

History of Memorial Park on Sorin's Bluff

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Most of us know Red Wing as a place renowned for boots and pottery. History-minded folks may even recall when the town ruled the nation's wheat market. But from 1870 to 1908, Red Wing also led the lime and limestone industries and earned the nickname "Minnesota's Lime Center," in large part due to Sorin's Bluff.

According to the *Saturday Evening Spectator* in 1888, the lime and limestone from Sorin's Bluff and Barn Bluff "could not be equaled ... known everywhere throughout the Northwest because of their great superiority over all others." Gustaf Adolf Carlson became the most successful quarry owner of the day with quarries at both Barn and Sorin's, but multiple quarries owned by men such as Danielson, Bellman, Betcher, Linne, Haglund, Berglund, and Lillblad were found throughout the bluffs of Red Wing.

For years, quarrymen attacked the rock with chisels, pry bars, and sledge hammers, often at risk of losing or crushing limbs. Quarryman B.M. Eide, who survived numerous near-fatal accidents from ropes, rock, and explosions, wrote of one close call: "... the end of my bar left a blue streak from my throat to the base of my abdomen; without luck on my side I could have been ripped completely open."

Danger continued when dynamite arrived and laborers broke up the rock with explosives to speed up the process. Still the limestone industry raged on, and rock from Sorin's Bluff and other local quarries constructed regional icons such as the Stone Arch Bridge in Minneapolis, buildings and churches throughout Red Wing, and thousands of home foundations that line local streets.

But limestone wasn't the bluffs' only profitable product. Residents also made money from a byproduct of the rock: the chalky, caustic powder called lime. In 1853 a man named Phineas Fish discovered he could burn the limestone chunks that fell off the river side of Barn Bluff into a fine dust. What Fish didn't know is that when limestone burns at 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit, the heat drives carbon dioxide away from the raw limestone (calcium carbonate) and the stone disintegrates into calcium oxide, a dust otherwise known as lime or quicklime. Though lime had multiple applications in life, the majority that came from Sorin's Bluff and other local quarries was used in farming and construction.

Farmers called quicklime a "natural manure" and used it in their soil. The local brick factory mixed lime with clay to form sand lime brick, hailed regionally for its strength and artistic color variations. And most of all, lime was mixed with sand and water to form a tough mortar used in limestone buildings across the state.

As Eide wrote, lime kilns “pop[ped] up like toad stools” during the 1870s in Red Wing. Quarrymen first built small “pot kilns” but soon improved the process with taller, cone-shaped “perpetual kilns” that burned 24 hours a day. Small tracks with railcars were built along the sides of bluffs to carry stone from the quarries to kilns (one traveled from the Lower Quarry of Sorin’s Bluff down the hill, under Seventh Street, to a kiln near Barn Bluff). Laborers then hauled limestone into the kilns from above and withdrew lime from the bottom without putting out the fires.

Kilns earned names like “Siberia” because of their unrelenting heat, and as author Ida Lein wrote, the work was difficult. “If one survived the ordeal of quarrying the stone and charging the kiln, and hadn’t succumbed to the CO₂ from the burning limestone, the operator could look forward to having the lump lime dust irritate the skin.” There was one high point, she notes: “The pleasures came when the young folks, neighbors from country and village, came about dusk, to enjoy a few hours’ frolic in the light from the fireplace.”

By 1879, Red Wing’s four lime companies operated roughly 12 kilns on Sorin’s and Barn bluffs, creating 500 barrels of quicklime daily. But the industries were not to last. Around 1900, lime starting growing out of favor as the country took interest in newer concrete blocks and Portland cement.

The people of Red Wing were also growing weary of quarrying. Dynamite blasts shook dishes in kitchens across the East End, the local paper reported “explosions felt over the entire city,” and people as far as Ellsworth complained of the tremors. Workers needed to constantly feed the kilns with local lumber, and the landscape was gradually growing bald. Worker injuries were ever-present and residents worried that boys playing on the bluffs were using dynamite storage areas for target practice.

When a railroad company secured a contract to remove 200,000 feet of stone from Barn Bluff, citizens began to worry that Barn Bluff and Sorin’s Bluff would someday disappear. In the spring of 1907, spurred to action by the editor of the *Daily Republican*, Jens Grondahl, citizens decided to rally. A year later, after hardy debate and campaigning, the contractors ended their quarrying in May of 1908.

With the industry already declining and the great controversy that had roiled, the lime and limestone industries in Red Wing quickly died. For a while, Sorin’s Bluff sat quiet.

Sorin’s Bluff Becomes a Park

In the early 1900s, the local Women’s Community Association and their tireless president, Henrietta Pratt Taber, worked diligently to raise money for local causes. In 1923 they had accumulated \$2,500 for a new Central Park band shell when they decided to change plans and

donate their funds to the newly formed Goodhue County Soldiers' Memorial Association, whose main charge was to find a place to honor the area's soldiers. The two groups eventually raised \$6,000, but they still didn't have a memorial location. Then 1927 brought a welcome surprise.

William Lawther, one of Red Wing's former wealthy citizens who had moved to Dubuque, Iowa, donated \$10,000 to purchase land for the memorial shortly before he died. In turn, the Memorial Association purchased 99 acres of Sorin's Bluff for \$5,000, built a road to the summit, and used the rest of the funds, as directed by Lawther, for a park and "a grand gateway" as an entrance. That gateway of St. Cloud granite still stands. Local newspapers also called upon citizens to register the names of fallen heroes so a tree could be planted in the park in their honor.

The *Goodhue County Tribune* reported that plans were for "landscaping of the summit in such a way as to provide for children's playgrounds and for fields for various athletic sports." In his ceremony address, Dr. M.W. Smith, President of the Goodhue County Soldiers' Memorial Association, said the park was given to the community for two reasons. The first, "... to commemorate the valor and sacrifices of those who ventured all for the sake of their country; the second, for greater opportunities for outdoor recreation, not only for our children but for ourselves as well."

Dedication ceremonies on Sunday, September 19, 1929, began with a parade along East Seventh Street filled with marching bands and veterans' groups, including soldiers from the Spanish-American War. Congressman W.I. Nolan said, "It is proper and fitting that such a monument should not be one which will perish under the ravages of time. Bronze or stone may crumble, but this everlasting hill will stand here for all ages to come...."

Memorial Park Finds Renewal

For the next few decades, Memorial Park on Sorin's Bluff stood as a symbol of pride and of Red Wing's dedication to its natural spaces. People walked the trails and picnicked in the quarries. They enjoyed the views and gathered there for Sunday drives and holidays. It was also a quiet place of reflection for many who trekked up by foot to revel in a bit of solitude.

But over the years, the park deteriorated. Brush and buckthorn eventually grew up in the quarries. Rock steps crumbled and cement picnic tables collapsed. Weeds overtook the park and by the early 1970s, the park was better known for late-night revelries and high-school pranks than family outings and nature walks. Memorial was still beloved, but it was tired and in need of revitalization.

Then in 2010, Red Wing started rallying again around the park. A few years earlier, the Red Wing Area Mountain Bikers Organization (RAMBO) had started to clear trails along the eastern side of the bluff, the disc golf course on top lured a few folks to play, and interest in Sorin's Bluff started growing again. Then from 2011 through 2016, a full-fledged community effort with hundreds of volunteers worked together to make Memorial Park a community gathering space again.

Live Healthy Red Wing worked to energize the community and organize volunteers, including hundreds of high school students, to cut down buckthorn and clear out trails and quarry areas. Groups mobilized to build and map new mountain bike trails, hiking trails, cross country ski trails, and snowshoe trails.

The Red Wing Area Fund and the City of Red Wing formed a public-private partnership and through a variety of sources, including state grants and generous philanthropic donations, funded pavilions, picnic areas, fire pits, and restrooms, along with safety features and kiosks that highlighted historical details and photos.

It was important that Memorial Park be accessible to everyone, so funds and volunteer work also went toward creating wheelchair-accessible trails in the Lower Quarry and making picnic tables, benches, and quarry overlooks accessible. Workers and volunteers also revived or built numerous trails accessible by foot from neighborhoods around the bluff. These included the Bluff Street Cow Path, Wilkinson Street trail, Mississippi National trail head, and limestone steps at Bush and 13th Streets.

Since 2016, improvements have continued. The City of Red Wing has worked closely with the DNR to increase preservation through controlled burns to maintain the natural prairies and bring back habitats. The disc golf course saw improvements, and maintenance increased across the entire park.

Most recently, in early 2018, resident Bob Behrens and the Noontime Kiwanis Club starting reaching out to the community to raise funds to renew one final favorite spot—Memorial Park's main overlook—as the organization's 100th Anniversary Community Service Project.

This overlook atop the bluff has been a prized location for many local and visitors. But the stone wall is now deteriorating and the area is rundown. Public outreach efforts in 2019 found that people have a strong attachment to this space, love the views, and want more accessibility so it's available to everyone.

In the spring of 2020, City Council members approved a pedestrian-focused, accessible design that features a circular viewing plaza, a flag pole with sculpture area, amphitheater-style seating, and three parking stalls with an additional adjacent parking area.

Additional community feedback came in that some people still wanted to enjoy the beautiful views from their cars. Currently, an area is being reassessed to see if dying and low-quality trees can be removed for this purpose, and an updated plan will be provided at the May 11, 2020 City Council meeting.

Memorial Park on Sorin's Bluff retains its important history, but it has never stayed the same. It continues to change so we all can enjoy it as good stewards of the land.