The first month the pool was open in 1949, children swam in three-hour shifts starting at 1 p.m.

**Baton Rouge pool steeped in history**

Site was gathering place for black community during segregation

BY OLIVIA MCCCLURE
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Decades ago in Baton Rouge, black children were not allowed to swim in the pool at the white-only City Park, so a private group called the United Negro Recreation Association started raising money to build Brooks Park. The group's approach was unpopular with some blacks, who refused to donate money because they believed they should be able to swim in public pools as taxpayers.

It was a time, however, that many black children never learned to swim properly and ended up drowning in creeks and the Mississippi River, said City Court Judge Trudy White, whose grandfather, William Baker, was a member of the group that raised money to build the pool.

White discovered the story of United Negro Recreation Association about a decade ago, leading her to conduct interviews and write a script for a documentary, "Baton Rouge's Troubled Waters," that aired on Louisiana Public Broadcasting.

The Brooks pool was a social hub in Old South Baton Rouge, which White remembered as a self-sufficient community where residents had every- thing they needed — schools, grocery stores, meat markets, tailors and churches — in one square mile. But the neighbor- hood began to deteriorate after integration and the unrest that followed in the 1960s.

"Times were so hard for black people in my age group that the majority of my classmates moved away," said Almena Freeman Warren, 71, a former principal of McKinley High School who grew up on East Washington Street.

People could escape the ra- cial turmoil at the Brooks Park pool, which was larger than an Olympic pool and always seemed to be busy, said War- ren, who later became a swim- ming coach at Baton Rouge Magnet High School. The Sunbeam bakery once hosted a swim competition there and gave loaves of bread as prizes.

"This park was just like Blue Bayou," Warren said. "Blue Bayou has people come from everywhere to swim, and it was just like that for black people. They came from Clinton, Ethel, they came from everywhere because they had no pools for black kids any- where.

Raymond Jetson, pastor of Star Hill Church, urged people at Saturday's event to "treat the remnants that are left" of Old South Baton Rouge. He said too many people today do not know about the area's history.

At the same time, facilities that once played a key role in community life are declining. While filming remakements at the Brooks pool for her docu- mentary, White found the same showers and toilets that were there when she was a child.

"Everything was still the same, which went to show the lack of reinvestment in our community," she said. "As Baton Rouge expanded, the money was going elsewhere instead of putting money back into the inner city communi- ties."

After dedicating the renamed City-Brooks Community Park in 2008, which combines the two formerly separate parks, BREC had to close its pool and those at three other parks in 2010 because of cracks and other problems. City-Brooks' pool was later reopened as a smaller pool that focuses on teaching kids to swim.

"It has turned into a swim- ming pool that's remote, on the side, nondescript," said Robin Clark, who grew up in the area.

Still, some attendees of Sat- urday's panel said they make it a point to take their children and grandchildren to City-Brooks to swim and play, hop- ing they will absorb some of the history that took place at and around the park.

"South Baton Rouge is not just a geographic thing, but it's also a cultural thing and a traditional thing," Clark said.

"It is part of who we are, it is our heritage, it is our culture. When we say South Baton Rouge, it denotes food, it de- notes a type of environment, it denotes a type of relationship with neighbors."