

## Interlaken Park

In the early years of the last century, Fairmont was the site of one of the finest resorts in the Midwest. That resort was known as Interlaken Park. It was the brainchild of Frank Wade, who in just three years transformed the land, which he purchased for \$175.00 an acre, into a recreational area that became an important feature of the local community.

The *Fairmont Daily Sentinel* of that era offered a weekly column devoted to Interlaken Park entitled, “*Interesting Notes from Interlaken,*” which described the improvements taking place, happenings in the park, as well as frequently listing the home towns of park visitors. Although most visited the park from southern Minnesota and northern Iowa, there were also many that came from the Minneapolis and St. Paul area, the Chicago area, and other parts of the Midwest.

Admission to Interlaken Park was a mere 25 cents in those early years, and weekend crowds often were in the neighborhood of 4,000 visitors. However, Interlaken’s income was significantly less than Mr. Wade’s park expenses. In 1917, Mr. Wade spent \$47,000.00 in improvements and wages; however, poor weather significantly reduced attendance on several weekends. In addition, during the following winter the diving pier was destroyed, and the parks pipes and faucets had to be replaced because they had frozen and broken.

Ever the optimist, Mr. Wade continued to finance his project by adding and expanding facilities and attractions while also booking special events. The 1918 season was better than previous years, and Mr. Wade planned to continue his efforts to improve the park. However, his unfortunate death in March of 1919 ended the vigorous growth the park had experienced up to that point.

Frank Wade’s son, Harold, managed the park until he sold it in 1923. Although the park thrived during that period of time, very few attractions were added, the major addition being a restaurant and cabaret called the Merrie Garden. Special attractions were booked and well attended. The season’s highlights were the July 4<sup>th</sup> celebrations, with the 1922 celebration attracting upwards of 20,000 visitors to the park.

Interlaken peaked in popularity in the early 1920s, and enjoyed praise from locals and visitors alike. However, problems were on the horizon. The development of the automobile as well as the development of northern Minnesota into a major resort area would both prove to have a negative effect on Fairmont's Interlaken Park.

What were the attractions to the park? One was the Interlaken Inn, in which vacationing families traveling to Interlaken Park could stay for weeks or months. When the inn first opened, it had a manager that imported a chef, waiters and porters from the Minneapolis area. Sunday dinner and evening weekday meals were seventy-five cents, and, it frequently hosted conventions and banquets. Additionally, guests could choose to stay in one of the sixteen cabins near the inn.

The dance pavilion, one of the park's first structures, remained in use until it burned down in 1972. Some of the performing groups included the Interlaken Orchestra, the Menke Melody Orchestra, the White Hussar Band from Chicago, Harold Bachman's Million Dollar Orchestra which attracted 10,000 visitors, as well as the Fairmont City Band.

One of Interlaken's main attractions was its zoo. Lenny Burton, one of Fairmont's more colorful and endeared individuals, was from the outset in charge of zoo as he was experienced having had his own zoo on the west side of George Lake. The zoo kept a wide variety of animals, including bears, deer, monkeys, owls, squirrels, seals, pheasants, eagles, foxes, swans, parrots, raccoons, skunks, ostriches, and more, including at one time a lion.

The Japanese Gardens in Interlaken were perhaps Frank Wade's greatest joy. He designed them based upon his observances of others around the country. Although his plan was to expand them, after his death, those plans never materialized. Subsequent owners were not enthusiastic about this project, and eventually the Japanese Gardens deteriorated to the point that by the late 1930s they were not the inviting aspect of the park as they were intended.

The park, at one time or another, also included a golf course, waterfront activities, special events and promotions, baseball games, pageants, a ferris wheel, an 18 hole miniature golf course, a shooting gallery, and a speech by William Jennings Bryan on July 12, 1918, that lasted for 2 ½ hours. His appearance attracted 3,000 visitors who listened to his speech entitled,

“Fundamentalism – a Plea For Patriotism, Prohibition, and Women’s Suffrage.” The Ku Klux Klan also used the park for rallies in the mid 1920s.

Interlaken Park, owned and run successfully by John Erickson and his family since 1923, was about to change ownership in 1945 as the Ericksons were negotiating the sale of the park with an outside interest. The sale was eventually thwarted by a group of 19 local businessmen who purchased the park for \$60,000.00 in 1946. Their plan was to run the park for one year in order to give the city of Fairmont the opportunity to purchase it from them. However, the public was not convinced that it was the right thing to do because of the expense, and voted it down.

Over the years, the park gradually evolved, and soon only the ballroom stood as a reminder of those vibrant days gone by. Later on, in 1972, a fire destroyed the ballroom too. Today, little remains of Interlaken Park but the memories of some, and the documentation of what that era was like in *Fairmont Daily Sentinels* of the past and a well written book entitled “*The Story Of Interlaken Park*,” by T. J. Arneson, which served as the primary resource for this article. If you’re interested in learning about Interlaken Park, both of the previously mentioned resources as well as others are available at the Pioneer Museum.