

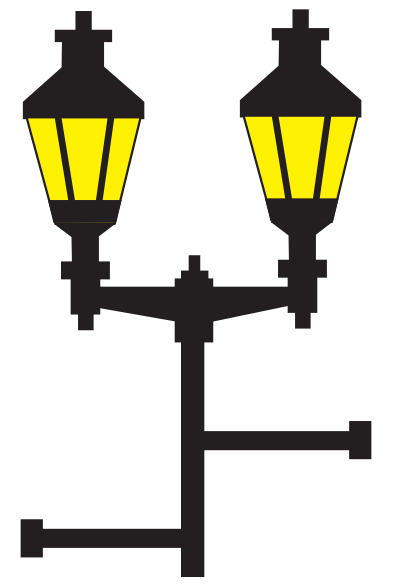
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Wagner Memorial Park Campground To Expand

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Commissioned as an ensign in the United States Navy, Arnold Wagner had achieved his dream of flying airplanes. On May 7, 1956, Ensign Arnold Wagner was killed in an airplane crash near Catalina Island in California.

Wagner had been working on a top secret mission for the U.S. Navy. Details of his death were kept secret by the government for the next 50 years. Those details have now become public record and it has been revealed that Wagner and another Navy airman were involved in the very early development stages of drone aircraft.

Something went terribly wrong for the test pilots on the flight and both the drone and the airplane crashed into the sea killing Wagner and the other pilot instantly. Arnold Wagner was only 22 years of age when he died in the crash.

Fast forward a decade to 1967. The City of Barnesville, Clay County and the Lyndon Johnson federal government were joining forces and looking to expand parks around the USA. Plans were taking shape to expand Blue Eagle Park. Options were negotiated with Marie and Ulrich Wagner for a couple of different parcels of land, one for 15 acres more or less and another for 22.34 acres of land.

In March of 1967 the motion was made at the City Council level to purchase the smaller tract of land. By that time the wheels were starting to come off the cooperative parks agreement involving city, county and federal participation. It looked like the city would be going it alone. In April the motion was made to increase the size of the acreage involved to the larger tract of land.

In September of 1967 Mayor Dan Motz announced that he had been involved in discussions with the Wagner family regarding the land. Now empty nesters with all their children grown and gone, the Wagners were looking at retirement from farming and also a lasting legacy for their lost son.

The Wagners proposed donating a significant portion of the 22.34 acre parcel of land to the City of Barnesville. Their only stipulation was that the land be used as a city park and be formally named after their son, the Arnold Wagner Memorial Park.

The city's attorney confirmed that such an arrangement was not only legal but generous. The city entered into the agreement with the Wagner family and the deed to the property



After a slow start, Arnold Wagner Memorial Park Campground has hit full stride. The popular little oasis has been filled to capacity every summer from April out well into November. A planned expansion this summer will help meet the demand for more full service hookups.



was conveyed from the Wagners to the city.

The city now owned the land but had no official plan on what to do with the 22.34 acres of land on the north side of Highway 34. The property was mowed occasionally but had no official purpose. During the late 1960s and through the 1970s, Wagner Park was used as an overflow slow pitch field for men and women during softball playoffs or tournaments.

If the diamonds at the Fair Grounds in Barnesville or the fields at Baker were in use, a few games were scheduled at Wagner Park. But it was rough. There was no dedicated

infield and everything was played on grass. Baselines were simply cut shorter than the playing surfaces and then striped. Sometimes, it looked exactly like what it was, a cow pasture.

In 1986 and 1987 plans were put in place to use the park for a BMX bike course for kids. At least some work was put into creating the small hills associated with BMX. But the park proved inconvenient for kids to attend and eventually the BMX track moved to the Peterson Park area within the city. The BMX attraction was short lived and eventually fizzled out in town. The BMX hills at Wagner Park were leveled by

Public Works crews.

Beginning in 1990, a committee established by the Barnesville City Council was tasked with looking into converting Wagner Park into a campground. That committee turned their findings over to the Parks, Recreation and Forestry Department, or more simply, the Park Board.

The numbers to establish a campground at Wagner Park were somewhat staggering. Initial cost estimates ranged as high as \$200,000 to install lights, a sewage and water system and to build a bathhouse. That would have to be bonded and borrowed for and would become a new City of Barnesville enterprise fund.

That borrowing and building would require the approval of the Barnesville voters. The \$200,000

request question was placed on the regular 1991 city election ballots in November of that year. The proposal was rejected in huge numbers by the voters.

"Who would come to a campground in Barnesville? It was a waste of money!"

But the idea and concept did not die with the defeat at the polls. The city could still get into the campground business, it just couldn't borrow money to do it. It would take some creative budgeting to accomplish.

The matter may well have died if it had been left entirely to the Barnesville City Council and the Park Board. In fact, in 1997 the Park Board tried to divest responsibility for the park from their portfolio and asked that their responsibility be deferred.

That didn't work. The Barnesville City Council said that the Arnold Wagner Memorial Park was a part of the park system within the city and therefore was the responsibility of the Park Board. In a bit of irony, what the Park Board was trying to get rid of in 1997 has become a cash cow and a major source of income for the city and parks.

Not only did the City Hall folks

feel the campground was a good bet, they were joined by an even more powerful group, the Barnesville Lions. That organization certainly lived up to their motto, "We Serve".

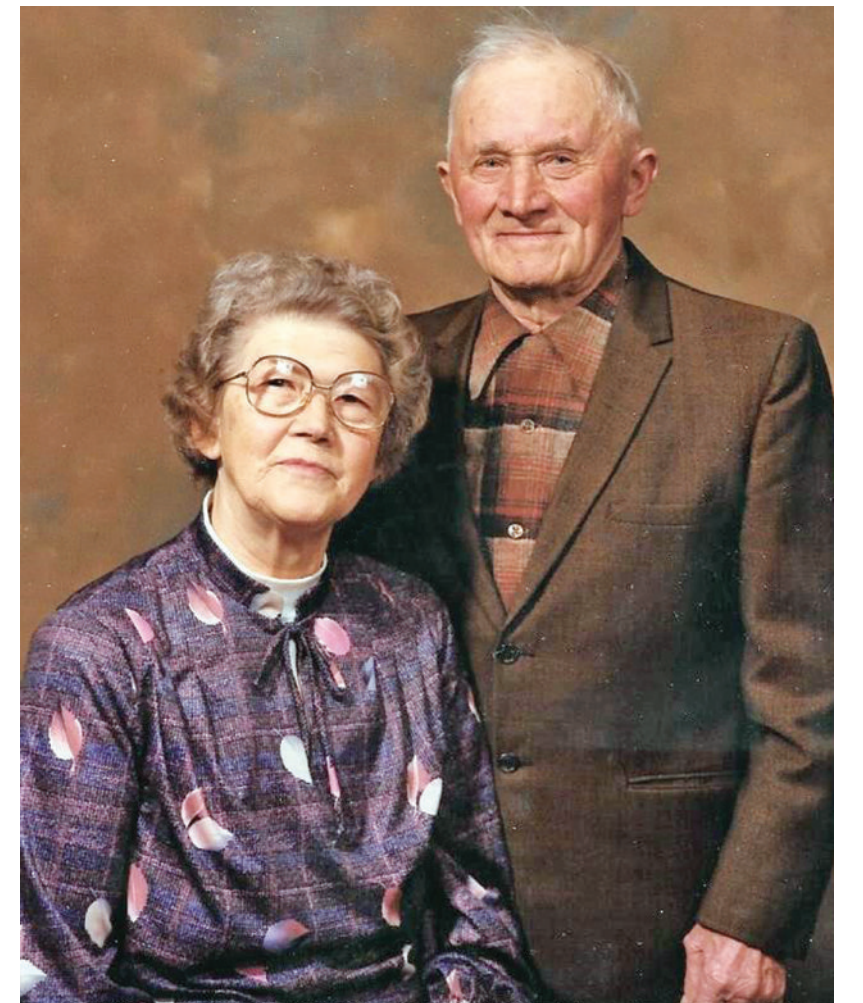
The Barnesville Lions poured materials, and even more important, volunteer manpower, into improving the campground. In short order there were lights, a sewer system and a public bathhouse up and operational on the site. The city departments established designated parking spots and installed electrical, fiber optic wi-fi cables and sewer extensions from the camp sites to the drain field.

By the late 1990s a campground was up and operating with 28 full service hookup sites and lots of room for tent camping in the park. The results were underwhelming in the early years of the 2000s. There were campers showing up but not a lot. There were always spots available.

Eventually the word got out through advertising, promotions and from satisfied campers who had stayed at the park. They told their friends about the quiet, peaceful and grassy campground that was available in Barnesville.

Soon the campground was full for special events such as Memorial

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Marie and Ulrich Wagner made the original donation of land that led to additional land being purchased to create Arnold Wagner Memorial Park in honor of their son. Now a major contribution of land from the three surviving Wagner children, Richard, Rosemary and Anita will lead to an expansion of that park.



Campground Manager Greg Cahoy made a big hit with the youngsters enjoying Arnold Wagner Memorial Park Campgrounds last summer. He added an inflatable "bouncy house" as an extra added attraction. Much of the playground equipment at the park was lost through expansion of campsites in 2023 but is in the planning stages for replacement. Perhaps as early as this summer, new playground equipment will be installed, in conjunction with another expansion of the campgrounds. Cahoy takes a personal interest in the campground living on the site during the summer. He welcomes and then guides each new arrival to their designated spot. He also cultivates a huge garden, donating all of the produce to campers for their personal use.

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