Bethlehem Members Helped Build Aberdeen's Storybook Land

By: Katherine Grandstrand Quail



One of the biggest gifts the community of Aberdeen has ever received is Storybook Land. It grew from a dream in the 1970s to the family destination that it is today through many financial gifts, but also the gift of time.

The Aberdeen Sertoma Club led the charge more than 50 years ago and Bethlemite Bennie Benson was at the forefront of creating Aberdeen's premier childhood memory factory – along with Doug Johnson and Bob Gruman, the three are often referred to as the fathers of Storybook Land.

Fellow Bethlehem member Bill Roth was right there along with them.

"Back in 1972, Linda and I moved back to Aberdeen, somewhat by chance," Bill said of his wife. He's a lifelong Aberdeen resident, she's a Northern grad who came to the Hub City from Plankinton. Bill found a job at Avera St. Luke's shortly after he and Linda welcomed their first child. They were living in Minneapolis at the time and wanted to come home to South Dakota.

The administrator at Avera encouraged him to join a service club – which led him to the Aberdeen Sertoma Club and his family friend Bennie Benson.

"It was about that same time that Sertoma was wrestling with the idea of taking over the long range plan that had been developed for possibly developing a Storybook Land," Bill said. "I got in on the ground floor of that."

In those early years of the park, much of the work was done by Sertomans and their families, Bill said.

"I helped with the first installation of the Yellow Brick Road and a lot of other things since then," Bill said. "The physical work was done on late afternoons, evenings and on weekends."

They were putting in sidewalks and laying the foundation of what is now a 21-acre fairytale getaway for families throughout the Upper Midwest. Since opening in 1976, the park draws thousands of visitors each year and provides a magical yet inexpensive, child-friendly escape.

“I don’t think, back then, anybody had any idea that it would develop into what it is now, 50 years later,” Bill said. “The whole community has been giving. … The whole community and region has really gotten behind it and said, ‘Yeah, we’re going to support this financially.’”

While the park sells ride tickets and concessions, admission is free and the plan is to keep it that way. With dozens of fairytale and nursery rhyme sets and playground equipment throughout the park, most kids will hardly notice if they don’t go on one of the rides that do have a fare.

Storybook Land was never about making money.

“People just can’t believe that they can get in and basically spend no money if they don’t want to,” Bill said. “That was one of the basic tenets, from the very beginning, that this was going to be free.”

Bennie passed away in 2018 at the age of 97. He got to see the park from the ground up to the installation of Humpty Dumpty’s Roller Coaster in 2016.



Generosity of time and funds were key to the creation of Storybook Land and for Bennie in his faith journey. He served as Sunday School superintendent, congregation president, was active in the choir and was a mentor for the next generation, according to his obituary. He made sure his estate took care of not only his children, but Bethlehem.

“My parents were the same age as Bennie Benson and his wife, and so they’d been friends since their youth, I think,” Bill said. “I grew up knowing not only Bennie, but his wife, Margaret, and their children. … We’ve had those connections our whole life.”

That spirit of service and leadership grew to one of Aberdeen’s brightest assets, a testament to what generosity can do when it expands into the community.

“A lot of that is because of people like Ben, who went around and knocked on doors and so forth and got people interested,” Bill said. “The whole community has gotten behind that from a giving standpoint, both time and financial giving.”

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