

Whitaker Park: past, present, and future

The following is a compilation of information presented in past Farviews – Pattee Canyon Neighborhood Council newsletters and provided by Missoula Parks and Recreation.

Whitaker Park is the only “developed” park in the entire Farviews – Pattee Canyon neighborhood. Although there are over 10 areas designated as park land in our neighborhood, Whitaker is the only park with play structures, picnic tables, and a basketball court. Whitaker Park is popular year-round and is great for strolling, playing field games, sledding, or family picnics. The last major renovation done to Whitaker Park was in approximately 1984 and the play equipment needs to be replaced, as does the material underneath the playset, known as the fall zone. Whitaker Park is included in the list of existing parks slated for playground equipment replacement under the Parks & Trails bond passed in November, 2014. It is a beautiful park, complete with an old Forest Service Radio building that is currently used by the City Parks & Recreation department for storage. Many folks have wondered about the history of the park and of this unique building overlooking Missoula.

Located on the southwest corner of 39th street and Whitaker Drive, Whitaker Park was originally platted as Hi-Yan-Ka Park when the Farviews neighborhood was established by the City of Missoula in 1945. The park is 2.27 acres and was set aside in the original plan as a community park. On February 5, 1980, the park board named the site Whitaker Park.

The Old Forest Service Radio building, built in 1936, is listed as a historic site by the National Park Service. Clyde P. Fickes, a structural engineer for the forest service, notes in his memoir, “About this time radio communication came into the picture. William B. Apgar at the Savanac Nursery had been working with amateur radio communications, so Bill was attached to my section as telephone and radio engineer for Region 1. In 1936 we built the Whitaker Hill Radio Station at Missoula from which all Region 1 radio was supervised and monitored.” In 1973, the site was declared surplus by the government and on April 2, 1975, it was given to the city.

The park, along with Whitaker Drive itself, are both named after Richard J. Whitaker, a pioneer in the history of Missoula. Born in Bath, England, at the age of nineteen he left his position as a bookkeeper in his father’s bank and migrated to Canada, where he was a cook in a logging camp before moving on to load freight for the Hudson Bay Company. He was the first white homesteader to an area just south of what is now the city of Regina, Saskatchewan. After a particularly cold, hard winter Richard headed for Montana and entered on the Highline above where the town of Great Falls, Montana now sits, though at that time, there were few white settlers. Richard continued westward. He located the Blackfoot Trail and followed this along the river into what is now the town of Missoula, Montana. When Richard arrived the only structures were located at Hellgate Trading Post where Capt. C. P. Higgins had set up camp. Although he initially considered continuing west, Richard decided to set up a homestead on the South Hill area of Missoula. He is credited with buying and operated the first threshing machine to be used in the area between Stevensville and Frenchtown. Around the turn of the

century, Richard built Whitaker Drive so he could get the thresher machine up the hill to his home.

In the 1920's Whitaker sold the family home and surrounding land (five sections) to former Dean Robert C Line of UM's Business Administration School. The home still stands across the road from what originally was the Greenough Mansion, now The Keep.

In 2005, a group of concerned neighbors spearheaded by Kathy Gillespie set about to restore the dilapidated radio transmitter building, also known as the "little white house". Parks and Recreation scraped the building to remove the lead paint, painted it, and made minor repairs. In 2006, Larry Wade prepared new shutters (with pine tree cut-outs like the originals) and Kathy and a troop of Girl Scouts primed and painted the shutters. These efforts were recognized with a Missoula Historic Preservation award in 2009. Recently, 2014, Missoula Parks & Recreation staff painted the exterior and made some minor repairs.