



Photos by Macy Moore / West Central Tribune

THERE’S NO PLACE LIKE GNOMETOWN

New Dawson gnome to be revealed with return of Riverfest

By Shelby Lindrud
West Central Tribune

Dawson Once upon a time, in the county of Lac qui Parle in the hamlet of Dawson, there lived a community of gnomes. There are doctors, teachers, a photographer, minister, garbage man and a farmer among many others. The small and jolly creatures began moving into the city park in days long past, and have made the community their home, to the glee of residents and visitors alike.

“Dawson gnomes have two unique features. They have a bent hat because they voted, and they have a heart on their sleeve because they care,” said Sharilyn Bates, who probably knows more about the gnomes than most, because she has written most of the legends



Loren Femrite, who has personally created numerous gnomes in Dawson, talks about them May 31 while strolling through the city park in Dawson.

about them.

The real story of the Dawson gnomes began in 1987 when the city began looking for something to identify with the community — a mascot of sorts. Sisters Alta Roesch and Ruth Solem came up with the idea of the gnome. In a write-up about the gnome, Solem said pretty much every culture that had settled in Dawson — Scandinavian, German,

Irish, Korean and more — all had their own legends of little people.

The city approved the idea of adopting a friendly gnome as its mascot, even though for some it took a little bit of convincing. Bates shared a story of one woman who needed a minister to tell her the gnomes were not satanic before she would be OK with them.

“Eventually she came around,” Bates said. “And she became a gnome.”

Every year, as part of Dawson’s Riverfest celebration at the end of June, a gnome of the year is chosen. That person, couple or organization is then immortalized with their very own gnome statue that is placed in the city park, a gnome legend of their very own and an art drawing of their gnome. Nominations are sent to the gnome committee, which then picks the annual honoree.

“We are looking for people that are not looking

for the spotlight. They are just trying to make Dawson a better place,” said Diane Nevins, a gnome committee member for many years.

Since 1988, when Helmer Carlson

“It shows the heart of our community, the people who are doing everything they can to make it a better place and keep it the great community it is. If we are going to be known for anything, I think that is a good way for our town to be known.”

JESI MARTINSON

and Clyde “Fat” Bohnsack were named the first two Dawson gnomes, there have been 43 gnomes named and created. Loren Femrite has created quite a few of the gnomes, including carving the very first gnome, Daws. Today, the gnomes are made out

of concrete, which lasts longer than wood. The original wooden gnomes can be found in the Dawson Public Library.

“They’re all gnomes, you can’t go wrong,” Femrite said.

Amongst all the gnomes in the park, there is one outlier. Hiding under a bridge near the park sign is Covidius P. Evilson, a troll. Created in 2021, Covidius illustrates the 2020-2021 pandemic years, when Riverfest was canceled and there were no new gnomes. Instead of a heart on his sleeve, he has the coronavirus molecule.

“We kind of don’t care too much for him; we scorn him a bit,” Nevins said.

“He is banned to that bridge,” Bates added.

The gnome of the year is usually announced by the first week of June, though people start asking committee members who it is by May. When it comes to sculpting this year’s gnome, Femrite is quite familiar with the person. He was chosen as this year’s gnome.

“It is quite a surprise,” Femrite said.

There will be an unveiling ceremony for Femrite’s gnome sculpture during the 2022 Riverfest in Dawson, which runs June 22-26. “The Gnometown Tale of Loren Femrite” will be presented at 6:30 p.m. Friday at Riverside Park.

There has been a passing of the baton when it comes to who writes the gnome legend for the gnome of the year. This year, Jesi Martinson has written it. Martinson has a long history with gnomes, since she is the granddaughter and niece of the two original creators.

“The gnomes were



Jesi Martinson, left, and Sharilyn Bates examine a gnome May 31 in the Dawson city park.

MUSEUMS/HISTORIC SITES, EVENTS

Kandiyohi County Historical Society

Willmar, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. weekdays, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday, closed holidays, \$3 for adults, ages 12 and under and Kandiyohi County Historical Society members admitted for free, 320-235-1881, located at the train engine on North Business Highway 71 across from Robbins Island. The museum has a number of featured exhibits. Along with the museum there is a one-room school, a log shed and a Great Northern locomotive. Maps of county historical sites are available at the museum. www.kandiyohicountyhistory.com

Sperry House: The Sperry House will be open from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturdays through Sept. 3. Cost is \$3 per person, members are free. Open by appointment during the week.

Guri Endreson site: The Guri Endreson site, located off County Road 5, the field road gate is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. Guided tours available by appointment.

Words on paper: June 30, 6:30 p.m., focusing on the 1950s and 1960s, Willmar author Forrest Peterson will review major historical events and a listing of books in that era that reflected and influenced society. It will conclude with tips about writing memoirs and the current publishing world.



Contributed

The Sacred Heart Area Historical Society Museum is open Tuesdays and Fridays, or by appointment.

Chippewa County Historical Society

The Chippewa County Historical Society will have several sites open for the summer. Admission prices vary. For more information or to make appointments call 320-269-7636, email chippewahistory@outlook.com or website www.chippewacohistory.org.

Chippewa City: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays, 1 to 5 p.m. weekends and holidays through Labor Day; junction of state Highway 7 and U.S. Highway 59 in Montevideo; re-creation of a turn-of-the-century town with 23 buildings and two very old dugout canoes. The Chippewa River Dugout Canoe, carbon dated to between 1436 and 1522,

is in the Gateway Building and the Minnesota River dugout canoe, carbon dated to between 1626 and 1679, is in the Gippe Cabin. Admission adults \$5, ages 6-17 \$2, and 5 and under will be admitted free.

Lac qui Parle Mission: 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily through Sept. 4. Visitors can ring the church bell, echoing the sound of the original, traditionally known as the first church bell in Minnesota; six miles north of Montevideo on U.S. Highway 59 and 2.2 miles west on County Road 13; free admission. The Lac qui Parle Mission is a Minnesota Historical Society historic site operated by the Chippewa County Historical Society. Mission Sunday will be July 10.

Mission Sunday: Annual event Sunday, July 10, at the Lac qui Parle Mission beginning with 10:30 a.m. worship, noon potluck, and 1 p.m. program. Free, open to the public.

Olof Swensson Farm Museum: 1 to 4 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays, through Sept. 3-4, or by appointment; six miles east of Montevideo on state Highway 7, then five miles south on County Road 6 to the junction with County Road 15. The 17-acre farmstead features a 22-room house, timber frame barn and the remains of a gristmill. Admission adults \$5, ages 6-17 \$2, 5 and under will be admitted free.

Danube Historical Society

The Danube Historical Society Museum is open from 1:30 to 4 p.m. Tuesdays and Fridays in the former Danube Depot Building or by appointment, call 320-826-2236.

Fagen Fighters WWII Museum

Granite Falls, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, Lenzen-Roe Memorial Airport, 3 miles south of Granite Falls on Highway 23; adults \$10, ages 10-17 \$5, family \$20, active military \$5, ages 9 and under admitted free, annual memberships available. Home to a

pristine collection of fully operational, active aircraft and vehicles from World War II along with fine art, bronze sculptures, interactive multimedia displays, and a library. It is designed as a self-guided experience.

GAR and Meeker County Museum

Litchfield, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Friday, noon to 4 p.m. Saturday, \$3 admission, ages 11 and under free; Grand Army of the Republic Hall and Meeker County Historical Society Museum, 308 Marshall Ave., 320-693-8911, meekercomuseum.org.

Lac qui Parle County Museum

Madison, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., weekdays; 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday; South Highway 75; freewill donation.

Norway Lake Log Church

New London, 7:15 p.m. Saturdays, July 9 through Aug. 13, vespers service followed by social hour, west of New London off County Road 40 on 99th St. N.W. or by appointment, call 320-905-1539. The summer festival program will be at 1:30 p.m. Aug. 21.

Paynesville Area Historical Museum

Paynesville, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, through Sept. 3, 251 Ampe Drive; freewill donation.

Schwanke's Museum

Willmar, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday, run mid-May through October, or by appointment, 3310 Business Highway 71 S.; features roadway and farm field history, more than 300 tractors, cars, trucks and fire trucks; gift shop; adults \$6, under 12 are \$3, 5 and under admitted free; 320-235-4341.

Swift County

Benson, 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Tuesday through Friday, or by appointment, 2135 Minnesota Ave.; free admission; 320-843-4467.

Yellow Medicine County Museum

Granite Falls, 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Wednesday through Saturday, through Sept. 3, junction of Minnesota highways 23 and 67 on the Minnesota River. For more information call 320-564-4479.

GNOME

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ingrained in my life before it was even a Dawson thing,” Martinson said, remembering all the stories, toys and movies she had as a child.

Since the gnomes started popping up in Dawson, they have become nearly synonymous with the city, and that is perfectly fine for those involved in their creation and upkeep.

“It shows the heart of our community, the people who are doing everything they can to make it a better place and keep it the great community it is,” Martinson said. “If we are going to be known for anything, I think that is a good way for our town to be known.”

Dawson gnomes have gotten some attention outside of the city. The Minnesota Lottery did a television ad with them and there have been other media stories done on them. And today, gnomes have become a popular garden and home decor piece and people travel from miles around to come see the Dawson gnomes.

However, the people of Dawson take pride in having welcomed the gnome long before it became a fad and for being known as Gnometown, USA.

“We had gnomes before it was cool,” Martinson said.

“And they all have hearts,” concluded Bates.



Macy Moore / West Central Tribune

Covidius P. Evilson, a troll, sits under a bridge May 31 in the Dawson city park. Created in 2021, Covidius illustrates the 2020-21 pandemic years, when Riverfest was canceled and there were no new gnomes. Instead of a heart on his sleeve, he has the coronavirus molecule.

Tickets are selling fast!

SHREK THE MUSICAL

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