

It's A Jungle Out There!

It was the early 1930's; Herbert Hoover was president and the country was in the midst of the "Great Depression." The effects of the "Great Depression" impacted Martin County as well. However, many current residents of Fairmont and Martin County may be unaware of the fact that one possible consequence of this era was that Fairmont was home to something called "Jungleland," located in the vicinity of the southwest shore of George Lake. The term "Jungleland" may evoke mental images of various types of exotic animals in the pleasant and tranquil setting of a picturesque zoo. However, "Jungleland" was not necessarily what the name might imply, rather it was the name given to an area of Fairmont that served as a home to hoboes and transients. Although it didn't house "exotic animals," it may have been home to what might be considered as somewhat "exotic characters."

A headline in the July 6, 1932, edition of the Fairmont Daily Sentinel read "FIGHT AT 'JUNGLES' BRINGS CLEANUP; 30 HOBOES DRIVEN OUT OF FAIRMONT." The group in question was described as "the toughest gang of hoboes, transients and questionable characters that had invaded Fairmont in years."

The cleanup of "Jungleland" was prompted by a call to the police informing them of a fight involving ten men. Upon arriving on the scene, the police found that about a dozen men were involved, including several that were drunk. The apparent ringleader was arrested and taken to jail. A man injured in the melee wasn't immediately found, but was later located and gave the police an account of the incident. He stated that there were initially four on each side; however, once the fight began his three friends quickly abandoned him. Consequently, he was left alone and became the recipient of a sound beating that included a broken jaw. The cause of the fight was not determined.

The burly ringleader, blamed for starting a near riot at the camp, stubbornly refused to get on the train when ordered to do so by police. He said that he liked this town and intended to stay. At that point, Chief Plenge rapped him across the back with his club and again ordered him on the train. That was apparently enough incentive for him to agree, and he entered the cattle car with the other hoboes.

The roundup, which began in earnest at 5:30 p.m. on July 5, 1932, involved the police officers combing the "jungles" on the west edge of town. It was said to have been an extremely tedious task, with the hoboes hiding in the long weeds and grass as well as literally burrowing into the earth. In addition, the men had devised a new type of hut constructed of sections of old boxes made into small rooms with the aid of brush and rubbish. Several of them were under the trees on the shores of George Lake. The

cleanup also found many empty bottles and cans of Bay Rum and canned heat. Retailers were advised not to sell denatured alcohol to “questionable characters.”

In carrying out the cleanup, Chief Plenge received permission from the city council to go through all the “jungles” and destroy the huts, cooking places, and camping sites. In addition, all the tall grass was ordered cut down in order to provide no further chance of hiding places for the transients. The findings in the cleanup of “Jungleland” concluded that there were also a few “honest, unemployed” men looking for work in addition to some of the regular transients that resided in Fairmont during both good and bad times.

Finally, after searching through weeds and debris, Fairmont Police Chief Plenge, along with officers Shea and Batterman, rounded up some thirty men of various ages and nationalities. They were then loaded into a departing Northwestern train cattle car heading west. Where they ended up is an unknown.

Apparently Fairmont’s problem at that time was effectively resolved by simply placing those transients and hoboes from “Jungleland” on a train heading west. It would seem that this form of 1930s problem solving, perhaps labeled as simply “kicking the can down the road,” wouldn’t be a viable long term solution. However, might this method of problem solving still be in use to some extent today in our modern society? You be the judge.

For more information on this topic visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.