

THE HISTORY OF VANDER VEER PARK

Originally this thirty-three acre tract of land, now known as Vander Veer Park, was a fair grounds. There was a half mile race track that ran where the present conservatory is now located.

However, because of the rōise from the fairgrounds, it only lasted as a race track for a few years.

The property was then acquired by the Davenport Park Board and dedicated as a park in 1890. It was originally called "Central Park" because it was in the center of the city. The park was like the one in New York City, and was patterned after it in many ways.

The original conservatory was opened in 1897. I was told that the first green house was built on the other side of Central Park Avenue in 1902, and then the west green-house was added in 1910.

The park was named Vander Veer Park in honor of A.W. Vander Veer shortly after his death in 1911. He served as the Park Board's first Secretary. He also donated an elaborate iron fountain at the south entrance which is now closed. Mr. Vander Veer died in office, and naming the park after him was a way to honor him.

An old drawing of the Park, now stored in a park office closet, showed three lagoons in the park, and a grandstand on the Brady Street side. There was also a Wishing Well in the park. The lagoons were drained after a child drowned in one of them. Presently a stone bridge in that area of the park marks the spot where two of the lagoons met. Other features that are gone today include a pavilion where "Teddy" Roosevelt and William Jennings Bryant spoke. It stood where the rose garden is now. When we planted roses we occasionally came upon some of the old cinder sidewalks.

There was a wading pool near the southeast corner of the park, which has also been filled in. A display of birds and monkeys was in the old building on the northwest corner of Main Street and Central Park Avenue. This building later served as offices for many years until about 1980 when it was torn down.

There were several other fountains, including one known as the "Horse Fountain" which was especially for horses and dogs. It was located where the present parking lot is located. It was erected in 1897, but gone by 1935. The ornate cast iron fountain at the former entrance where Main Street came into the park was torn down in the 1940's and sold for scrap. The present lighted fountain was erected later on. It features a colored light display.

The old conservatory was condemned and torn down in 1953. The present structure was built in 1954 and dedicated in 1955.

The rose garden was started by the Tri-City Mens' Rose Club in 1945, under the guidance of the late Dr. A. A. Plagmann and John Hanssen. The gardens were renovated a few years ago.

We now have a volunteer organization called "Friends of Vander Veer", which was formed in 1991. The organization was instrumental in installing the present rose garden, and the aereators in the lagoon.

At one time the rose garden contained 2,500 rose plantings. Every year new varieties come from the different rose companies that hybridize roses. These are Hybrid tea roses, floribundas, grandifloras, climbing roses and shrub roses.

I have been associated with Vander Veer Park since 1964, and was put in charge of the rose garden in 1965. I worked under three Park Superintendents - Emil Plambeck, Richard Slatery and Wayne Boyer. I received much of my training from Ralph Clayton who was the head horticulturist. He retired in 1971, and after that I was put in complete charge of all the outside gardens. I was made Head Gardener over all the Vander Veer Horticultural area in 1975, and filled that position until my retirement in 1983.