

Swan City Park History

A Portal to the Past and a Pathway to the Future

When the first settlers arrived in what was to become the City of Beaver Dam, they chose the location because of the availability of water. There was a river that could be dammed to create a source of power for a saw mill and grist mill. There were also springs and ponds available for drinking water. Thomas Mackie, the cities first settler in 1841, chose the location for his cabin near a stream that crossed the one hundred block of present day East Mackie Street. Another early settler, Abraham Ackerman, arrived a year later and purchased a parcel of land that included what would become Swan City Park. Mr. Ackerman was a man of some means and his philanthropy was a major influence on the growth of the small community.

In 1876, Dr. George Swan arrived in Beaver Dam from Indiana and purchased the medical practice of Dr. Samuel Thurber. Dr. Swan was a doctor as well an entrepreneur, having invented several devices and developed a number of commercial remedies that were sold throughout the country. In 1879 while looking for some land to purchase for a cow pasture, he purchased land from Mr. Ackerman which contained a “mineral spring” located on the southeast corner of the property. He would go on to purchase seventeen acres overall. Dr. Swan was aware of the spring and the stories of Native American tribes, such as the Winnebagos and Potawatomi hunting in the area and visiting the spring for its water quality and possible healing powers. Dr. Swan was enthusiastic about the medicinal qualities of the water and sent a sample to a leading chemist in Milwaukee for an analysis. The sample tested pure and free from ground contaminants. It was similar to water from Waukesha’s Bethesda Spring.

A Milwaukee engineer estimated that the spring had an outflow of 6,000 barrels per day. The spring was excavated, cleaned and a flat stone with a hole was placed over the fissure. A hollowed out green maple log allowed the water to flow to the surface. The temperature of the water was a constant fifty degrees. A pavilion was built over the spring, the same structure we see today at the southeast corner of the park. At this particular time in history, health resorts were starting to become very popular. People from all over the country were looking for places to vacation, that placed an emphasis on “good health.” Each day many people came to drink the water from the spring Dr. Swan named Vita Mineral Spring. Vita meaning “life.”

Dr. Swan saw a business opportunity and contracted with the engineer who laid out Lincoln Park in Chicago. Three lakes/lagoons were excavated and over two thousand trees were planted in what had previously been a pasture. Along with the ponds, tennis and croquet grounds were laid out. Playgrounds were established and the grounds were entirely surrounded by a white picket fence.

During the summer of 1880 work was not confined to the landscaping alone. On the west side of the park a four story hotel was constructed that could accommodate up to

one hundred guests. Also constructed at that time was a bath house, greenhouse, boathouse, music pavilion and three buildings to put the spring water in bottles and barrels. The water was shipped all over the country.

In July of 1881 they held the formal grand opening of Vita Park with over eight thousand people attending. The park was a huge success for Dr. Swan and also the entire community with guests arriving over the next thirteen years from all over the world. In the summers, city hotels would be full and private rooms in homes would be rented as well. Some families from larger cities would stay the entire summer. Vita Park was the social hub of Beaver Dam and Dodge County. Bands would play in the hotel formal ballroom at least two nights a week.

In 1893 the health spa craze had ended and Dr. Swan closed the hotel. The buildings fell into disrepair and the lagoons filled with silt. The hotel and buildings were sold at auction and the majority of the lumber was used to construct new buildings in town. Dr. Swan decided to put the property up for sale as city lots. Luckily the city council stepped in and purchased the property for \$15,000, to become a city park. It eventually was placed on a referendum in 1906 and passed by the citizens of Beaver Dam. Thus becoming Beaver Dam's first city park,

It wasn't until 1915 that the city completed the restoration of the park, with the addition of benches and tables, new paths, gardens and the repair of the original Spring House. A small zoo was added with deer, monkeys and foxes. It was officially now called Swan City Park.

From 1915 to 1940 numerous improvements were made to the park. The east lagoon was concreted to create a wading pool. A 24' x 40' foot comfort station was constructed near the site of the current wading pool. In the 1930s the original mineral spring was capped because of contamination. Fresh water had been served at the same site since the 1880s. In the 1930s the Works Progress Administration had constructed the walls and improved the bridges in the park. A new lighting system was also added during this period. In 1935 the new bandstand was completed. It was based on designs from the Hollywood Bowl and Radio City Music Hall. People came from all over the country to see the special effects which incorporated water and lighting, synchronized with the entertainment on stage. A huge fountain was installed in the main lagoon which provided lighting and sound effects.

In the 1940s the bandstand was used to promote the purchase of War Bonds during World War Two. Stars from Hollywood appeared on stage. Also in the 1940s two special summer shows were introduced. One being Circus Night, which included professional circus acts and the other being Indian Night which highlighted Native American culture and pageantry. Either night could bring up to ten thousand people to the park.

In the subsequent years Swan City Park was a center of activity for Beaver Dam. It was used to celebrate special anniversaries and honor veterans returning home from

foreign wars. The deer park was closed and modern playground equipment was installed in its place. Horseshoe pits were added as well as a basketball court. The bandshell was available for weekly concerts and presentations each summer. This included outdoor movies, shown on a big screen, with a carbon-arc projector. Rose gardens throughout the park were sponsored by various civic organizations. In 1973 a new wading pool was completed, to replace the original cement lagoon pond. In 1980 the Vita Spring Pavilion was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. This being the only structure remaining from Dr. Swans famed health spa. In 1984 the pavilion was restored by the Beaver Dam Parks and Recreation Committee.

Swan City Park has continued to be the centerpiece of city parks. It is an iconic park that represents so much for so many. Most citizens have a special memory, from the distant past or a more recent event. From city-wide picnics, to car shows, craft fairs, concerts, political rallies, church services, weddings, family reunions, graduation or birthday parties, recreational pursuits, Christmas displays, or just a casual walk, Swan City Park has something for everyone.

Today, we are at a crossroads. A masterplan has been developed for the park. With community support, like its original purpose of “life” and “good health,” Swan City Park will be a safe environment that meets the needs of all generations. With this plan, a stroll through the park will be a portal to the past and a pathway to the future.