

THE FORT FRANKFORT STORY

In 1998, this 60 acre parcel was nothing more than a gravel road and fields of dandelions. The Frankfort Park District was looking for a big idea to improve the site, but its capital budget was exhausted from its purchase. Park Commissioner, Terry Rusin, while visiting her mother in Norway Michigan, learned about a playground similar to this structure. It was built with volunteer help, private financing and professional consulting from a company called Leathers and Assoc. Terry gained the support of the Frankfort Park District, and took charge of the project. She called an organizational meeting in February of 1999 with a completion target of October of 1999.

On April 15th, a representative from Leathers and Assoc. came to Frankfort to survey the site and talk to our school children about the play features they would like in the park. The children also chose its name, "Fort Frankfort". Leathers and Assoc. provided a plan, materials list, and organizational guides. Committees were formed and the project began.

The goal was to raise \$120,000. Phil Simmons, fundraising chair, formed a 501(c) 3 called Operation Playground, Inc. Money was raised from many community events including a casino night and swing dance. Phil secured most of the business donations. Terry Rusin petitioned Representative Renee Kosel for a \$40,000 state grant. Trustees Dick Keyburn and Jim Holland helped secure Village support and Dr. Alan Heath promoted the project with the Chamber of Commerce.

Community awareness of the project was highlighted in an award winning cable TV promotional skit. It was a takeoff of The Andy Griffith Show, called Mayberry USA, and was filmed at the "haberdashery" in the Frankfort Historical Society. It was produced and directed by Joe Griffin. He was 14 years old.

Judy Herder, Greg Griffin, and Dave McDonald recruited volunteers for construction week. Volunteers had a choice of working on any of three daily shifts. A typical shift included between 75 and 120 workers. Many volunteers took "vacation" days to help. To encourage volunteers to stay and work, lunch and dinner were provided and served in a large tent. Many of Frankfort's restaurants generously responded to Rich Scialdella's committee's request to donate meals.

Volunteers could also take advantage of childcare services that were provided in St. Anthony's parish basement. Judi Matevich Children's Committee arranged activities including magicians, clowns, crafts, and games. Some of the children waxed the thousands of screws used in construction. (The wood was so dense the screws needed to be waxed to penetrate it.)

Rich Stanevicius and Rene Savaria headed the Tools Committee. They converted an old semi trailer into a "tool shed". The volunteers loaned hundreds of their personal tools for the project. Each tool was registered and tagged, and after construction, not one tool was missing!

Lou Papp and Rich's committee acquired the building materials for the project, many of which were donated. When the massive supply of lumber, poles, Trex, and hardware arrived, local Boy Scout Troop #270 camped at the park to guard it.

Rich Stanevicius and his crew constructed the West picnic pavilion. Home Depot, Jabzays Outdoor Creations, GE, and Pactiv also donated crews of professionals to help with the construction. Tom Roth built the signature "Fort Frankfort" entrance in his garage!

Construction Week began Monday October 11th. The Fort had to be completed by that Sunday, October 17th.

On Monday representatives from Leathers marked the field where the poles were to be dug. Several commercial post hole diggers were employed and cranes were used to drop the poles in the holes. Wednesday the volunteers showed up and shifts started at seven in the morning. When volunteers arrived, they were asked if they were "skilled" or "unskilled" and directed to a site captain who headed a work crew. Work would be assigned and then the volunteer went to the tool shed for the appropriate tools. Skilled meant you were comfortable working with power tools. Many of the unskilled workers sealed the lumber or hauled wood chips. The floor of Fort Frankfort is wood chip mulch that is almost 18 inches deep. A whole "mountain of mulch" had to be moved to cover it. Volunteers worked tirelessly to ten o'clock each night. The Fort progressed on schedule, but Saturday the weather turned vicious as a large storm hit Frankfort. Tarps were erected over the construction site but some broke loose in the high winds and flapped like billowing sails on a ship. Everyone stayed and worked to meet the deadline. Early Sunday evening the work was completed. A large paper chain which the children made was stretched in front of the entrance of the Fort. After a countdown by Terry Rusin, the children broke through the chain to officially open Fort Frankfort and played until dark.

Operation Playground has won many awards for Fort Frankfort. The Fort remains in top condition because each year Lincoln Way High School student volunteers replenish the mulch, paint the towers, and sand and seal all the wood.

Enjoy your visit.... Share our pride.



Toby Rusin - Champion



Food Table - Dining Lunch



Mowing Snow



Tool Shed



Pole Placement - Rich Stanevicius



Digging Poles in Holes



Mountain of Mulch



Following Tarp



Day Seven - 3... Park Open