

Accessible to all, community sings were entertainment

<http://www.accesspress.org/2013/05/accessible-to-all-community-sings-were-entertainment/>

June 13, 2013

Singing together in a park, under the trees or even under a moonlit sky, may sound quaint today. But during the early to mid-20th century, community sings were a very popular and accessible form of entertainment.

At a time when people with disabilities and senior citizens had very limited access to parks and recreation programs, anyone could attend and sing along.

During World War I, community singing was mandated by many states including Minnesota. Singing was a way to keep spirits up, propagate patriotism, and solidify cultures. A statewide community song chairperson was given the task of making sure that every county and township had volunteer community songleaders and regular gatherings for singing.



Community sings were especially popular in Minneapolis from 1919 through the late 1950s. People would gather in large groups, sometimes 10,000 strong, and sing in neighborhood parks on summer evenings. The city's parks competed against each other for the annual prize of "the best singing park," in a competition co-sponsored by the Minneapolis Park Board and the *Daily News*, and later the *Minneapolis Tribune* newspaper.

Each park had a small bandstand for the songleader to use. For a long time the Park Board provided an employee to oversee the community sings. But even when funding couldn't be provided, as happened during the Great Depression of the 1930s, the sings continued.

Winners first got a banner and from 1924, a large silver traveling trophy. If a park won three years in a row, the singers got to keep the trophy and a new traveling prize was created.

The banners and trophies were highly coveted. In 1920 Riverside Park and Logan Park tied in the scoring, and had to have a two-concert sing-off so a winner would be determined. Logan Park won by one point.

The *Tribune* extensively covered the sings, publishing pictures, news stories and even every sing's scoring by judges. The park standings were regularly published. Having a good community song leader was essential to having a park full of singers. One 1930 newspaper headline declared, "Minneapolis is teaching America how to sing." The accompanying article emphasized that anyone could join and sing, even a "bathtub baritone."

The article described how about 400,000 people would participate in community sings that year, which earned the city worldwide attention for the events. One sing that year at Powderhorn Park drew about 45,000 people.

For more information about the Minneapolis community sings of the 20th century, read the books *Minneapolis Park System* by Theodore Wirth and *City of Parks* by David C. Smith.

The group Minnesota Community Sings is trying to bring those days back, with an event May 18 in Minneapolis. Information about that event is on this month's Accessible Fun page.

Information for this article came from Minnesota Community Sings.

Would you like to make history?

Access Press is interested in reader submissions for the monthly History Note column, to complement the articles written by Luther Granquist and other contributors. Submissions must center on events, people and places in the history of Minnesota's disability community. We are interested in history that focuses on all types of disability topics, so long as the history has a tie to Minnesota. We are especially interested in stories from Greater Minnesota. Please submit ideas prior to submitting full stories, as we may have covered the topic before. Contact us at access@accesspress.org or 651-644-2133 if you have questions.

The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, www.mncdd.org and www.partnersinpolicymaking.com