

LOCAL

Step back in time

Dakota man's book details rich history of Oakdale Park

Sherry Maves sherry.maves@gmail.com

Published 2:34 p.m. CT Feb. 29, 2020 | Updated 2:35 p.m. CT Feb. 29, 2020

While the impending demolition of the Oakdale Tabernacle has created a buzz around Freeport, many younger people and those who have moved to town in recent years may not be familiar with the rich history of Oakdale Park and the century old tabernacle.

Tyger Johnson of Dakota shared his carefully compiled 172 page history of Oakdale Park containing newspaper clippings from as early as 1874, plus photos; programs; train schedules; accounts of speakers; meetings and concerts; maps; and other details of annual church camp meetings that occurred at Oakdale from 1895 through 1967. Johnson said the project took him four months to complete, and he found much information in the archives at Faith United Methodist Church in Freeport. His Oakdale volume is available in the local history room of the library.

Additional information was provided by Karen Fyock from the local history room at Freeport Public Library, Sharon Whelton of the Stephenson County Historical Society, Zoe Norwood from the Rockford Public Library and from Harriet Gustason's Looking Back columns from The Journal Standard.

Oakdale camp meetings grew from the first American camp meeting of the Evangelical denomination held in New Berlin, PA in 1810. Each church area had its own timber for circuit preaching in the summer. Oakdale Park Camp Meeting Association, comprised of some 40 area churches, was organized in Shannon on Aug. 20, 1894; they bought 20 acres of timber South of Freeport from Frank Smith, and seven more acres were added later. Camp meetings were also conducted at Riviera Park in the Arcade where the VFW building stands and at the former Methodist camp grounds in Lena.

After clearing the Oakdale acreage, a dining hall, dorms, and the original tabernacle (with an ornate fence around it to prevent promenading while preaching was going on) were built. The dedication took place Aug. 24, 1895 with 7,000 in attendance the first Sunday.

An 1896 Freeport Daily Bulletin article waxed poetic about Oakdale attractions. “Nearby brooks babble and streams wind through dells of rare beauty. The Hermit’s Cave, Lover’s Walk and Poet’s Glen are all there to inspire the heart after Christian duties are performed.”

The same article also warned, “You must behave yourself when you go to Oakdale for Deputy Sheriff Mason Fox is in charge of the police regulations and while he is a mighty fine man when you’re nice, you ought to see him when you violate rules and regulations.”

The 10-day events each August were eagerly anticipated by throngs of people, many of whom lodged in dorms or tents (offered with or without wood floors) to hear preaching by famous traveling evangelists. White tents were numbered and set up in order on marked avenues. Cottages were added and there was a Sunday School building and a hotel.

In 1901, lodging in the hotel or tent rental was 25 cents per night, and the program mentions a post office, laundry, telegraph office and barber shop on the grounds. Feed and water for horses cost 30 cents and the use of a feed trough per team was 15 cents. Admission to the celebration was 10 cents.

There are accounts of people riding bikes from Dixon to Oakdale while others walked from Freeport. The Illinois Central and the Great Western Railroad brought huge crowds who were met by horse drawn jitneys that took them to the grounds.

Attendees could experience sunrise services, classes with visiting missionaries, handcrafts, sports, Saturday night banquets, musical presentations, lectures, celebrations of old people’s day, young people’s day, plus special speakers, inspired preaching and social interaction. In the early years some sermons were preached in German and English. There was plenty of friendly rivalry between churches and the one with the most attendance and highest offerings receiving a special banner.

When lightning struck the original tabernacle on May 26, 1915, the wooden structure quickly burned to the ground. With a camp meeting scheduled for August, the directors of the association scurried to find contractors who could construct a quality building in a short amount of time.

Arthur C. Woods, a Purdue graduate in electrical engineering, was head of A.C. Woods Company in Rockford. He had also done post graduate work in structural engineering and had been chief engineer for a large bridge firm in Wisconsin, having designed railroad and other bridges as well as buildings. When he read about the tabernacle, he rode the interurban from Rockford to Freeport to inquire.

Within a few days of submitting his bid of \$2,260, he was awarded the contract and S. E. Hamlyn of Freeport was awarded the \$2,300 bid for carpenter work, bringing the total cost of the new structure to slightly more than \$5000. Utilizing steel beams for durability, the tabernacle, which would be modeled after the one at the Lena Methodist campground, would be octagonal in shape, 100 feet in diameter, and 46 feet high at the apex of the circular roof. The cost figure did not include painting which was done by volunteer members of the association. A concrete floor was added later.

The first sermon in the new tabernacle was preached by Rev. L. B. Tobias who had also preached the opening service for the last camp in the old tabernacle. Dr. C. A. Mock, president of Western Union College of LeMars, Iowa, dedicated the new tabernacle as a place where God is to be worshiped.

Years later, the hotel, dining hall and cook house burned in 1932 when workmen (some accounts say ministers) were raking and burning leaves.

Several newspaper clippings spoke of intense heat and storms not being a deterrent to the faithful. However, by 1954 attendance was dwindling and the last camp meeting was held at Oakdale in 1967. In 1968 the title to Oakdale was transferred to the Methodist Rock River Conference, a swimming pool was built, and outings were scheduled by individual churches.

The Freeport Park District bought the campgrounds in 1971 and renamed it the Oakdale Nature Preserve. The lodge was renovated in 1973, and the Bill Gelwicks Nature Center was dedicated in 1974.

The preserve was widely used for wildlife and nature studies, outdoor education, day camp activities, overnight camps, picnics, reunions, swimming lessons, theatre studies and general recreation. Later the pool, cottages and other buildings were removed. The park board purchased additional acreage and a 1988 donation of land expanded the park again. For a while there was a full time nature specialist, but that position was eventually eliminated.

In the 1990s gospel music and folk music gatherings still used the tabernacle, and there were occasional weddings. By 2012 the tabernacle, the only structure left of the former glory days of Oakdale, was closed to the public due to lack of use. Engineering studies have rendered it structurally sound, but the park board felt it was too expensive to repair and maintain.

Currently a group of concerned citizens who feel the tabernacle offers great potential for heritage tourism, parties, weddings, art fairs, music festivals, theatre productions and more has offered to revitalize the structure utilizing volunteer skilled labor, plus they want to

maintain and market the landmark. They have collected nearly \$25,000 in pledges since January, but three of the five park board commissioners are not on board with their plans.

The iconic building that is on Landmarks Illinois list of most endangered properties has been sentenced to demolition by the park board; at this writing it is still standing. For several from today's generation who attended services, accepted Christ and were baptized there in the 1950s and 60s, the tabernacle is a sacred place. For others it is a unique, historical structure that should be saved. Will future history record the demise of the tabernacle or its salvation through some unusual turn of events?

Quietly contemplating his large volume of work, Johnson said, "God brings people together for a reason. When I was working on this four years ago, I knew there must be some reason why I felt compelled to do it, and now here we are."