

A Brief History of Concerts in Todd Grove Park by Spencer Brewer

In 1990/91 the Lakeport Summer Concert Series started by the local KZYX radio station owner Larry Evans (a friend) and a Lakeport bank president who saw a vision clearly of a free community concert series. I was part of the first two years playing there and a minor part of the planning with Larry. During the same time, an Ukiah Arts Group were investigating putting on a similar event somewhere in Ukiah with then Mayor Colleen Henderson spearheading the research. I was interviewed by the group about how to do it and soon forgot about the meeting as I was on tour most of the time in those days and not here much. I learned later that the group eventually abandoned the idea. A year passed and over that year several folks inquired why Ukiah didn't have a similar series to Lakeport. With some encouragement from friends to see if there was a series to be created, in late 1991 I approached Gil and Gudrun Dye of KWINE asking if they wanted to be a part of a summer concert series as the media partners/sponsors and they enthusiastically said yes. I then approached Ken and Kathy Fowler at Fowler Auto Center about the same idea as the lead sponsor and they also were quickly on board. Finally, I met with then city manager Chuck Rowe and laid out the concept and plan with the City of Ukiah being the major partner and presenter with support from city staff. He loved the idea and we were off and running.

Assistant city manager Candace Horsley, then head of the chamber Elizabeth Christian, head of Ukiah Community Services Robin Heise and myself were the core team that then plunged into visioning and putting the bones together for a series in the summer of 1992. We decided that Sundays were the perfect day as they 1) wouldn't compete with other regional festivals, 2) we could get access to bigger and more well-known bands as Sunday is generally an 'off' day for bands and 3) families could end their weekend with each other in a park setting with their neighbors. Eventually it became named 'Sundays in the Park'.

Where was it to be? A park, the fairgrounds, a vineyard, the airport, someone's private land close to town? Only a park made sense because of the city's support and endorsement. There was only one park that had almost everything we needed and that was Todd Grove Park. Everyone knew it, it had lots of parking and space, restrooms, there was a playground for kids and the city maintained it. On the mostly western south side of the park was a small gazebo which is still there today, so it made sense to put it there the first year. Quickly it became apparent that the location had issues like seating around it wasn't perfect, it was too small for some bands, there were some trees that blocked the total view and the sun set behind the band as they were playing. Time to rethink this.

We quickly enlisted the help of the Lion's Club to build a wood stage near the same location but in a better location. That worked for a short while, but it still wasn't perfect. Eventually we moved the wooden stage, which laboriously had to be rebuilt every year because winter weather trashed it annually, to its current location. Lots of room, great backdrop of trees, easy access for load in for the bands and a natural back wall. That wood stage lasted for several years, but there was a problem, the Lions Club still had to rebuild the wood stage every year, so enter Plan C. Larry DeKnoblough, Ukiah's Redevelopment Coordinator spearheaded a core team to get city staff, local contractors Rainbow Construction, Parnum Paving and Suave Construction (Concrete) to donate their time to build a permanent stage. A very generous offer by both companies as the series was growing larger and larger each year and businesses around town wanted to generously support the ongoing success of the series.

We mapped it out with the idea that it needed to hold the Ukiah Symphony in size and have two stairways as well as two forward speaker stands....all out of concrete. Sangiacomo Landscape assisted in the design and implementation of the front flower beds. In late 1997/98 the new stage was built, and the symphony inaugurated it that year. It was quite an accomplishment and helped 'cement' the Sundays in the Park series in perpetuity.

Around this same time John Schaeffer's Real Goods had become an international phenomenon around solar energy and alternative power. John and I spoke about what it would take to get his vendors to donate the supplies to make the series solar powered. Enter Jeff Oldham (resident solar expert and consultant) who came out, surveyed the layout and then made a plan for installing the system. John called many of his suppliers who generously donated 90% of the supplies as this would be a great project and a 'live' exhibition of what solar could be....the country's first all-solar powered concert series! Everything quickly came together with Real Goods partnering with the city electrical team installing solar panels on a tall pole at the northeast corner of the park, a large metal box to hold the inverters, batteries and cable running to the back of the stage. It was tested and viola' electricity from the sun. Nikola Tesla would have been proud this is where his invention of AC power morphed into. He originally wanted electricity to be free for all, but JP Morgan and George Westinghouse had other plans financially. I digress.

The first band of that year came on stage and several of us huddled around the power monitors reviewing the battery capacity diligently for the 4+ hours we needed power. No issues. High fives and smiles all around at the end of the concert. A first had just occurred. Enter the second band two weeks later with 10 musicians and a LOT of gear. With 3 minutes of power left in the batteries near the end of their sets, the band played their encore and stopped with 30 seconds of power left. Some sweaty hand wringing ensued and once again, we needed to rethink this. Add more batteries and panels (expensive) or do a grid tie system which would over the year more than offset the power needed for the series as well as help supply the power needs of the golf course facility and Todd Grove Room. Once this change occurred, the system ran beautifully with little to no issues, feeding more power annually than the summer of concerts needed with power to spare. In the 1990's this was quite the concept.

Now 28 years later, several governor's awards, almost 200 bands and hundreds of thousands attendees over the decades, the series has become a mainstay of people's summers. Parents in the park with their kid's fondly remember when they were kid's running around dancing and playing with friends years ago. Family memories are being made to this day and the series lives on. New music genres are being heard, new people are moving to town and Todd Grove Park lives on serving the Ukiah community daily.

- Spencer Brewer