

Celebrate Spring in Sidney's Parks

By Mike Barhorst

Well before Tawawa Park officially opened for vehicular traffic, hundreds of community members and visitors took advantage of the warmer than usual winter weather to enjoy not only Tawawa Park, but Sidney's two-dozen neighborhood parks. The warm weekends were especially busy at Tawawa Park.

In February, I made several trips to Tawawa Park as part of the planning process for the Civil War Living History Weekend. Those trips caused me to reflect on not only the gem of our park system (Tawawa Park), but on our good fortune as a community to have so many parks.

Well before most of us were born, there were those with foresight who knew that great cities had great public places. As a result, few of us have to walk more than a half-mile to reach one of the City's 24 parks.

In 1955, the Recreation Commission developed a long-range recreation plan that suggested the City should have a park within one-half mile of every resident. As a result, that thinking became an integral part of the future planning for the City, and the practice begun more than six decades ago continues through the present.

It was also in 1955 that the City of Sidney took over operation of Tawawa Park. The land that became that park was purchased by a group of citizens who incorporated as a non-profit on May 24, 1948. The group organized as the Tawawa Civic Park Trustees after learning that the property was for sale. They then twisted the arms of their friends to come up with the funds to purchase the land.

The main drive through Tawawa was originally the road bed for the "Big Four" Railroad. After the railroad was relocated in 1923, the abandoned road bed became a popular hiking trail. The lake was a popular fishing spot, Big Rock was an oft-visited curiosity, and the tow path of the canal was a favorite for young lovers, especially in the spring and summer.

The Kah Family owned the land, and following World War II, there was considerable speculation that they had plans to build housing on the property. Instead, they put the property up for sale for \$15,000. In order to secure the land for a park, local attorney William Milligan made a list of 15 people from whom he believed he could successfully ask for \$1,000 and then purchase the land.

As the story goes, he first spoke to Monarch Machine Tool Company President Wendell E. Whipp. Whipp handed him the entire amount necessary to complete the purchase with the admonition that when the funds were collected, he would be repaid, but "didn't want to let the opportunity to purchase the property slip away before the total could be collected."

In addition to Milligan and Whipp, those who succumbed to the arm-twisting included Sidney Printing & Publishing Company Vice President Cecil Watkins, Ferguson Construction President Murray A. Ferguson, Sidney Printing & Publishing Company President J. Oliver Amos, Sidney Machine Tool Company General Manager Wayne Bertsch and Wagner Manufacturing Vice President of Sales Jerome Wagner, Sr. Once the parkland was purchased, additional arms were twisted to obtain funds to develop the property.

That list is a veritable who's who of individuals, businesses, clubs and organizations of the time. The individual donors ranged from Frank Amann, Joseph Cook, Arthur Graham and Harley Knoop (bankers) to Paul Crimm, Eugene Crimm, Thomas Hunter, John Kerrigan, Clayton Kiracofe, George Schroer, Ned Smith and Edward Sparks (physicians), local businessmen, including W.E. Bumgardner, L.E. Canter, Norbert Pointner, L.R. Oller and William Wentz, and industrialists Ralph J. Stolle, C.D.W. Anderson, C.D. Beck, and Kermit Kuck.

And, I've barely scratched the surface. There are 78 other individuals listed on the plaque that is mounted on the front of the shelter at Wagner Glade. In addition, there are 19 corporations listed, many of them no longer extant, as well as 17 civic clubs, again many of which have been consigned to history.

In more recent years, it is an appropriate time to again thank both Emerson Climate Technologies and Honda of American Manufacturing for providing grants to the City during the Great Recession by which we were able to replace large play structures in our parks. The City was faced with removing play equipment and not replacing it because of the lack of funds. Both Emerson and Honda ensured that did not happen, and for that City Council will always be grateful.

As spring has officially arrived, it is appropriate to pause to thank those who had the wisdom and desire to make their community a better place. It is also a good time to think about the future of our park system, and additional parks that could benefit the community.

The development of the hiking/bicycle trail that will eventually connect Sidney to both the Great Miami River Recreational Trail and the Ohio to Indiana Trail is but one of the projects in the planning stages. Other potential projects include a dog park, a skate park, and additional parkland that would remain in a natural state that has been acquired by the City as part of the well field project.

A key to the development of the bicycle/hiking trail will be the Shelby County Park District, which currently has no funding mechanism. In contrast, the Miami County Park District was created in 1967, and voters first approved financial support for the district decades ago.

Despite several attempts, voters in Shelby County have not previously approved a tax levy to support the Shelby County Park District. As a result, our neighbors to the south (Miami County) have a well-developed county park system. Shelby County is far behind. When residents bemoan the fact that people would rather live in other places, we have only ourselves to blame.

Amenities such as parks and bicycle/hiking trails are expensive. Evidence indicates that boomers looking to retire, as well as millennials just beginning their careers, are looking for places that will afford them a good quality of life. We need to be the leaders (like those who saw the opportunity to purchase Tawawa Park now eight decades ago) who work to create amenities that will attract both residents and visitors to our community well into the future.

Photo caption:

Play equipment, such as this structure at Custenborder Park, was provided by a grant from Emerson Climate Technologies. During the Great Recession, the play structure it replaced would have been removed and not replaced had it not been for the generosity of Emerson and Honda of America Manufacturing.

Mike Barhorst photo.

An unidentified couple walk aside Amos Lake during one of the three beautiful weekends in February, weekends which drew hundreds of people to the City's parks.

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