

“The Beach”

Centerville’s Gunderson Park. What it once was and what it could be again.

By Jared Hybertson, Centerville Economic Development Coordinator

“As the man who journeyed far afield and unsuccessfully searched for four-leaf clovers, only to return home to find that which he sought growing profusely in his own backyard, so Centerville one day awakened to the fact that the Vermillion River flowing by our doors and the land adjacent thereto offered splendid possibilities for a bathing beach and park.”

That was a passage taken out of the May 29th, 1924 issue of the Centerville Journal. The poetically written article describes how community leaders came to the realization they had an amazing space, right in their own backyard, full of potential for a wonderful park and recreation area. The article goes on to tell how the community rallied and came together to make their vision for the space a reality. This 7.5 acre stretch of land came to be known as Gunderson Park.

Centerville’s Gunderson Park, or “The Beach” as it is often referred to, gets its name from long time community leader and businessman T.I. Gunderson. Mr. Gunderson, who was Mayor at the time the concept for the park was first introduced, owned the land where community members thought it best to put their park. T.I. as he was called deeded the land to the City with the agreement that so long as it was maintained as a park it would remain the City’s space to utilize.

In that same May 29th, 1924 article, the Centerville Journal depicts the volunteerism, collaboration, and just plain old hard work this community put forth to achieve their vision of Gunderson Park. *“In response to a call for volunteers, dozens of men and boys gathered at the park and from early morn until late at night they were busy clearing the grounds of willows, underbrush, tall weeds, and grass, and other refuse. Some tore down fences and built new ones; still others worked on the beach itself, with teams, scrapers, etc. Every day for at least a week a crew of men was busy making a road across the dike leading to the park, sloping off the beach, and erecting the necessary buildings. In this connection we remember the most noticeable fact was that everybody helped.”*

The park became an outdoor recreational hot spot. In its heyday, Gunderson Park was the place for everything from swimming and recreation, to fishing, to picnics, to meetings and celebrations. The park was home to bath houses, concession stands, and a clubhouse. Patrons could enjoy benches, swings, teeter-totters, a maypole, and even large waterslides dumping into the swimming area.

Later another article in the Journal from the 20’s boasted that *“Gunderson Park and Bath Beach is the best tourist camp between Sioux City and Rapid City, and every year more and more tourists are finding this to be a fact!”*

Sadly, over the years, time and Mother Nature were not good to Gunderson Park. Several seasons of flooding gradually started to destroy the park's amenities and wooden structures. Park repair and clean-up days were held by community members but deterioration, vandals, and flood waters had taken its toll on the park. In the early 1960's talks had begun on a new state-of-the-art swimming pool and there was a push to continue developing the new City Park on the east side of town. Gunderson was no longer the main priority.

In 1993 what was left of the old dam located down river at Centerville was taken out. During this time Centerville had what was considered another "100 year flood". The combination of the dam being gone and the now faster flowing flood waters again did not bode well for Gunderson Park. Most of whatever remained of the buildings at Gunderson Park was destroyed.

Looking at Gunderson Park today it might be difficult to picture the boisterous park in its glory days. The stone pillars at the entrance of the park still remain, as well as a few that follow the oval dirt road that still circles through the park. Also still standing, like well preserved ancient ruins, are the stone pillars from the once vibrant grape arbor. Near the grape arbor a large stone fire place once used for cooking picnic meals has also managed to endure. It is truly a unique specimen to behold. If one stands in the middle of the historic park and slowly looks around you can envision the park back in its day in all its glory. It is easy to see what those early citizens of Centerville saw in this space.

The City still mows and maintains the park, still honoring that original agreement with T.I. There is no denying it is still a very attractive green space. Outdoor enthusiasts will appreciate its natural beauty. Towering mature cotton wood trees offer majestic beauty and ample amounts of shade. The river winds around the park and its waters and banks are appealing to the eye in their own right. Open stretches of green grass, clover, and prairie flowers are inviting. The dense stretch of trees along the river leading towards town makes for an alluring area to hike and explore.

Unfortunately, it is hard to imagine Gunderson Park ever being what it once was in its heyday. Times have certainly changed and flood waters from the Vermillion River do remain an issue. But challenges aside, something needs to be done with this underutilized gem in the City's possession. Now days, City Parks are more often than not actually built in floodplains, utilizing these less developable spaces and dealing with the floods as they come and building accordingly.

The buildings and structures from the 1920's may not have survived at Gunderson Park. But with new more flood resistant materials and the proper planning, Gunderson Park could be redeveloped back into a desirable, functional park space that would get utilized again. This time around we wouldn't be talking concession stands and waterslides, but one can certainly envision picnic areas and benches, camping spots and fire pits, recreational play areas and trails. Locals would head down there again to let their kids run and play and then later enjoy a picnic. People from around the region and neighboring towns would come to Gunderson again, maybe not to swim in the river, but to camp, bike, kayak, and fish.

Centerville has a long history for valuing their parks and recreation. Another reason the timing might be right to revitalize Gunderson Park is the new addition of Centerville's bike path. Phase I of this recreational trail was completed in the summer of 2015. Phase II of the trail is scheduled to be

completed by the spring of 2017 and will ultimately extend the path out to Gunderson Park. Why not give children and adult users of the trail alike a reason to take this stretch out to Gunderson Park by offering a more appealing recreation area with something to do while they are there.

I am afraid maybe we have forgotten what we have in Gunderson Park. Hearing the amazing story of how Gunderson Park came to be is truly inspirational and should not be forgotten. One can't help but feel inspired. I find myself longing for the days when an entire community would rally around a cause in order to accomplish something they truly believed in. I still believe in Gunderson. And I believe that with just a fraction of that good old fashioned work ethic and volunteerism we can follow in that example that was given to us of what it once meant to be a "community" and together work to make Gunderson Park great again.

Won't you join me?