

# History of Fontenelle Park

## H. W. S. Cleveland and the “City Beautiful Movement”

Omaha was lucky that it was still a small city when the national “City Beautiful Movement” started in the 1890’s. It was one of the first cities to have a Park Board, which was created in 1889. Because we were only four decades old (Omaha was founded in 1854), we had plenty of open space, and could plan our growth, unlike older eastern cities which were already overcrowded.

A famous landscape architect, H. W. S. Cleveland, was hired by the Park Board. He had designed parks and boulevards in Chicago, Brooklyn, and the entire Minneapolis–St. Paul park and boulevard system.

When Cleveland came to Omaha in 1889, there was only one major park, Hanscom Park. He advised the Park Board it should acquire land for a “great central park” (of no less than 500 acres), which would offer rural quiet, and shut out the sights of the city. A system of smaller parks would connect to this great park. All would be linked together by wide, curving boulevards, with ornamental plantings. Land for Elmwood Park was acquired, which would become the central park of the Cleveland Plan. It was “a wild and romantic place” with large elm trees.

Between 1889–1894, land for four other smaller parks was acquired—Bemis, Miller, Riverview, and Fontenelle Parks. Both Elmwood and Bemis Parks had deep ravines and streams. Miller Park was a cornfield, and Riverview Park was a hilly tract of land along the Missouri River. By 1896, Riverview Park acquired its first zoo animals—the beginnings of the Henry Doorly Zoo.



*Lodge Pole Pines: Fontenelle Park*

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## Fontenelle Park–1893

Fontenelle Park was perhaps the most beautiful site of all the parks, chosen for its view. In 1893 Omaha citizens protested the \$90,000 purchase of high, rolling hills and pasture land for Fontenelle Park, because it was “too distant” from the city. It was an investment for future generations.

H. W. S. Cleveland’s designs had several signature themes—curving drives, lagoons with islands, and hilltop stands of pines. The century-old lodge pole pines on the hilltops of Fontenelle Park, Elmwood Park, and Miller Park, are the oldest living record of the Cleveland Plan. Lodge pole pines got their name for their prized value as support poles in constructing Indian tipis.

## Tales and Trails of the Old Days



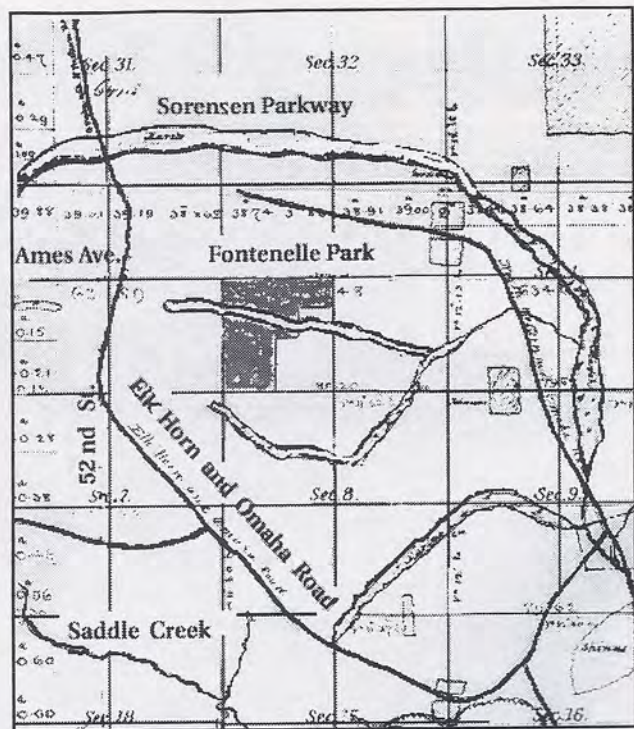
*Logan Fontenelle was also called by his Omaha name, "Shon-gas-ka," or White Horse.*

### Logan Fontenelle (1825–1855)

Many places in the Omaha area are named for Logan Fontenelle, including Fontenelle Park. Logan was born at Fort Atkinson in 1825, the son of a French fur trader, Lucien Fontenelle, and his wife "Bright Sun," the daughter of Omaha Chief Big Elk. His father had a trading post at "Belle Vue," in today's Fontenelle Forest.

Logan was the oldest of five children. He went to school in St. Louis, where he learned to speak, read, and write English. In 1846, when the Mormons arrived at the Missouri, he served as interpreter for his grandfather, Chief Big Elk, who granted the Mormons permission to establish "Winter Quarters." Logan and Peter Sarpy owned a ferry boat at the Elkhorn River emigrant crossing, so he must have used the Elkhorn Road.

Logan played an important role in the treaty negotiations of 1854, when the Omaha sold their land to the United States. He was killed by the Sioux while on a tribal buffalo hunt in 1855. His early death was mourned by both the Indian and white communities. Logan was buried near his father's grave in Fontenelle Forest, where a marker on the History Trail commemorates his memory.



*1857 Survey Map—Partial Map of Townships  
15 and 16 North, Range 13 East*

### Elkhorn and Omaha Road

One of the major Mormon Roads, labelled the "Elkhorn and Omaha Road" on this 1857 survey map, followed 52nd Street north to Highway 36. A long muddy swamp crossed Fontenelle Park where Paxton Boulevard and the golf course pond are located today.

The North of the Platte Road to Utah, and other western destinations, was also called the Council Bluffs Road. The Mormon town of Kaneshville on the Iowa side of the river changed its name to Council Bluffs in 1853. It was a "jumping off place" for western travel.

Many roads led from Missouri River ferry crossings throughout the Omaha area, but they all came together near Highway 36 on the Elkhorn River. There was an obvious reason for this—if you crossed the Elkhorn at this point, you were automatically placed on the north side of the Platte River. The Platte takes a westward bend near this location.

The great trail historian Merrill Mattes, estimated that 180,000 people travelled on the Council Bluffs Road.



*August 30, 1942, Fontenelle Park Pavilion: Photo shows new roof of the baseball grandstand at left.*

*Bostwick-Frohardt Collection  
Western Heritage Museum*

## Fontenelle Park History

### 1895–1911: *Early Days*

The 6-to-10 inch pine tree seedlings survived the droughts of the 1890's. In 1911, the land was graded, and drives were put in.

### 1913–18: *Parks & Boulevards Linked*

Fontenelle Boulevard was built in 1913, and by 1918 Happy Hollow Boulevard and Belvedere Boulevard were joined to it. This system of boulevards, linking three parks—Miller, Fontenelle, and Elmwood—together, was according to H. W. S. Cleveland's plan.

### 1914: *July 4th Fireworks Celebration*

The park was officially dedicated on July 4th, 1914. A local card club "passed the hat" and raised \$500 for the first Fontenelle Park Fireworks Celebration. Before this, the club had sponsored neighborhood fireworks displays.

### 1917: *Lagoon Built*

After storm sewers were put in, a lagoon with an island was built. The lagoon was planted with water lilies, and stocked with fish.

### 1920: *Golf Course Development*

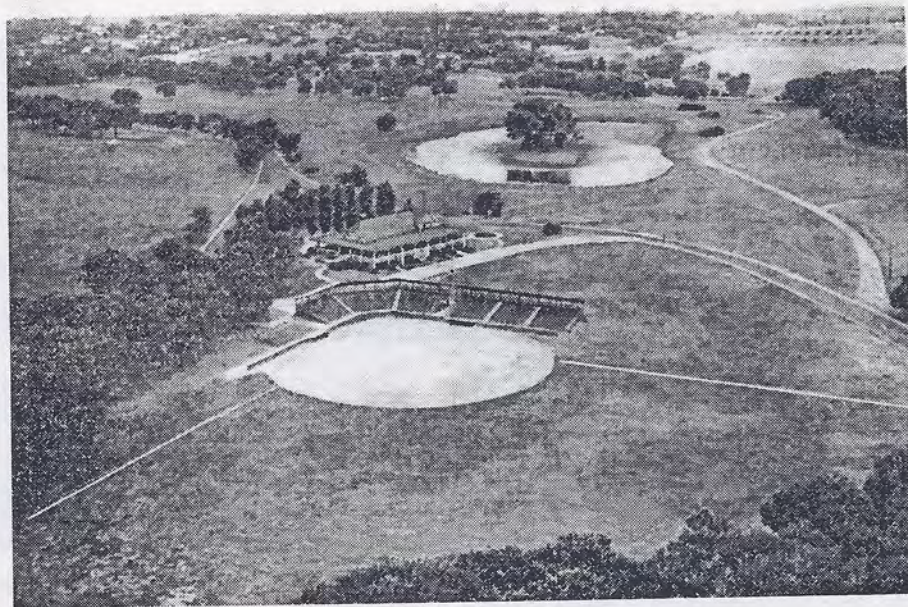
Though some said golf was a "sissy game" \$8,000 was appropriated by the city to develop Fontenelle Park Golf Course. Miller Park, the first free golf course, opened in 1911.

### 1925: *"Battle of Argonne" Fireworks*

"More than 50,000 explosions" depicted the World War I Battle of Argonne in Fontenelle Park. The fireworks display—witnessed by over 80,000 people—commemorated the 1918 battle in France, seven years earlier, in which 26,000 American lives were lost.

### 1927: *Pavilion Dedicated*

3,000 people attended the dedication of the "typical English clubhouse," designed by Leo A. Daley, which served both ball players and golfers. The first floor was a community hall, complete with a kitchen, and a stage. A 20-foot wide veranda surrounded the building, providing an "unobstructed view" of the baseball diamond and lagoon.



*Flying Over Fontenelle Park, August 30, 1947: New ball diamond and grandstand are in front of the pavilion. The lagoon and its island are near the top of the picture. "Lover's Lane" is at top left. (Omaha World-Herald)*

### 1939: Junior Legion World Series

Bleachers were built to seat 13,000 fans, who watched the national championship games of American Legion baseball. A local team, the McDevitts, coached by Skip Palrang, won the series 6-2.

### 1941: Roofed Grandstand Built

The playing field was enlarged to major league size, 400 foot foul lines, 450 feet at center field, and sodded. A roofed grandstand was added to the bleachers.

### 1955: Summer Recreation Program

More than 750 children signed up for recreation programs at the park. Activities included a bike parade, yo-yo contest, tetherball, washers, box hockey, checkers, and horseshoes. *The Omaha World-Herald* sponsored a "Show Wagon" talent program.

### 1955: Ducks Clean Up Water Lilies

Water lilies completely covered the lagoon, and each year park crews had to drag with cables to remove them. 35 ducks and geese took care of the problem by eating them.

### 1956: "Lovers Lane"

Neighbors requested the road at the south end of the park be closed, as the "unlighted, unpatrolled, road encouraged immorality." The Parks and Recreation Commission voted to pave the road, and light it.

### 1959: Indoor Rifle Range

Pistols and 22 calibre rifles were allowed in the indoor rifle range at the pavilion.

### 1963: Tennis Courts

The first seamless courts in city parks were built at Fontenelle. A new clubhouse for golfers and tennis players was added.



*Felled Cottonwood...50 year old monarch in left field, April 19, 1977: Young boy, walking at left, provides a measure of the size. (Omaha World-Herald)*

### 1969: Night Baseball

Fontenelle gained a lighted baseball field.

### 1970: Show Wagon Draws Top Crowd

5,000 people watched young singers and dancers compete at regional finals. Winners went onto finals at Elmwood Park.

### 1971: Duck Stoning Arrests

Two children were arrested for stoning ducks.

### 1975: Final Fireworks Show

Fireworks displays, sponsored by Veterans of Foreign Wars, ended due to concern for the ducks and geese, whose island home on the lagoon served as the launching area.

### 1976-77: "O Noah" and "Cindyrella"

Original musicals, by Pat Whitfield, featuring black versions of Noah's Ark and Cinderella, were staged at the park, and toured the city.

### 1977: Tree Cutter Strikes

A 75 foot tall cottonwood tree, 5 foot thick at the base, was cut by a chain saw. The tree occupied left field of the baseball diamond. The tree cutter was fined \$100.

### 1978: "Age of Enlightenment" Festival

A Transcendental Meditation festival and picnic featured a blue grass band.

### 1978: Winter Carnival

The carnival included a speed skating contest; "broomball" (with soccer ball, brooms, and no skates); figure skating exhibitions; skate sailing; and cross country skiing.

### 1979: Edmonson Youth Outreach Center

Joe and Jean Edmonson started a center for neighborhood boys and girls in the pavilion building. The program features long term



*View of the New Clubhouse, Fontenelle Park, September 12, 1997*

### ***Edmonson Center, continued***

mentoring programs for youngsters. Activities include a well-known wrestling program, computers, and radio-television production. In 1991, the YMCA began sponsoring the center, which celebrates its 20th anniversary in 1998.

### ***1982: Vietnam Vet Rescues Marker***

Pat Peterson, a Vietnam vet, organized a rescue party to restore the war monument, which had been knocked over. The monument, at the intersection of Fontenelle and Paxton Boulevards, commemorates soldiers killed in World War I.

### ***1990: Pavilion Renovated***

The pavilion—once threatened with being torn down—got a \$400,000 renovation. City officials said it is “one of the nicest facilities in Omaha for wedding receptions, parties,

family reunions, and other activities.” Central air conditioning was added, and the building was made handicapped accessible. The building, which includes a kitchen, hall, and stage, holds 100. The Edmonson Youth Center is located in the lower level. A park caretaker lives on the top floor.

### ***1994: New Clubhouse and Playground***

The lagoon was dredged to deepen the pond, and fencing and sidewalks were installed. New picnic tables, and a modern playground replaced old equipment. A new clubhouse for golfers and tennis players was built.

### ***1996-97: Park Clean Up Days***

Fontenelle View Neighborhood Association and Benson Neighborhood Association sponsored park clean up days.

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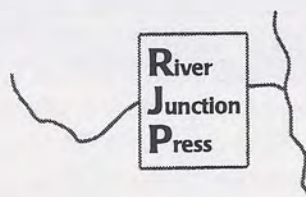
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## Acknowledgments

Material for Fontenelle Park History was found in the clipping files of the Historical Society of Douglas County, W. Dale Clark Library, and *The Omaha World-Herald* electronic clipping files. Photo Credits: Kira Gale, Bostwick-Frohardt Collection, and *The Omaha-World-Herald*. Logan Fontenelle portrait by George Simons is from *The Illustrated History of Nebraska*. Map detail on back cover is from *Map of Omaha and Vicinity, 1918-21*, by Roy Towl and John Bruce.

Thanks for assistance, and acknowledgements are due to —

Historical Society of Douglas County Archives  
Historical Archives, W. Dale Clark Library  
City of Omaha Planning Dept, and the  
Parks, Recreation & Public Property Dept.  
Fontenelle Forest Association  
Photo Archives, Western Heritage Museum  
State Surveyor, Survey Records Repository  
Fontenelle View Neighborhood Association  
Benson Neighborhood Association  
Edmonson Youth Outreach Center  
Veterans of Foreign Wars, Post 3421  
Dennis Hastings, Omaha Indian Historian  
Bob Astleford, Golfer  
Jerry Parks, City of Omaha Special Projects  
Richard Orr, Historian



*Exploring History in Omaha-Council Bluffs Newsletter* will be published occasionally. Editor Kira Gale is writing a history book of Omaha-Council Bluffs.

*History of Fontenelle Park* (first issue)  
*The Story of Hard Heart, an Ioway Chief*  
(second issue)

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Map of Omaha  
1918-21