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Point to ponder | A quiet man visits his legacy in Balboa Park

By John Wilkens

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Nate's Point, a grassy, tree-lined spit of land on Balboa Park's western edge, is one of the few public places in San Diego where dogs are allowed to run free.

It's also one of the few named after a person who is still alive.

His name is Nate Wells. He is 90. The land is named for him because he took an ugly pile of dirt and weeds and transformed it, working on his own time.

Now he hardly ever goes there.

One of the last times he went, about two years ago, he brought his wife and a couple of his grandkids and a picnic lunch. They spread out a blanket and set out some food and . . .

"We got overrun by the dogs," he said. "There were about 15 of them, and the owners didn't seem to care what the dogs were doing. So we just picked up and went home."

He's not angry. He's not bitter. This is a man who takes the long view. He's been married to the same woman for 58 years. He worked for the city for 35 years. He still lives in a home he helped build in 1952.

So he likes the notion that this place will outlive him, and that it will carry his name. Those factors outweigh the irritation he feels "that this area I worked so hard on has become nothing but a dog park."

At least somebody is enjoying it, he said. And that was the whole idea.

Wells grew up in the Midwest and came to San Diego in 1935 on the heels of a couple of "footloose and fancy-free" friends. He was 24.

Three years later, the city hired him for six weeks to help clean Balboa Park. "I guess they liked me, because they kept me on," he said. He made \$66 a month.

As he settled in with the parks department, he noticed a neglected patch of land at the west end of the Cabrillo Bridge. Dirt was piled high near a gully filled with weeds.

"That's an awful-looking thing for a park," he remembered saying to himself.

Years went by and he came up for a promotion to supervisor. Part of the process was an essay test. The question: Pick a section of the park and explain how you would improve it.

Wells drew a diagram for the dirt pile at the end of the bridge and submitted it. The plan had lawn and trees and 12 picnic tables. "I wanted it to be a place where families could come and have a picnic and relax," he said.

He got the promotion. But the design had to wait for time and money and the clearing of bureaucratic red tape. He offered to do the work himself, using a city bulldozer. One boss said no, but another finally said yes.

By now it was 1973. He was 62. "At that time, I was working Saturday mornings, so after work I would get a bulldozer and start leveling the dirt," he said.

It took him almost three months. He filled in the gully and extended the flat area down toward the freeway. He got the whole thing ready for planting.

And then he had a heart attack. The doctors found a tumor. "I thought that was it for me," Wells said. He filled out his retirement papers in the hospital so his surviving widow would get a better pension.

In his absence, the city finished the job. And he got better. "Two or three years later, I went there to visit and the grass was in and trees were planted," Wells said.

And the place had a name.

He agreed to come to Nate's Point again on a recent weekday afternoon to have his picture taken. He wore a dress shirt and a necktie.

His wife, Mary Eleanore, came with him. They met almost 60 years ago in Denver, at the Rainbow Ballroom. He was in the military, and he had a four-hour leave, and he asked her to dance.

She refused.

"I said to myself, 'She can't do that to me' and asked her again," Wells said. They danced. He got her phone number and called her for another date. "That was my downfall," he jokes now.

They raised three children, two boys and a girl. One son took to landscaping, too, and Wells went to work for him after leaving the parks department. He did that for 12 years.

Now he's retired, mostly. He still has three longtime clients whose yards he maintains. One of them, Dolores Haskins, lives on Mount Soledad. "He comes once a week," she said. "I don't want him to quit. He's just delightful."

There used to be a wooden sign at the park announcing the area as Nate's Point. "I didn't know for quite a while that it had been named for him," Mary Eleanore said. "Our daughter saw the sign one day and called him up and said, 'Is that you?'"

The sign is gone. "I guess somebody needed a little firewood," Wells said. His family has talked about putting up a new sign -- metal this time.

There are several other metal signs there, all announcing the land as a place where dogs can run leash-free. It became a dog park in 1996.

When he was there recently, pet owners walked past him, unaware of his role in their enjoyment. And he didn't tell them.

City officials aren't exactly dialed in, either. In 1988, while considering whether to name part of Balboa Park after Martin Luther King Jr., the parks director noted that several other people already were so honored.

"We have a little area called Nate's Point, strictly because it was built by a guy with his own two hands," the director told reporters then. "But don't ask me his first name."

At the park, Wells watched the dogs with a look of bemused tolerance. He likes dogs, in their place. He grew up with them on farms in Nebraska and Kansas. He doesn't own one now because his yard is too small.

Dogs ran around his legs, sniffed him. One jumped on the table where his wife was sitting.

"Are we through here?" he politely asked the photographer. They were.

He took his wife's hand in his and they left Nate's Point behind.

[Illustration]


3 PICS; Caption: 1. Nate Wells considers what has become of the park he helped build with his own hands. His wife, Mary Eleanore (center), is seated behind him. 2. Nate Wells worked on Saturday afternoons to sculpt Nate's Point from a pile of dirt and weeds. (E-5) 3. Nate and Mary Eleanore Wells walk away from Nate's Point. (E-5); Credit: 1,2,3. Howard Lipin / Union-Tribune

Credit: STAFF WRITER

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