

Norfolk Insider

City of Norfolk, NE

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“The First Memorial Field”

It was September 24, 1949 and 4500 people gathered for the dedication of the new Memorial Athletic Field in Norfolk, Nebraska. A Norfolk Daily News story at the time called the field “one of the finest in the middlewest” and that “(those in attendance) today are proud of the place that marks another progressive step by the city in the march of time.”

It was an event befitting three princesses-each representing Norfolk High, Norfolk Catholic High and Norfolk Junior College. Pictures show them wearing long gowns and presented with large floral bouquets. A parade, high school bands from Norfolk High and Fremont High, color guards from Norfolk military groups and speeches from Norfolk City Councilmen Bernard DeLay and C. H. Haer and U.S. Congressman Karl Stefan were all part of the festivities surrounding the new field’s inaugural game between Norfolk High and Fremont High.

The Memorial Field construction project was the result of a vote by Norfolk citizens on October 7, 1947 to decide if the city should spend \$150,000 in bonds for the construction of a field that would include a “baseball stadium and roof, football stadium, lights, field house with storage facilities and a running track.”

Planning board chairman at the time, B.E. Adkins, said the development would last “not for the next five or ten years but for the next 25.” It was pointed out that there would be steel rather than concrete grandstands to substantially reduce costs.

Harris Osterberg, Chamber of Commerce manager at the time, told the Council he had visited 27 towns in six states inquiring about their athletic fields and found that they cost \$25,000 to \$500,000 with the more costly having been built through federal funding from the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The WPA provided funds for over a million public projects across the nation from 1935-1943.

“Norfolk has 2500 school children and no adequate place for their athletic events and no place to put a crowd for those events,” Osterberg is quoted as saying.

Cost estimates for the field were put at \$22,500 for the land; leveling, \$2,000; baseball stadium and roof, \$25,000; football stadium, \$15,000; fence, \$10,000; lights, \$10,000; field house and storage, \$12,500; drainage and water, \$10,000; football and baseball field, \$5,000; roadways and walks, \$10,000; parking and gravel, \$3,000; running track, \$10,000; miscellaneous, \$7,000.

A 40 acre tract on North 13th Street was the first site mentioned for the park. This tract was to “give ample room for a baseball stadium, a football field, track, field house, a tract for pari-mutuel races, if ever wanted, agriculture shows, gun club range, (and) saddle club facilities.”

The results of the vote for the new field showed 1,579 to 1,120 in favor of the project. Of those who voted in favor, 1,221 voted that the location be on South First Street, 535 voted for it to be on North 13th Street and 508 wrote that it should be on North Fourth Street. The South First Street location would include 20 acres south of Pasewalk Avenue east of First Street and take up most of six city blocks. Some of the property was purchased from F. M and Catherin Deutsch and J.R. and Clara Andrews with \$112.50 paid for each of the 28 lots.

A picture in the August 27, 1948 edition of the Daily News shows a small tractor with a front end loader putting dirt in a truck saying that city workers "were moving dirt from a road which is to be eliminated to make room for the football field." Both the baseball and football fields were to be seeded the fall of 1948 to be ready for play the next year.

According to the September 21, 1949 issue of the paper, the press box on top of the football stands was 18 feet long and six feet wide and large enough to accommodate "radio broadcasts, newspapermen and for those using the amplifying system, which has three weather proof horns."

Football fans were invited to cheer from stands 160 feet long and ten rows high which would seat 1,100 people. The baseball stands were 96 feet long and 17 rows high and also able to handle 1,100 fans. In addition, there were portable bleachers 160 feet long and nine rows high that could be moved on skids from one field to the other.

In the same story, the writer pointed out that the fields are "exceptionally well lighted, there being sixteen 90 foot poles bearing a large array of lights. Those who have seen the lights say they have never seen a better lighted field in this part of the middlewest."

The June 29, 1949 Norfolk Daily News edition gave an update of the field saying that "the home plate is lighted by more than twenty foot candles, which produce more light than that used inside some of Norfolk's stores." It went on to explain that extra lighting would be shed on the field between the 20 yard lines and end zones so that "customers at the other end of the field can see the play as easily as in daylight."

The article states that "Norfolk, it is expected, will have one of the best sodded football fields in the state...the grass has grown so well that it already has been mowed twice and is now ready for a third mowing."

The September, 1949 article states that an "exceptionally large parking area has been created for those who drive cars to the field. After parking their machines the fans will go to the portable ticket office which has three windows, patterned after the one at Ak-Sar-Ben field at Omaha."

Parking was an issue as fans at the first game were reminded that they could enter only at the Bluff Avenue entrance and were urged to "cooperate fully with the parking police so that the least possible confusion will result."

At the opening ceremony, Congressman Stefan commended the citizens of Norfolk on "providing a place for the boys and girls to receive athletic training that will build character and health." The paper also quoted him as praising Norfolk for "dedicating the field to the memory of those who fought for their country and paid the supreme sacrifice."

Memorial Field in Norfolk is currently being renovated as the result of a bond issue passed November 2, 2010. The field with new artificial turf will be the site of the first football game on August 26, 2011 with Lutheran High Northeast hosting Ponca High at 7:00 p.m. According to City of Norfolk City Administrator, Shane Weidner, special opening ceremonies for the park are planned for next spring when the aquatic facility and baseball field projects are also completed.