is now called East Street or Highway 9]. The high banks have been rather unsightly and as the banks have disintegrated and slid down, they have lessened the area of the school grounds proportionately."

The walls progressed rapidly, but the easily accessible later issues of the *Gazette* do not reveal exactly when it was finished. When time allows, more research in city documents will probably aid in solving that little mystery. Regardless, those massive walls are also still standing strong – a tribute both to the CWA laborers and to the expert mason and public servant, Charles Patrick Breen, who supervised them.

Author's note: According to both the *Platte County Gazette* and the *Park College Stylus*, the high school building, converted into apartments many years ago, was completed and formally opened in February 1925 and the first class graduated in 1929.

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