

## Spencer Park

Was Spencer Park or Chimney Town a blessing or a curse? In 1943 the residents of Hastings were undecided, but the majority felt that it would be the latter. The War, at a fervor pitch, demanded an increasing supply of armaments to support troops fighting on two fronts, and the federal government, in its effort to supply the necessary war materials, focused on the Midwest and built ammunition depots at both Hastings and Grand Island.

With Nearly 10,000 workers employed during the peak production, the sleepy agricultural community of Hastings faced a critical housing shortage. Newspapers carried pleas from the Mayor urging homeowners to remodel and renovate their existing rental properties and to even let the spare rooms in their homes to accommodate the large number of workers being brought in by the government to construct the 45 million dollar Naval Ammunition Depot east of Hastings.

Hastings Daily Tribune carriers surveyed the community in June 1942 and found that there were 106 houses and 74 apartments vacant, hardly sufficient for the needs of so large a venture. Overnight rents doubled despite warnings by officials to maintain current rent levels. Landlords, realizing a good deal, increased rents from \$35 a month to \$60 and \$70 per month. The increase in rent brought down the wrath of Navy officials and in a July editorial one official was quoted as saying, "Newcomers to Hastings resent being soaked."

The Navy did not intend local residents to be burdened forever with the increased population, and through the federal Work Agency Defense Housing Development they planned a housing complex to be constructed on federally owned land on the southeast edge of Hastings. But until construction could be completed, Hastings would have to suffer bulging seams. Also in June of 1942, the Mayor and City Council met and passed an ordinance for the regulation of a trailer park at 14th and Burlington, site of the Adams County Fairgrounds, where the federal government located trailers for its construction personnel. These people would be the first to move to Spencer Park.

Many citizens were critical of these steps and voiced their views in the Hastings Daily Tribune Vox Pop. One letter signed "Anonymous Southsider" pointed out that he felt there was no need to force a "Negro Housing Project" on the southside, a view that typified the feelings of many of the residents in Hastings both on the North and South side of the Burlington tracks.

Resentment born of overnight changes in lifestyles was not confined to housing. Many of the construction people remember being charged "extra" if they did any shopping with their NAD identification badges visible. But, while the newcomers suffered some discrimination, there were many merchants who welcomed the new business and did all they could to assist these people in the transition from transient to resident.

So while the NAD brought affluence and employment, not everyone was excited about the changes, therefore the birth of Spencer Park was not without pain.

Land for the project had been homesteaded in 1872 by Delavan S. Cole, who for a time in the late 1800's turned that portion of his land into what was known as Coles Park. Later the land was sold to the Spencer brothers who held title until it was acquired by the federal government. Hence the name Spencer Park. Construction of 840 concrete block apartments began soon after initial work was started on the depot itself. The apartments ranged from 2 rooms to 3 bedroom units complete with kitchen, living room and bath. They were assigned to families based on the number of members, with the first five families taking up residence on October 16, 1943.

Conditions were primitive by today's standards. Gas was provided for the 20-inch kitchen range and the hot water heater; but fuel for heating had to be purchased by the tenant. Coal was the primary fuel and detached coal bins with a shelter for garbage cans had been included with the original construction. These bins were located at the rear at the edge of the lanes that passed between every two rows of units. Furniture was also supplied in whatever quantity and type necessary to the individual families needs, and while it could not be called stylish, it was sturdy and practical, usually made of oak. All this cost but \$36 a month, with an additional charge of \$1 for those people who owned an electric refrigerator.

Only the lanes and sidewalks to the units had been paved, leaving the streets rutted dirt avenues. Street lighting had

been left for future installation and the small but growing community boasted only one telephone and that was for emergency use only, being installed in the home of the Red Cross Director.

In addition to the units, the Navy had constructed an administration building, maintenance building, recreation building and meeting hall on the east side of the project with a duplicate recreational building in the southwestern section of the park adjacent to Circle R which had been set aside to house the Negro population.

Construction of an Elementary school to house 300 students was begun in 1943, but until it was completed, students attended Lincoln school at Burlington and C Street. Superintendent, Raymond Watson waved kindergarten requirements for park children so as not to overburden Lincoln School. Until busing could be established, the students had to provide their own transportation.

As no postal delivery service was available, all mail had to be picked up at the main post office at 3rd and Hastings. This meant a trip on foot for most of the people as cars were at a premium and most of them were pressed into service transporting personnel to and from the NAD. Household delivery was nearly a year in coming and eventually a branch post office was established in the meeting hall.

"Cattle Wagons" or "Barges" made regular runs into the park from the NAD to transport employees to their jobs. These "Barges" were in reality semi-flatbed trucks fitted out with benches. Before streets were paved, the riders often had to literally push their way to work when rains turned the streets to quagmires. This situation was remedied when the Navy, after an unsuccessful attempt to persuade the city to do it, paved not only streets but sidewalks as well, ending forever the necessity of school officials to place a knife at each school entrance for the children to scrape their shoes with. Street lighting was not long to follow and for most it looked as though the community was taking shape.

Even before the school was completed, the people of Spencer Park were organizing the housing area into a community. Within a year of its completion, the FWADHA had turned over management of the park to the direct control of the Navy, and the commander of the NAD issued grass seed and trees to everyone who applied. Ground for Victory Gardens was prepared and garden plots on the north side of the park were given to all applicants.

The residents formed two councils, one for the white community and one for the black. Both councils worked with the Navy personnel for the community good. One of the first priorities early in 1944 was the establishment of a Sunday School which met in the Meeting Hall. With the assistance of the Hastings Ministerial Society, a schedule for visiting ministers was established and Protestant services were conducted each Sunday. The Ministerial Society also guided the selection and purchase of needed materials. Within a short time Catholic services were also being held, but before many months passed, Navy Chaplains took over the ministerial duties. A clever carpenter built a special altar which served the Catholic congregation but when turned around also served the Protestant.

Also formed in 1944 was the Spencer Park Men's Club which was swiftly followed by their counterpart, the Spencer Park Women's Club. By this time some 596 units were occupied by 2,400 people and an additional 1,347 units were yet to be completed. The Men's Club decided in 1946 that it was time to start a Boy Scout troop. Their organization was followed by the Girl Scouts with the Women's Club as their sponsor. Following discussions with the NAD Commander, two roomy outbuildings were made available to the Scouts. These buildings were located east of the school building and remodeled to include kitchens, fireplaces, cabinets, tables and even picket fences. A few of the additional activities sponsored by the men and Women's Clubs for youth were: wrestling, baseball and boxing. Crutcher Field in the southwest corner of the park was dedicated in July, 1948 and was named for C. R. Crutcher, Commanding Officer at the NAD from October 6, 1946 to June 30, 1949. A golden Gloves boxing tournament was also sponsored by the Men's Club. Other contests included: stilts, softball for both men and women, and soap box derbies. Among the many other projects were pancake feeds, Halloween parties and free weekly movies and square dances.

In 1946 councils for Spencer Park decided to hold a 4th of July celebration complete with fireworks, picnics, softball tournaments and Indian Dances to be performed by the members of the Sioux population. Once underway City Fathers became anxious and Mayor Roy Carter, with Police Chief Ray Crosson, offered the assistance of the men in blue to the Councils in keeping the peace. Their offer of assistance was emphatically refused, for the small community had its own security officer who assured the city officials that he had experienced no trouble nor did he expect any and so the officers retreated.

In September of 1944 Spencer Park school received its first 300 students. Built and supplied by the Navy at a cost of \$5 million, the school was clearly the most up-to-date of any school in the community, and construction of additional classrooms began immediately to house an additional 300 students. Included in the addition were an auditorium and kitchen facilities.

The 10 room school was leased and staffed by the city for grades kindergarten through sixth grade. Teachers were drawn from classrooms throughout the city, but at first there were those who did not look upon teaching at Spencer Park with any enthusiasm. Miss Viola Elliott, principal at the school for 27 years, was warned by fellow teachers not to take the position of principal when Superintendent Raymond Watson offered her the promotion, because the park was thought to be inhabited by unsavory transients, a myth that was a long time being exposed.

Miss Elliott and her teachers started a breakfast program which later evolved into the first hot lunch program in the city, with the Navy again playing a leading role. When Miss Elliott first applied for government commodities, the Navy Commander lent his assistance by opening his storehouses to equip a kitchen complete with trays and silverware. He also supplied the commodities necessary for food preparation.

Another innovation at Spencer Park School was the addition of a classroom for handicapped and retarded children. For this young community, populated by defense workers and returning war veterans and their families, no project was too great and they did not wait for assistance to begin new projects. The Men's Clubs volunteered their labor, wood and skilled carpenters to build the special equipment necessary to aid in teaching and transporting these children. Teachers, together with members of the Spencer Park Men and Women's Clubs, sponsored and chaperoned Friday night dances for park teenagers. These dances were so popular that they were later opened to the community at large.

To complete the community and at the request of the Navy, a grocery store was opened in 1944 by Arnold and Della Widergren in a building just south of the school playground. The Widergrens operated their store for five years until the Navy put the facility out for bids. O.P. Skaggs took over the operation then, followed by Jack and Jill and just before the park ceased operation, again by the Widergrens.

B. C. Burchess and partner D. E. Adams, owners of Bert's Drug Store, opened a branch pharmacy across from the grocery and in addition to prescriptions they offered a large assortment of sundry items including chocolate and cigarettes which during the war years were almost impossible to obtain. Quantities of these items were available however, because the store served defense workers and military personnel.

A small cafe opened next door to the pharmacy but was only in operation a short time. Two Navy doctors felt the park needed their assistance and with the aid of the commanding officer they furnished a small office in the same vicinity and staffed it during their off-duty hours. The Hastings medical community was not supportive, feeling these doctors had an unfair advantage, so in a short time the Navy doctors were refused hospital privileges for their Spencer Park patients. They abandoned their office and limited their practice to military personnel.

A branch of the Hastings Public Library was opened in the late '40s to supply needed reading material and two newspapers were published by the residents and delivered by the Girl Scouts. Both bi-weeklies were mimeographed and contained park news and calendars of coming events. The first paper was called "Spencer Park Recreation News" and was published in 1945. Later "Sparks" was born and filled the void for several years.

This temporary community, unwanted by the City of Hastings, had out of necessity and in a very short time, pulled its diverse people together, creating a pleasant and healthful atmosphere for the nearly 6,000 inhabitants. Navy direction continued until 1954 when the 840 units were sold to the Hastings Housing Authority for \$44,918. Rents were slightly increased, but life continued much the same. No more free water-based paint to freshen the walls, no more spot inspections by the Navy to see that federal property was being maintained, and no more instant maintenance; but improvements were to come.

The city ran a new gas line to all units, eliminating the need for coal or fuel oil; but there was a catch to the pipeline. The line had to be laid twice because the first installation authorized by the city called for plastic pipe and once laid, Nebraska winters proved more than the plastic of that day could withstand. Cracked pipes caused shortages and dangerous leaks so it was replaced with the more conventional iron pipe. Also by this time telephones were commonplace and regular bus service made transportation available to all.

After several years of declining population, the Hastings Housing Authority sold 420 units to the Good Samaritan Society in 1957 for \$112,000 for the establishment of the Good Samaritan Village, a retirement center. In 1966 the city sold the rest of the complex to the Village and ended forever Spencer Park. Today you won't see chimneys as the Village added peaked roofs to the apartments and a number of new buildings have been constructed. Several of the first families to occupy Spencer Park are now enjoying their retirement in the Village.

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