

Fairmont in the 1980's

Remember 1980? Most of us probably have some fond memories of that not too long ago time. What was Fairmont like in 1980? The following provides a brief glimpse into the past, the not too distant past, of the year 1980, and beyond into the later 1980's.

Who were the city officials in 1980? The Mayor of Fairmont was Robert Malliet, Brian Rick was the City Administrator, and Greg Fitzloff was the Executive Vice President of the Fairmont Area Chamber of Commerce.

The estimated 1980 population of Fairmont was 11,353, Martin County's population was 25,200, and the trade area was an estimated 67,000 people.

The largest employer categories included manufacturing with 1,394 employees, retail trade with 1,608 employees, service with 982 employees, and government with 523 employees. Some of the larger employers of that time were Fairmont Railway Motors, Inc., employing 638, Armour & Co. employing 250, 3M employing 320, Stokely-Van Camp, Inc., employing 291 in addition to 450-500 seasonal employees, and Weigh-Tronix employing 296.

Average hourly wages of manufacturing employees of that time for general laborers was \$5.13, shipping & receiving clerks was \$5.34, fork lift operators was \$5.25, welders was \$5.49, and semi-skilled and unskilled workers made an average of \$4.59.

One source of transportation in 1980 was Republic Airlines which served Fairmont. Republic Airlines provided mail, passenger and air express service on four daily flights between Sioux Falls and Minneapolis. They used a Convair 580 which held forty-eight passengers and had an air speed capability of 345 mph. The Greyhound Lines and Midwest Coaches, Inc., offered eight daily runs from the bus terminal which was located at the Gilbert Hotel. The Chicago & North Western Railroad Company and the Milwaukee Road offered two freight trains daily to the Twin Cities and Chicago. Motor freight companies serving Fairmont included Glendenning Motorways, Inc., Murphy Motor Freight Lines, Inc., and Hyman Freightways, in addition to UPS and REA.

Regarding communication, Central Telephone Company served the area and provided service to 7,400 urban customers and 2,100 rural customers. The Sentinel had a circulation of 13,000, the Photo Press had 11,000 subscribers, and the Martin County Shopper covered 17,600 subscribers. KSUM/KFMC operated 24 hours daily, and customers of Cable TV in Fairmont received eleven channels, three independent stations, and educational TV. The charge for Cable TV in 1980 was \$9.45 per month.

The Fairmont Fire Department of that point in time had thirty-five volunteer firemen. The police department employed fourteen full-time officers with a ten man reserve force. It also had four radio equipped vehicles and two canine units.

The preceding information is generally raw data concerning that era. However, what other events and changes of interest took place in Fairmont during the 1980's? A number of them are as follows:

- Popcorn and soft drinks were being sold at the corner of Second Street and Downtown Plaza by the children of Dr. & Mrs. Robert Arneson and was called the "Plaza Pop and Popcorn Stand."
- In 1980, Wehler's Jewelry Store was sold to Gary Beckman. Beckman had previously worked for Mr. Wehler as a high school student and had recently sold an accounting business in order to go back into the jewelry business.
- In 1981 and 1982 at the Fair Mall, J. C. Penney and the 1896 Restaurant were remodeled. Also, The Baron, a restaurant with a Bavarian Theme with seating for 108 and live entertainment was opened. The Country Kitchen on North State Street was purchased by Steve Schmitz and James Beier, remodeled and redecorated, and then opened as The Ranch Restaurant. Other restaurants with new owners were the Western Café, Mr. Steak, and Who's On Third.
- New condos, the Belle Vue Estates and Shorewood Terrace, were being built in Fairmont in 1982.
- Fred's Place, located on 112 1st. St., was for sale and was being advertised as the only Pool Hall, Recreation Center in town. The building was badly damaged after a fire in July of 1982.
- Park Street Grocery closed in October of 1983.
- ConAgra purchased Armour in December of 1983.
- Ehler's, a retail women's apparel store chain, planned to reopen in Fairmont in 1983.
- Fairmont Railway Motors, Inc. celebrated 75 years of manufacturing in Fairmont in 1984.
- ShopKo planned to open a discount store in 1985.
- Maplewood Residence was completed in 1986.
- Kiehl's Bakery became a third generation business in 1986 with the addition of Brian Kiehl, Art Kiehl's grandson and Wendell Kiehl's son.
- In 1988, Jim Zarling became the city's new finance director, David Miller began his term as Mayor of Fairmont, Mike Foster joined the City as Data Processing Manager, and Tom Reber was hired as the new City Administrator.
- Construction of a proposed mall that would include a new K-Mart store was expected to begin in north Fairmont in the fall of 1989, and Burger King opened that same year.

These were several, but certainly not all, of the events of interest in Fairmont during the 1980's. Many of us will surely recall some of those changes in our community as significant improvements. Others, such as the closing of Park Street Grocery, marked the end of a perhaps somewhat nostalgic era involving corner grocery stores. Still others, such as Kiehl's Bakery, are undoubtedly missed by many of us that fondly remember the aroma of fresh baked bread, the pastries, cakes, and the little coffee counter. However, although times change, the one constant is that the city of Fairmont, as well as its citizens and businesses, will continue to evolve as we move forward into the future.