




EWING PARK Lilac Arboretum


History of the Arboretum



In 1937 the Ewing Farm of about 357 acres was left to the City of Des Moines by Mrs. Winnie Ewing Coffin to be preserved as a recreational park.

In 1939 Rose Rosenfield a Park Board member recommended the reservation of 35 acres of the park to be set aside for a future lilac arboretum.

The collection began in 1940 as 350 plants of 116 varieties were donated by Mrs. Rosenfield also a Des Moines Founders Garden Club member and Vivian Evans of Van Meter Ia. a fellow DMFGC member.



These initial plants were planted in the City nursery under the supervision of the Ewing Park Superintendent Paul Sandahl.

In 1943 the plants were transferred to the 35 acre space to begin the arboretum.

In 1947 John C. Wister a renowned horticulturist and Landscape Architect was hired out of Pennsylvania to organize the collection.

Mr. Sandahl who served as the Ewing Park Superintendent drafted the original path structure that was later adopted by the Landscape Architect.

In 1947 the arboretum was opened to the public for its first good bloom and attracted 5000 visitors.

1948 brought a record 20,000 patrons on a single Sunday!

At its height the arboretum contained as many as 1,500 shrubs of over 500 varieties.

George Madsen, who succeeded Paul Sandahl as Superintendent of Ewing park under Mr. Wister's direction saw to the care and pruning of the lilacs over the next 27 years.

Historically the Arboretum was named the Sandahl-Madsen Lilac Arboretum after the first two park superintendents to care for the lilac collection.

On March 31, 1967 during a record breaking 83 degree day, a flash fire devastated 33 acres of Ewing park, including 177 of the lilacs in the arboretum.

The Founders Garden Club planted a group of magnolias at the entrance gate to the park in honor of Mrs. Rosenfield's early contributions.