

Community Treasures

Martin County is known for beautiful parks, some of which are located in Fairmont. Each park is unique in its own special way, and the summer months find them teeming with a variety of activities.

Fairmont's oldest park is Sylvania Park, located on the northeast corner of Lake Sisseton. It dates back to 1888; however, the city did not acquire the land title until 1894. Once known as "The Grove," the park was initially sold or donated in a total of four parcels. The first parcel was sold by Sylvan S. and Julia M. Huntting for \$1,500.00.

Besides its natural beauty, the park is probably best known for its legendary "Singing Oak," its landmark Sylvania Park Band Shell, and the many splendid performances of the city band.

The "Singing Oak" is an Indian legend that has since been retold by Major Arthur Nelson as to how it is associated with our local history. According to Nelson's account, the "Sisseton Oak," or the "Singing Oak," was a gnarled tree with a trunk measuring almost four feet in diameter. It once stood in the northwest corner of Sylvania Park at a time when it was a wilderness area inhabited by the Sisseton Sioux.

Legend has it that on one expedition, the Sisseton warriors returned with a three year old Caucasian captive. The Sisseton singer, a famous singer known throughout the Sioux nation, befriended the child until an epidemic struck, likely being smallpox. Consequently, their council of wise men felt that the Great Spirit was displeased with them as a result of the epidemic and believed the child must be put to death. However, the Sisseton Singer disagreed, thus causing the tribal leaders to become enraged. As a result, both the child and the Sisseton Singer were doomed. They were fastened to the large limb on the Oak tree that extended over the lake with firewood placed below them that was set on fire. As the fire burned, the Singer continued his song over the hiss and crackling of the fire telling of war and bloodshed as being hateful to the Great Spirit and of the coming peace.

Upon their death, the remains of the two victims were buried at the water's edge. Therefore, the Indians believed that when standing at the foot of this Oak tree at dusk, the voice of the singer and the cries of the child could be heard. White trappers and hunters of that time also believed the legend and avoided the area as well. The Oak tree was mysteriously destroyed by fire in 1908 and the site of the "Singing Oak" has since been marked by an engraved field stone.

The realization of a band shell in Sylvania Park began in 1925 when the City of Fairmont purchased the plan for \$150.00 from George Pass & Sons of Mankato. The construction contract went to Andrew Christiansen Lumber and was constructed in 1926 at a cost of \$3,135.00. Interestingly, the project was assisted by a number of additional people including some rather unwilling inmates from the local jail, one of whom was a woman serving a sentence for attending a “flapper” party.

Although construction was not fully completed, the first concert was held on June 10, 1926. Following initial construction, a number of additional improvements were completed over the years: an extended apron was added to the stage in 1951; extensive shoreline reinforcement was done in 1993 to prevent damage due to soil erosion; landscaping and reseeding was done in 1995; a new audio system was installed in 2001; new risers and wiring was completed in 2002; and in 2003 a secure room was added for band equipment storage. The band shell has superb acoustics, an exceptionally large stage, and has served as a focal point for many local activities.

Fairmont's City Band, although having disbanded and reorganized itself on numerous occasions over the years, has been in existence since 1873. The “old band” broke up in 1945 as a result of many of its members being in the military. Then in 1951 under the leadership of the new high school band director, Dick Scherer, the band was reorganized. It has served the public continuously since that time while maintaining an average band membership of forty to sixty musicians. Band members are not necessarily professional musicians, but rather people that enjoy playing for those that enjoy listening. High school band students that have completed tenth grade and adults that have ever played an instrument are generally welcome to become members and participate in the band. The annual summer concert series is sponsored by the City of Fairmont in conjunction with the Fairmont Area Schools.

Sylvania Park, the band shell, and the city band are all priceless community treasures. They serve as rich cultural resources to the citizens of Fairmont, Martin County, and anyone else wishing to visit and experience the park, the band shell, and the city band.

For more information on this topic, or to become a member of the Martin County Historical Society, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.





BAND SHELL SYLVANIA PARK FAIRMONT MINN. 1882

