

ELMHURST HISTORY HIGHLIGHT: 1936 Elmhurst Centennial Celebration

In the midst of the Great Depression, the City of Elmhurst planned a 10-day extravaganza meant to celebrate the centennial anniversary of the arrival of white settlers to the area in 1836. The planning began in 1935, with a focus on original residents and descendants of early 19th century settlers. Festivities were slated to span the dates of June 3rd through the 13th of the following year. The city put out a call to local businesses to find historical artifacts to display in their windows, and multiple parades and events were planned to span the entire week. Ads were taken out in papers throughout Chicagoland to draw crowds to the event. And by all accounts, the celebrations were a rousing success.

The merriment began in earnest at 9am on Friday, June 5th with a city-wide reveille, described as a “salvo of bombs, blowing of city whistles, and ringing of all church bells.” In the morning, the local D.A.R. chapter dedicated a bronze plaque at the corner of St. Charles Road and Cottage Hill Avenue, marking the original 1843 spot of the [Hill Cottage Tavern](#)—the plaque is still there today. A children’s parade was held on York Street that afternoon, drawing a crowd of thousands. The Friday festivities finished with a street dance on Addison Avenue that ran through midnight.



Elmhurst Centennial Parade along York Street on June 7th, 1936. M2014.1.74

The formal opening ceremonies of the Centennial Celebration were held on June 6th in Wilder Park, chaired by Alben F. Bates, descendent of Cottage Hill Tavern founder Gerry Bates. Long-time Elmhurst residents were given “Old Settler” ribbons and were treated as guests of honor at the ceremony. Earlier that day, a wreath ceremony was held at the Glos Mausoleum, honoring the first village president of Elmhurst, the late Henry L. Glos. That night, a theatrical pageant was performed to a crowd of 15,000 spectators in Wilder Park, highlights various episodes of Elmhurst history in the 19th century.

The events reached a crescendo on Sunday the 7th as the Centennial Parade made its way through town on York Street, with more than 2,500 marchers on the street and an estimated 40,000 people looking on from the sidewalk. Every notable business, church, and civic organization made sure to have a presence in the parade—more than 300 units in all. Events continued throughout the week, including sporting events, band concerts, and school activities. The final event on June 13th was a boxing tournament

where the winners were crowned “The Elmhurst Centennial Boxing Champions,” a title they would hold for a century, which would be certified an official *Ripley’s Believe It Or Not* record.

While the event was marked by the racial prejudices of the day and by overly romanticizing the past, it was a warming example of civic unity in a difficult time in the nation’s history. It being the first earnest attempt to reflect on Elmhurst’s history, it also arguably sowed the seeds of the Elmhurst Historical Commission, a group formed in 1952 by the City of Elmhurst that led to the creation of the Elmhurst History Museum in 1957.



The Marth Ibbetson Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution dedicate a marker on the site of the original Cottage Hill Tavern on June 6th, 1936. M2011.1.23

By Daniel Lund, Elmhurst History Museum Staff, Updated October 2021