

The College That Never Was

When considering educational opportunities available locally, Fairmont is indeed fortunate to have Presentation College and other resources available to those wishing to further their education. However, the city of Fairmont also pursued higher education some time ago in the form of a junior college. This was during an era when college admissions and school enrollments in general, were literally mushrooming. Fairmont's goal of a junior college apparently started nearly fifty years ago according to a January 6, 1965, headline from the *Sentinel* that read, "Fairmont Buys Day Farm For Junior College Site." This piece went on to state that the city of Fairmont had purchased the 168 acre Day Farm located on the west side of Lake Sisseton as the site for a future junior college. The land was purchased from Mrs. Majel B. Habberstad of Minneapolis and Doris Day of Los Angeles, the two daughters of Burt Day who was the brother of *Sentinel* founder Frank Day. The farm was homesteaded by the ladies' grandfather, Rueben Ward. The article also stated that the land would be paid for by profits from the municipal liquor store.

Shortly thereafter, the Fairmont Junior College Action Committee (JCAC) was formed. It was apparently quite instrumental in organizing meetings and dinners in which local individuals, as well as legislators and state senators, were present in extolling the virtues of building a junior college in Fairmont.

A *Sentinel* article from May 29, 1969, read "Junior college may open by 1973." This was the first of two articles, written by then *Sentinel* Editor Roger Matz based on an interview with Emil Wilken who served as the assistant to the chancellor of the state junior college system. It started by stating, "A lakeside farm does not become an ivy-covered campus overnight." It went on to outline the fact that although this ten year dream had now been provided \$97,000, as well as being designated a junior college site by the legislature, there needed to be answers to questions as to what curriculum of study would the college offer and what buildings would be needed in order to carry out their programs.

The subsequent article on the topic from the May 30, 1969, *Sentinel* entitled "College shape remains formless," projected what the college might become. Matz facetiously began the second article by stating; "Will it come complete with student demonstrators?" By this he meant that questions like these might be more easily answered than questions about what the final product would be in terms of size and appearance. However, could his quote have also implied that there were perhaps other unwritten, but discussed, concerns about a junior college in Fairmont? In the article by Matz, Dr. Wilken estimated that the school could open in 1973 with an enrollment of 400 to 500 students. He also indicated that the JC might have several buildings serving several

purposes including a science building, a library, and general classroom buildings. He went on to state that junior colleges frequently share athletic facilities with local high schools, especially in their early stages of development.

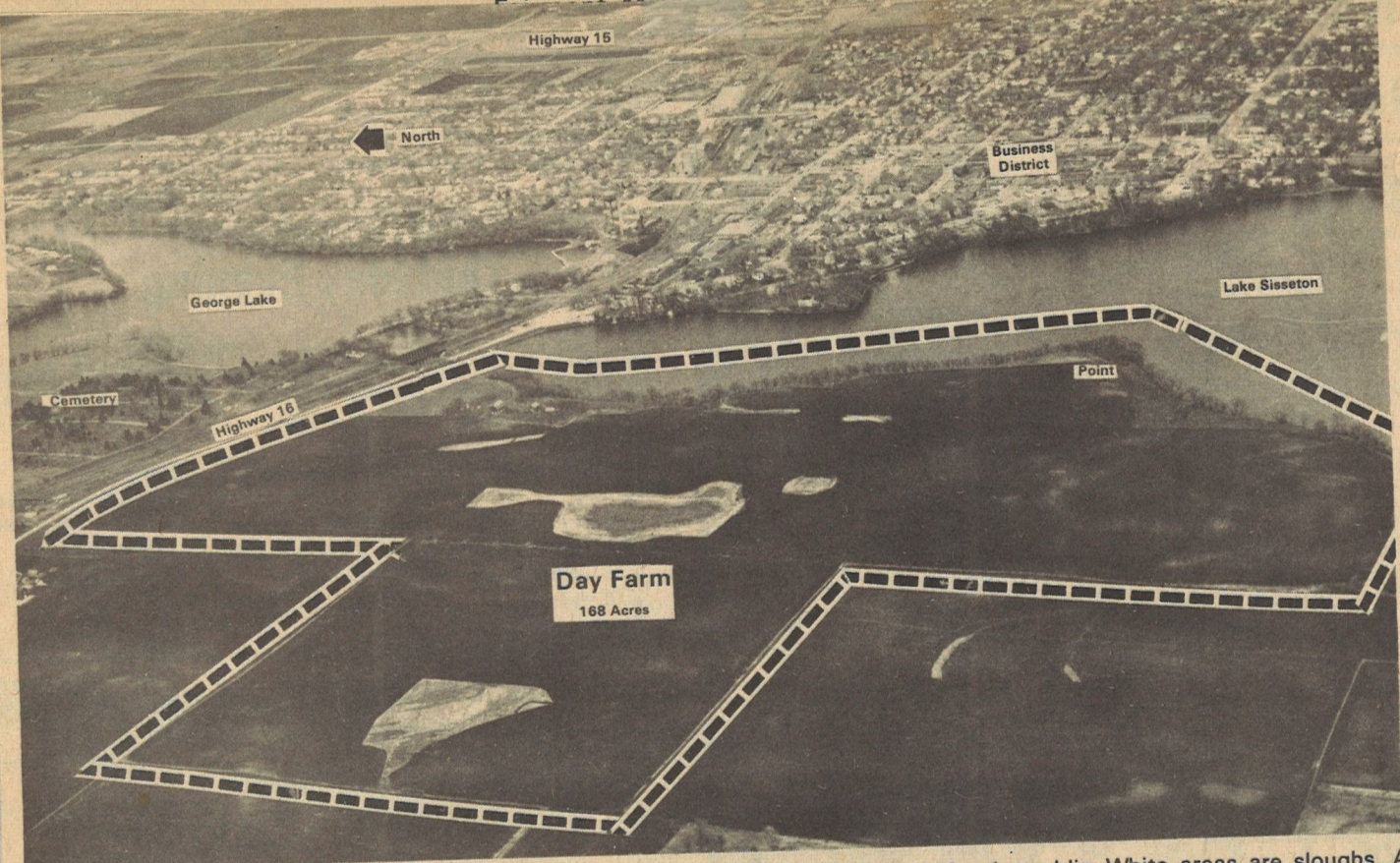
A June 17, 1969, *Sentinel* piece entitled “Junior college needs outlined,” promoted the benefits a JC would afford the students in addition to the enthusiastic efforts of those interested in having a JC in Fairmont. The article went on to further outline the economic benefits derived from a JC, what the college offerings might include, and the necessary steps to be taken in order to establish a junior college in Fairmont.

Between 1969 and 1972, the matter seemed to essentially deteriorate. In a *Sentinel* article from May 25th of 1972 entitled “Fairlakes head ponders future,” Dr. Donald K. Harcom, who was the newly appointed president of Fairlakes Junior College, said he was anxious to move but had no idea as to where his office might be established. He went on to say that he had little information about the college but believed it would be the best in Minnesota. Obviously, things were a bit murky at best regarding the JC at this juncture.

According to a February 21, 1974, *Sentinel* story entitled, “After 15-year struggle, Fairlakes vanishes,” Fairlakes Junior College finally appeared doomed. This story stated that in December of 1973, two legislative leaders visited Fairmont in hopes of learning the key issues that concerned the people of Fairmont. During their two hours in town, they heard about everything but the junior college. What at one time had been the hottest topic in town; the elusive junior college had now seemingly slipped into obscurity. Apparently, public sentiment regarding the JC must have waned.

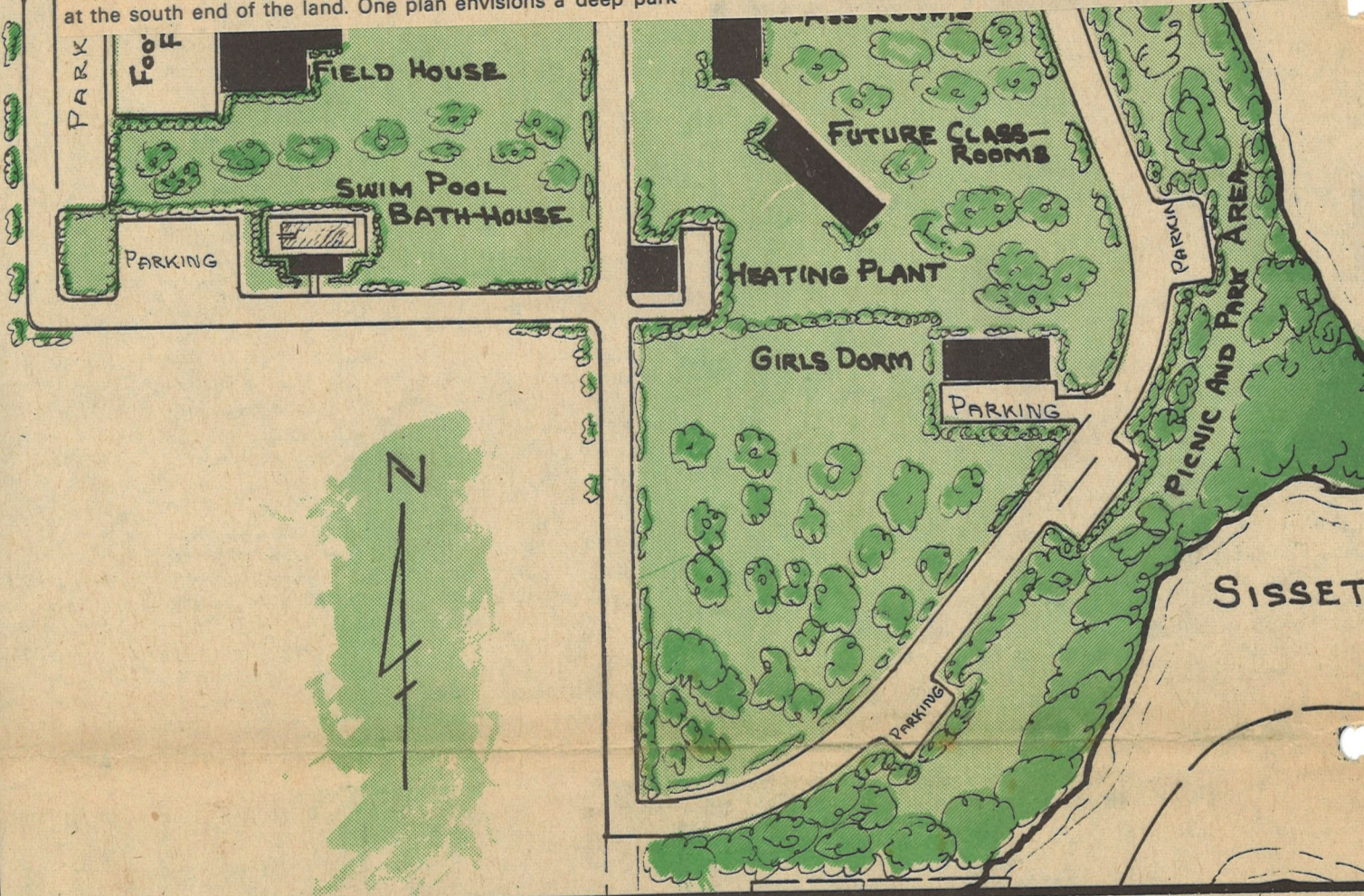
In summary, the inability of the forces surrounding Fairlakes Junior College to coalesce was due to a changing Minnesota compounded by a variety of other factors. Among them, the plans lingered beyond deadlines, state officials blamed architects, architects blamed state bureaucrats, plans were submitted to bidders months behind schedule, and bids came back \$200,000.00 too high, causing an arduous situation at best. Furthering the problem, college enrollments were declining and the Minnesota Commissioner of Administration impounded the Fairlakes funds. Going as far back as 1958 when a state report termed Fairmont an educational “void,” the struggle ultimately reached closure in 1973. In the final analysis, had the plans proceeded in a prudent and timely manner, perhaps Fairlakes Junior College might have come to fruition. However, since it failed to materialize, one can now only speculate as to “what might have been” regarding that phase of our local history.

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



ACROSS FROM CITY - The Day farm lies across Lake Sisseton from Sylvania park and Fairmont business district. Trees stud the nearly mile long west shoreline including a point at the south end of the land. One plan envisions a deep park-

way along the lake for the public. White areas are sloughs. A barn and old vacant farmhouse are on the land. (Sentinel Photo Via Fairmont Flying Service)



SKETCH SHOWS ONE POSSIBLE WAY OF DEVELOPING DAY FARM