

I moved to Beatrice in 1977. That itself is not significant. What is significant is that for 31 years when anyone mentioned Charles Park, two things came to my mind. Charles who? And groups (not gangs) of kids. Both of my pre conceived, or ill conceived notions turned out to be not quite as I imagined. There aren't as many kids these days after the new High School moved to its present location. It wasn't until I became involved with the restoration project that I became aware of the parks history.

It isn't a 'Charles who', but rather a James Charles. James Charles was a farmer who lived south of Beatrice. In 1905 Mr. Charles died and left a large portion of his estate to the City of Beatrice specifically bequeathed to buy and develop land for a city park. He did not donate the land, but rather the money to purchase the land. That's when it got interesting. There was a tumultuous disagreement as to the location. Four sites were picked throughout the city. The least favored site was eventually selected. However, the selected site was conveniently located adjacent to the Carnegie Library and the School campus. Several law suits and a Nebraska Supreme Court decision later and the park was created in 1914. The city had to remove several houses and a church in order to clear the area. The park landscape was designed by Ossian Cole Simonds. Mr. Simonds turned out to be a rather famous landscape designer and this was one of his early projects. We have tried to remain faithful to his original design and selection of plants.

Main Street Beatrice received a grant for a streetscape design for the entire Main Street district including renovations for Charles Park. Priorities and funding issues delayed the renovation. In the later months of 2008, Main Street Beatrice contacted Exmark Manufacturing for financial assistance for park renovations. Exmark graciously agreed to provide the irrigation equipment, purchase park benches and trash containers, and some additional funds used to help pay for the installation of the irrigation equipment. Various city departments provided tremendous assistance and labor. The cooperation of the city has been outstanding and the results reflect those efforts. The outdoor classroom area on the northern edge of the park is a new addition. Teachers and students will have an outdoor area to enjoy nature in a learning environment. Once again there will be groups of kids in the park. And kids in a park are a good thing. The park is back.

However, we have more to accomplish. By next summer we will have the benches placed throughout the park. The garden will be in full bloom thanks to Marlene Gakle and her merry band of gardeners. She promises it will look great and I know that is an understatement. There will be three signs in the park. Two entry signs and a sign commemorating the appearance and campaign speech of Bobby Kennedy in 1968 will be placed along the northern third of the park. There are plans to have a rededication ceremony this spring to bring media and public attention to the park. Bring a lawn chair or a blanket and enjoy. Better yet, bring the kids.