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Park revives Lone Elm site, and its history - Prairie land is one of several new features already in place

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The Lone Elm was a sentinel in the great westward movement, the beacon that announced the coming of a good night's rest at the campground, a wash in the springs and a bit of camaraderie and fun before the long, hard voyage caught its beleaguering stride.

Now, the new Lone Elm Park, in southern Olathe, where four major wagon trails once criss-crossed at Lone Elm Campground, looks to soon be a beacon again.

The glow of lights from the world-class softball and soccer fields will mark the area now.

The freshly reclaimed prairie and artifacts will try to bring the American history of the important place to life.

The gatherings of people for fun and camaraderie will be much

like it was in the old days, and all of it is starting to take shape.

With just a few months left in the \$5 million initial phase of development, softball diamonds, soccer fields and a 40-acre prairie are already in place at the 167th Street and Lone Elm Road site. Artifacts have been recovered. Parts of the planned 1/2-mile of trails are being cleared, revealing the footprints of wagon trains. Supplies to build a shelter, including stone rescued from an 1870s horse barn in Maryville, Kan., are stacked and ready for a new life.

There are trees, a stream with springs and plenty of open space.

That's why it's set up to be such a great campsite, said Kevin Corbett, Olathe parks superintendent.

It's also why it's setting up to be a great park.

Paid with an 2%-cent sales tax, the land was purchased for \$1.8 million, and the total development is expected to cost \$10 million to \$12 million when completed, Corbett said.

Contributions from the Olathe Soccer Club and Olathe Girls Softball Association have totaled \$350,000, and he said talks are under way for more donations.

Soccer starts at the facility this April, and softball starts in May. The concession stand and bathrooms are built. A grand opening will happen around that time as well, the latest chapter in the storied history of the 160-acre piece of Johnson County.

It's been a bit of a struggle with this park to balance the natural side and the youth sports side, Corbett said. The combination is hoped to be complementary.

People who are here all day for tournaments can get out and access the rest of the park, hike the trails, rent the shelter, he said. They can do other things in the park besides sit and wonder when their kid s next game is.

Corbett said diary accounts of visitors to the campsite travelers of the Santa Fe, Oregon, California and Military trails describe how it got its name.

A grove, much like the one there now, surrounded the open fields, but as 1820 turned to 1870, more and more trees were plucked for firewood until the Lone Elm became lone.

Entries give conflicting accounts of just when it happened, but several note the tree s demise, its utility more important than its symbolism.

The famed, cannibalistic Donner Party stayed there. William Becknell, who marked the Santa Fe Trail, spent the night. Frontiersman Kit Carson did, too. Even Francis Parkman, who mapped the West for the federal government, paid a visit.

The quarter-section was also the first farmstead in Johnson County, property of the Ainsworth family since the late 1850s, according to city research.

He was a real character, Corbett said of Newt Ainsworth, the family patriarch. He gave a real colorful account of what was going on here. It was a highway. It was an amazing place to be.

Immigrants, gold rushers and soldiers mingled around his farm for several years before the camp finally died.

This spring, after winter has had its way with the prairie, the next

rebirth of the land will begin.

But funding runs out in December 2004, long before the \$12 million needed to complete the project will be collected. Corbett said examining a new tax would be possible.

Many things still have to happen in the coming months before the grand opening. Construction of the shelter which will have a fireplace and historic information kiosk happens next. Rendezvous Road and the main entrance to the park must be completed. Finally, the trails artifact displays will be put together.

It s opening this spring, but it s just a lot of work to get a park of this scale up to speed, Corbett said.

It s already starting to look like a landmark.

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Photo (color)

MIKE RANSDELL/The Kansas City Star

Parts of 40 acres of newly established prairie land is in bloom at Lone Elm Park, including the Black Eyed Susan. Establishing the prairie land is one piece of the work under way to prepare the new 160-acre community park, at 167th and Lone Elm Road, for its spring 2004 opening.

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