

Colby Municipal Swimming Pool Beating the Heat in Style

Through the Great Depression of the 1930s, Colby was able to implement a number of WPA (Works Progress Administration) projects. As project possibilities were discussed, one recurring issue was a municipal swimming pool. In 1936 it was mentioned by the paper that a pool would be a good idea for the community and a year later tentative plans were made for a pool to be located in the northeast corner of Fike Park. "Instead of the conventional box type of pool ranging in depth gradually from one end to the other, the plans for Colby's pool call for what amounts to a series of pools, ranging from wading to [swimming to] diving" (CFPT 8/25/1937).

Meanwhile Art Hemstrom, who operated a swimming pool four miles north of town, was put out with the remarks that local folks did not have a place to swim or for recreation since he and his wife had been operating a "resort" for ten years. However, he did not take issue with the public if they wanted a city pool, he just wanted it noted that Colby really hadn't had to do without excellent facilities as long as he had been in operation. The next summer (1938) there was no mention of the Hemstrom resort opening for or being in business.

Plans stagnated until 1938 when "[t]he Chamber of Commerce passed a resolution which is to be presented to the city council requesting that body to call an election to allow the people of this community to vote bonds for a swimming pool if they so desire" (CFPT 7/13/1938).

By August 10, 500 signatures were submitted to the council. "Members of the city council and city officials met with a representative of the engineering firm of Paulette and Wilson to consider plans and details for Colby's recreation project and swimming pool. The election to determine whether the voters of Colby wish to vote bonds for the project in all probability will be held in connection with the general election in November" (CFPT 8/10/1938). The council also decided to go ahead and submit the proposed plans to WPA for assistance in hopes that their approval would help support the bond election. Colby did receive approval from the federal government on the recreational and swimming pool project in October.

As election day drew nearer, support for the pool bonds intensified. "Thomas county is one of the few counties in the state where there are no running streams. Consequently there are no suitable places for swimming in the county. In times past and soon after the sewage system was installed in Colby, boys would go to the pasture north of town and swim in the water that had been filtered after having carried the sewage of the town. There is little question that the water was filthy but so anxious were the youth of this community to swim that they swam there for several years. Other places in the county, such as an old sand pit east of town, were popular when it rained and filled these spots full of water. This condition due to the drouth has not been obtained for several years" (CFPT 10/19/1938).

"The community as a whole suffered a double loss of revenue because the lack of a swimming pool here: the amount paid out for gasoline and other expenses in going to other communities, and the loss of revenue that would naturally come to this town from people in outlying communities who do their trading here but are forced to seek their recreation elsewhere.

"Considerable time and thought was given to the determination of what kind and size swimming pool would be proper for Colby. The pool in Burlington, Colo., was visited in 1937. The pool at Oakley was too small and a pool the size of the one at Garden City too large. Members of the city council and representatives of the Chamber of Commerce visited the newly constructed swimming pool at Hays and after talking with city officials, citizens, the engineers and taxpayers, it was decided that a similar pool would adequately suit the needs of Colby.

"The total cost of this project will be \$59,480, which is divided into \$28,136 for material and equipment and \$31,344 for labor and superintendence. The federal government furnishes 60 per cent of the total amount and Colby's contribution will be 40 per cent or approximately \$25,000. The financing of the project will be taken care of by the grant from the government and a \$25,000 bond issue by the city of Colby. It is proposed to retire these bonds over a ten year period. This will

take an average levy for the period of 2.74 mills.

"For this money Colby will have one of the finest swimming pools in the state of Kansas -- not just a basement filled with water -- but a pool in which every precaution will be taken for the health of swimmers by providing a modern and adequate filtration system and a pool which is so designed to promote the utmost in safety for the inexperienced swimmer. People of Colby will not have to go elsewhere for their recreational facilities but will have provided at home, facilities which will promote the health and happiness of our people" (CFPT 11/2/1938). The bond issue passed 792 to 419.

"The pool and courts will be located just east of the O'Pelt hotel. A number of citizens have donated lots for the site and arrangements are being made to secure the remaining space needed. This will not necessitate the destruction of a great many trees as would the site once contemplated on the northeast corner of the park" (CFPT 11/16/1938).

"The detailed plans [brought here today by Murray Wilson, member of the Salina engineering firm of Paulette and Wilson] show a swimming pool with dimensions of 150x75 feet which when crowded to capacity will care for approximately 700 persons. The pool is modern in design with rounded corners, and a roped off section for diving in the deep end. Provision has been made for the smaller children in the design of a separate wading pool.

"The bathhouse will be a modern attractive structure constructed of monolithic concrete. [T]here will be a concession room on the first floor and the entire roof will be constructed to accommodate spectators. A modern gravity sand filtration plant which will purify 600 gallons per minute of the pool's 320,000 gallons will be located just beside the bathhouse. The plant has the capacity to filter all of the water in the pool eight hours.

"Work will not be commenced on the swimming pool at this time due to the fact that it would not be possible to complete this part of the project before June 30, the period for which WPA now has funds available. When Congress gets around to making its appropriations for WPA for next year and it is definitely ascertained that money will be available for the completion of the project here, construction . . . will be commenced" (CFPT 4/19/1939).

"Workmen are busily engaged in pouring cement for [the] pool today and will continue until the walls are completed. Only three sections remain to be poured. A device has been fixed whereby the sand and the water for the cement is heated before it is mixed with the cement. Work will continue throughout the winter in order to supply needed work and to make the pool available as soon as possible" (CFPT 1/3/1940).

"Workmen are now occupied with the construction of the bath house. This building is being poured in three sections with the west end completed and the east side will be ready before the end of this month. The center section will then be filled in and the roof poured. It is hoped that the outside work can be completed before the harsh winter months, so that the finishing work can be done inside during that period" (CFPT 9/18/1940).

June 5, 1941 was the red-letter day for the Colby pool. "Complete details of the opening are waiting on the arrival of Miss Gladys Turner, who will have charge of the pool. Miss Turner is to provide the suits and have charge of the lifeguards, checking stand and concession stand. The city furnishes only the water, lights, and chemicals for purifying the water.

"The bath house itself has been made beautiful by cream and white paint and several ornamental lights on the front, which faces the south. [I]t will be open to the public after 1:00 to 10:00 every afternoon and evening the rest of the summer. Single admission will be 20 cents for adults and 10 cents for children with season tickets priced at \$6.00 for adults and \$4.00 for children. Suits and towels will be available for rent at the pool.

"With its opening tomorrow Colby will have the finest recreation facilities of any city its size in this section of the country. Fike Park has been a mecca for picnickers for a number of years, and now the city has added . . . four fine concrete tennis courts and adjoining them the biggest and best swimming pool between Hays and Denver" (CFPT 6/4/1941).

"[T]he new pool has been a big attraction . . . despite the worst possible weather for a swimming

pool. On Sunday when it rained practically the entire day, dozens of people bathed; and other days saw even more swimmers. When warm weather finally arrives, the pool should do land-office business" (CFPT 6/11/1941).

Not so long ago, consideration was given to raze the 1941 pool and replace it with another pool. But renovations made in 1992 have extended the useful life of the Colby Pool. Olson Associates drew up the renovation plans and work was done by Stephens Construction Co. of Colby. Work included a handicapped accessible ramp constructed at the shallow east end of the tank and the east end level was raised. More privacy showers were installed and the bathrooms were made handicapped accessible. The spectator deck on the roof of the bathhouse was closed to the public in 1998.

Most recently, the Colby Municipal Swimming Pool Bath house was nominated and accepted to the National Register of Historic Places on June 7, 2002. It is significant as a WPA structure built in the Modernistic Movement-Art Deco style. At the present time, the only other building in the county on the Register is the Thomas County Courthouse added in 1976.