*Hear, Here* Field Trip: The Purpose of a Park

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**Directions/Instructions:**

Before starting the tour enter the Hear, Here number into your phone’s contacts:

1-844-432-7529.

You will be visiting four *Hear, Here* signs, starting and ending at Riverside Park in downtown La Crosse. Your route is as follows:

* Your first sign is located near the fountain at the south entrance to the park, on the east side of the sidewalk. (The Mississippi River is to the west of the park). Your first sign is narrated by **Azoz Alsoubaie** and is **Location #1, Story #1.**
* Your second story is near your first, on a green pole by the Simpler Time statue of two kids and a dog. The story is narrated by **Mai Chao**, and is **Location #1, Story #9**.
* Continue walking north on the sidewalk that is along the river. Your third sign is located on a green light pole across the road from the cannon memorial. This story is narrated by Siiri Koski and is **Location #6, Story #8**.
* Your final sign is located at the north end of Riverside Park, at the Hiawatha Statue. Continue walking north on the sidewalk to find the statue. Dan Green narrates this story, at **Location #1, Story #2**.



Story #4: Dan Green

Story #3: Siiri Koski

Story #2: Mai Chao

Story #1: Azoz Alsoubaie

**Introduction**

In 1909, one of Wendell Anderson’s last acts as mayor of La Crosse was to propose a new park along the river. There was already a boat landing, where passengers had to jump from rock to rock on the levee to make it from the bank to gangplank.[[1]](#footnote-1) The land from Front Street to the river was bought or donated by property owners and the Milwaukee Railroad Company and the land that is now Riverside Park was dredged from the riverbed by the La Crosse Dredging Company at a cost of $43,000 in 1911[[2]](#footnote-2). Since then, Riverside Park has become one of the city’s most popular parks.

Unlike other parks, such as Hixon Forest, which serves to conserve the rugged bluffs and provide more intensive outdoor recreation, Riverside Park has a much more leisurely atmosphere. With its riverwalk, large field, and bandshell, Riverside Park is very human oriented, reflecting its conception as a pleasure park.[[3]](#footnote-3) City parks like Riverside were born out of the social movement of progressivism which fought against over-industrialization of urban areas.[[4]](#footnote-4) At the end of the 19th century, urban growth and industrialization separated city-dwellers from the open expanse of the countryside. The central idea of a pleasure garden is for people from all backgrounds to escape the pavement of the city and gather in the greenery of the park.[[5]](#footnote-5) In this tour, developed by Kim Thompson, the human interactions and conversations that define Riverside Park are explored through three stories from the *Hear, Here* project. The story by Azoz Alsoubaie describes a time when an international student discovered that American parks have different rules than those in Saudi Arabia. In the second story, Siiri Koski describes the role Pride in the Park plays in her life. Finally, Dan Green discusses the Hiawatha statue, and how stereotypical art can impact the mental health of Native Americans. These interactions highlighted on the tour explore how Riverside Park can play various roles in people’s lives. What purpose does the park serve for you?

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**Story #1: Azoz Alsoubaie** (Location #1, Story #1)

In our first story, told by Azoz Aloubaie, an international student from UWL, he learns that parks in America are not universally open all the time. One late night, he and a friend were sitting in Riverside talking and eating, when they were approached by a police officer who informed them that they couldn’t be at the park since it was closed at night. This raises the question of how public spaces are perceived. To Azoz, it was surprising that people can’t enter a public park at any time, as many parks in his home country of Saudi Arabia are open 24 hours.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Azoz’s encounter followed a series of debate and ordinances regarding park access in the mid-1990s. At the time, older visitors to Riverside felt threatened and put off by youth who would gather in large groups, play music from their car stereos, and overall disrupt the peace others sought at Riverside.[[7]](#footnote-7) Although the Parks Board Commissioners sets park hours, stricter laws were introduced in July 1994 as an attempt to reduce the amount of teenagers and college students in Riverside Park in the late evenings.[[8]](#footnote-8) There was also an additional danger for college students at Riverside Park after hours. In less than 10 years, eight college students had fallen into the river and drowned after the bars closed for the night. Volunteer and police presence at the park at night was heightened after 11pm as part of Operation RiverWatch to keep people out of Riverside Park.[[9]](#footnote-9) As for Azoz, his late-night visit wasn’t disturbing the peace of the park atmosphere as some argued large groups of teenagers did and he wasn’t in immediate danger, but it was still against the rules. Although regulation of visitors may be unenforceable, is there a need? How do we determine what the correct way to visit a park is?

**Azoz Alsoubaie’s Story Transcript**: Yeah, My name is Azoz Alsubaie. I’m from Saudi Arabia. I went after the bars to the River Park and it was dark. It was I think eleven or midnight. It was the park and there is a fountain here and chairs, I think the weather was not windy, but it was cold, I was wearing a jacket. And there was no one here, just dark out.

And me and my friend just grabbed Jimmy Johns, we wanted to just hang out to sit there and eat. And when we were walking we saw a cop there and he was just looking at us weirdly. Ah, we didn’t care so we sat and started to eat and he just came to us and said, “Do you know what is the time?”

We said, “Yeah, it’s eleven or twelve,” whatever it was.

And he said, “Do you know that you are not allowed to be here after ten?”

I said, “Oh, really? I didn’t know that.”

He said, “Yeah it’s a rule,” I think he said in Wisconsin or maybe it’s specific in La Crosse. So I said to him, “Oh I didn’t know that a public place will be closed.”

He said, “Yeah, you know, different rules everywhere.”

I said, “Yeah okay, no problem we will just head back to the campus.” And he said “Thank you.”

And the weird thing is that guy, he looks perfectly, exactly, as one of my classmates but he is younger. So you can see my classmate after thirty, after twenty years from now. And that was amazing.

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**Story #2: Mai Chao** (Location #1, Story #9)

A unique feature of Riverside Park is the presence of the Mississippi River. Mai Chao’s *Hear, Here* poem draws connections between the Mekong River that forms the border between Thailand and Laos, and the Mississippi River along Riverside Park. Mai Chao’s mother, Chia Vue, crossed the Mekong River from Laos into Thailand during and after the Vietnam War (1955-1975). The Vietnam War had a profound impact on Hmoob people in Loas; thousands of families were forced to abandon their homes, possessions, and farms during the war, and many Hmoob died in the disruption the war caused. Many Hmoob individuals had fought on the side of the United States against the Vietnamese, and so when the United States withdrew from the war and the Laos fell under communist control in 1975, life became dangerous for the Hmoob who had sided with America during the war, forcing the Hmoob to make the perilous journey to refugee camps in Thailand. They moved secretly through the jungle to the Mekong River, where they crossed into Thailand and lived in refugee camps before being resettled into other countries. The Mekong River was dangerous to cross, and many Hmoob did not know how to swim. Floatation devices were often made of bamboo, in order to cross into Thailand and start their new lives as refugees.

 Mai Chao contrasts her mother’s experiences crossing the Mekong with her experiences with the Mississippi River in her poem, connecting past to present, and connecting La Crosse to the world. Her poem won honorable mention in the 2017 *Hear, Here* poetry contest.

**Mai Chao’s Poem Transcript**: Hello, this is Mai Chao reading “Two Rivers,” the honorable mention poem in the 2017 Hear, Here Poetry Contest. This poem was inspired by true events that contrasted my experience in America with my mother’s experience from Laos. I am forever grateful to my brave mother, Chia Vue, who brought her family to Wisconsin after escaping the Vietnam War.

*Two Rivers*

Mississippi, oh, Mississippi,
timeless beauty,
you have carried countless stories
without judgement.
Your serene wisdom
inspires curiosity in young and old.
Today,
I sit before you as he asks for my hand,
how can I not accept such a kind-hearted man to be mine?
When his West melts into my East,
we become stronger as one.
Mississippi, oh, Mississippi,
you have done it again,
witnessing a new history
with prudence.
Watching your heartbeat,
in front of
“A Simpler Time”
overlooking the Julia Belle Swain,
I think of Mother.

Back then,
she once sat before the Mekong,
10,000 miles away.
Death asking for her hand,
how can she accept to go at such a young age?
When escaping certain death becomes a second chance,
she grows stronger with others.
Mekong, oh, Mekong,
you have done it again,
witnessing a new history
With prudence.
Watching your heartbeat,
in front of
fear
overlooking “The Land of Smiles.”
She thinks of her future.

Two daughters
before
two rivers.
Each with hopes and dreams,
like the moon and the sun
intertwining as one.
Mekong, oh, Mekong.
Mississippi, oh, Mississippi.
Two daughters
standing before the shores of the past,
the crossroads of the present
by two rivers.

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**Story #3: Siiri Koski** (Location #6, Story #8)

The large green in the center of Riverside Park is home to several events throughout the year, including weekly concerts by the La Crosse Concert Band,[[10]](#footnote-10) Riverfest,[[11]](#footnote-11) and the annual Rotary Lights[[12]](#footnote-12). Another is Pride in the Park, which started in 2006 by the 7 Rivers LGBTQ+ Connection (The Center).[[13]](#footnote-13) Pride in the Park is just one of hundreds of LGBTQ+ pride events held around the world today. The first pride parade was much different than the celebratory events today. Pride events originate after at the Stonewall Inn, a popular gay club in New York, was raided by police. The patrons fought back, and the riot is often cited as the beginning of gay liberation. In June of 1970, the one year anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, marches in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and San Francisco were held to bring attention to the struggles of the gay community. By the mid-70s, a festival element was added and the name “pride” was added.[[14]](#footnote-14) Pride in the Park is a part of a weekend-long celebration of diversity and the LGBTQ+ community in La Crosse and draws around 1,000 people along with vendors and musical acts.[[15]](#footnote-15)

In this story by Siiri Koski, she describes her experience at Pride in the Park. The atmosphere of the event is one of celebration and acceptance. As an annual celebration in Riverside Park, Pride is one of the park’s most notable events.

**Siiri Koski’s Story Transcript**: Riverside Park is a great place for anybody who comes to La Crosse, to visit, who lives here. Pride is really fun. Couldn’t really miss it because of all the pride flags everywhere. The really gigantic one plus all the other small ones. The main attraction for me is that there’s a bunch of LGBTQ people there. I finally get to be in a place where I’m assumed to be gay over assumed to be straight. So that’s, like, the best part for me. But, there are tons of food trucks there from different areas so there’s lots of good food because everybody loves food trucks. The drag queens come by. Whoever won the La Crosse drag queen contest will have their crown and be walking around and that’s awesome, everybody loves the drag queens. I think that the most memorable thing for me at Pride in La Crosse is the first one this last year that I went to being out just because I was able to go there and, like, actually fit in with everybody and be out as a bisexual person as opposed to going as an ally. And so, it was really great because I was able to take pictures, bring my friends with, put them on social media, and just be really open about the fact that I was at Pride and I was, you know, celebrating it. I wouldn’t say that it helped me decide to come out, but it was definitely, like, I knew it would be there and it was a great support system. I knew that if I’d come out at least I could look forward to going to all these Pride events with other people that identify the same as me. So, it definitely made me feel more comfortable coming out. I think, just in general, if I were to say anything to a person listening to this, it would just be to be open-minded and friendly to your fellow human beings on earth. My name is Siiri and I moved here in second grade, grew up on the North Side actually, but I did live on the South Side for a little bit as well. And now I’m going to college here, so I really know the area and the people fairly well and I just, I like being here.

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**Story #4: Dan Green** (Location #1, Story #2)

The Hiawatha Statue is better known as the “Colossus of Kitsch” or the “Big Indian of Riverside Park.” The area from La Crosse to Hastings, MN is historically referred to as Hiawatha Valley, hence the name of the statue.[[16]](#footnote-16) This version was created by Anthony Zimmerhakl and placed in the park in October of 1961; however, there is another Hiawatha Statue in Ironwood, Michigan that is 54 feet tall and credited as the “Tallest Indian.” These statues attempt to symbolize the Native American chief who has been credited with the organization of the Five Nations, along with keeping the peace between European settlers and Native Americans.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Two divergent opinions arose in La Crosse regarding the statue: those who supported the statue as a cultural symbol, and those that opposed the statue as cultural appropriation, or misrepresentation. Individuals who support the statue claim it was created with the intention to represent the many Native American people that populated the area over the last few centuries~~.~~[[18]](#footnote-18) This opinion holds that the statue was not intended to be offensive and was for a genuine purpose of promoting the heritage of La Crosse prior to European settlement. The statue’s creator, Zimmerhakl, was rumored to be part-Native American and this reasoning is attributed as to why he shares a passion and bond for the culture. These supporters also point to the historical value of the Hiawatha Statue as it has stood in Riverside Park for over 50 years.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Others, however, believe this statue to be problematic and unrepresentative of the Ho-Chunk people. In this first story, Dan Green offers a different perspective on the Hiawatha statue. Dan Green believes that this statue was well intentioned, but a major mistake was made in putting it up.[[20]](#footnote-20) For example, the statue is dressed in non-traditional Ho Chunk attire, developing controversy after its completion. Dan Green’s story offers insight into how some Ho Chunk in our community view the controversy surrounding the statue, and how the use of public space such as a park can become an issue.

**Dan Green’s Story Transcript**: We’re in the north end of Riverside Park. I just turned my back, symbolically, on what the UW-L Native American students used to refer to as “the Colossus of Kitsch” or as Riverside Park calls “the Big Indian.”

First, my name is Kera Cho Mani ga. That means “the person who paints the sky blue.” You know me as Dan Green – what Malcolm X might call my slave name. At the time, the late nineties, the chamber of commerce in La Crosse proposed fifty-thousand dollars into a paintjob on the colossus – something that reinforces stereotypes about Native Americans. As a sociology student, I had for years looked into the influence of imagery, statuaries, and I was a part of the national anti-Native American sport mascot movement. I traveled to University of Illinois, University of North Dakota, and Cleveland Ohio on a regular basis to demonstrate and to teach about the harms, the largely psychological harms, of this kind of imagery of the big Indian standing behind me. So that was my interest, that here it is, in my hometown where I’m raising children that look like me – they’re brown-skinned, they’re dark-haired, we don’t get mistaken for anything but Native American, and here’s something in our hometown reinforcing harmful thinking about us, so I was compelled to do something.

By fortune, in the late eighties I had a friend who was the editor of the editorial page for the local paper and he had a new idea where he would have guest editorialists every Sunday, and he called me up saying that there were no people of color on his list – would I volunteer to do four editorials over the course of the next year? I said wonderful. So I chose the opportunity taking a look around me, not just the colossus of kitsch but The Freighthouse Restaurant right there, and there’s a number of stores just a few blocks away, all with the same archaic imagery – out of date, primitive, savage, Native American imagery out there. So I took that opportunity to write these editorials using scientific principles and concepts as to how we’re influenced by this imagery, and I got hate mail. People actually called. That was very violating to, in my own home, to have somebody calling me names and never attacking my principles, never even addressing the science of it. It was very demagogic, it was all emotion-laden, never an appeal to reason, and that’s exactly what I was trying to do – I was trying to get people to use their head, to make them think and not just react on an emotional level, but it went by a whole lot of people.

Over the years, the big Indian has become a symbol with what is wrong with our perception of Native America. Columbus Day, how we teach about Columbus, we make a hero of this mass-murderer, this initiator of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, did so many things that were just against humanity, and yet we hold him up as a hero. Well, here is this maybe well intended statue, but what we have to remember is that intentions do not determine consequences. Maybe these things were supposed to be honoring of Native Americans, and we appreciate the intention, but do we appreciate that maybe that’s not what they resulted in, maybe a mistake was made – well intentioned, but a mistake was made. So the big Indian became this symbol for not only what was wrong, but what to do about it. And so the Native American Student Association began using it as a gathering point and they would march down here from the university and we would have invited speakers and others who had an interest in changing how we perceive Native Americans and others for that matter.

One block away, there is The Freighthouse, and if you look in front at the main entrance you’ll walk by a fiberglass statue of a Pullman porter, and if you look at it that person’s skin is colored to resemble a Caucasian, but if you take a look, I found original photographs of that, and it was a Black man. So at some point they re-painted it, I’m assuming not to offend African Americans. So, that was well intended. Well, why don’t they do the same thing to the colossus of kitsch? Bring him into the modern era. If you take a look at all, with incredible exception, all of Native American imagery from Leinenkugel’s beer to Land ‘O Lakes butter etcetera, is always Native Americans in the past. Dressed in buckskins if dressed at all, with feathers, drums, horses, primitive weapons – never are they shown as rock and roll artists or using a laser printer or anything like that, and that’s what’s wrong, so if it’s got to stay, let’s at least make a statement: let’s bring him into the present.

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**Conclusion**

Riverside Park has been a familiar cornerstone in the La Crosse community for over 100 years. Some may have visited, as Mayor Anderson had intended, simply as a place to relax and take refuge from everyday life. However, Riverside Park has a multitude of uses to different people; Azoz may have seen Riverside Park as a place to hang out, but the city may disagree with how he used the park. Siiri found that Riverside Park was a place for a community to gather and celebrate. Dan saw Riverside Park as home to a problematic monument. With just these few examples, it is evident that the simplistic purpose for a leisurely park has morphed into something larger and more complex than Mayor Anderson probably imagined it would be.

 To conclude this tour, consider the questions: Why are public spaces such as parks important? What function do they have in our larger society? What function do parks have in La Crosse? What did Riverside Park mean to our narrators, and what does it mean to you? What ways can La Crosse as a community improve its parks, or bring new things to our parks?

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10. “La Crosse Concert Band,” *La Crosse Concert Band*, 2018, http://www.lacrosseconcertband.org/# [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
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16. “Chief Hiawatha Statue to Be Built in Park.” *La Crosse Tribune*, 15 June 1958. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. “Hiawatha.” *Dictionary.com*, Dictionary.com, www.dictionary.com/browse/hiawatha. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
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