

A Lifetime Stroll Through The Parks of Lincoln

Fifty-one summers ago a fifty-four year old man who had survived the loss of a young wife, the rigors of the Great Depression, and two world wars, packed up his second wife and their two children and left the small Nebraska community that had been his life-long home. The economic prospects in the small town for a man of my father's age and education were limited, and he had a dream that his nine year old son and twelve year old daughter would attend University and improve their own prospects. And so on a hot and humid June day in the summer of 1956 the family packed all their belongings into a rented moving van and headed north to the capital city where he had secured employment.

Lincoln was one hundred miles and a world away, and as we left the only community any of us had ever called home, my excitement was mixed with a sense of loss and a longing for childhood friends, Wednesday evening summer band concerts, sodas from the Rexall drugstore fountain, and the security of a life filled with familiar faces and places.

On our third day in Lincoln, we spent an afternoon in a place which, fifty-one years later, is still near and dear to my heart. I have a detailed memory of that first visit to Pioneers Park, stopping at the entrance to see the Buffalo statue, driving past the lake filled with ducks and on through the thick pines to the picnic area. My sister and I played while my parents unpacked a picnic lunch. After our meal we collapsed on a blanket and enjoyed the canopy of shade, the humming of early evening crickets, and a welcome summer breeze. I had never seen a park so large and beautiful and I will always remember the sense of joy and contentment which poured over me as I drifted off to sleep that summer afternoon in Pioneers Park.

Our family had survived the move, and whatever life in Lincoln held in store for us, we had found a place of refuge, filled with green grass and tall trees and memories of laughter on a summer day. What a wonderful gift had been given us that day. Throughout the fifty-one years since that first visit, Pioneers Park has remained like the home of a steadfast friend, a place to find comfort, and to celebrate all manner of family milestones. High school cross-country practices and meets, bicycling, flying kites, trips to the Ager Nature Center, feeding ducks in the lake, the wedding of one of my daughters best friends, picnics, plays and concerts at Pinewood Bowl. It was as if God had selected Pioneers Park as a primary background tapestry for our life in Lincoln. We needed a place and it was given to us. I will always be grateful.

Another of my favorite Lincoln parks is the Sunken Gardens. The wonderful palette of colors is a feast for the senses, and serves as a source of spiritual renewal. Recently, when my wife and I again needed a special place, this beautiful garden provided it. My father in-law passed away two years ago and we wanted a place in Lincoln to honor and celebrate his memory. He was an avid gardener and would have loved the Sunken Gardens. On discovering that it was possible to purchase a brick along the walkway in memory of an individual, we elected to do this for him and it has been a great source of comfort to have a spot of such beauty to frequent and to quietly honor his memory. We are so grateful to those responsible for raising the funds to rejuvenate this marvelous garden.

My memory is filled with many other celebrations in the parks of Lincoln, including my recent 60th. birthday party in Antelope Park orchestrated by family and friends. Lincoln's parks have been a true blessing to me and my family and I want to see others experience that blessing. Like most things that are worthwhile in life, maintaining parks requires time, effort and expense. While we could assume that only those wealthy enough to donate large chunks of land or money are able to impact the future of our parks, such is not the case. Lincolnites are fortunate to be able to contribute in keeping with our personal resources because of the creation of the Lincoln Parks Foundation. Since 1992 this entity has given us all the chance to be a part of the process of maintaining our beautiful parks. Through our individual support of this Foundation each of us can continue to give our children and grandchildren, "A Lifetime Stroll Through The Parks of Lincoln".

Larry Beaty