



# An American Tour: 94



## Omaha's Peony Park

Peony Park was begun by local entrepreneurs Godfrey Malec, and brothers Jerry and Joe Sr. in 1919 with the help of investor Frank Srb, a family member and business man from Dodge, NE. The brothers opened a gas station and restaurant on the Lincoln Highway. Carl Rosenfield's neighboring Peony Gardens were established 35 years earlier, in 1884, with 25 acres of peonies in several hundred varieties. When the Gardens became a highway stop along the burgeoning Lincoln Highway, the Malec brothers added amusements to this already busy roadside attraction. The park became the official headquarters for the Lawrence Welk Band in the 1930s, which made it immensely popular. Other events included the Coca-Cola Date Night and Polka Days, and numerous appearances by The Les Brown Band, The Woody Herman Band, Harry James and his Band, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Tommy Dorsey, Jimmy Dorsey and the Glenn Miller Band. Originally built outside city limits, the park was annexed by the city of Omaha in 1958. The park was strictly segregated until 1963.

In the 1980s, Omaha's Italian community began holding their annual celebration called La Festa Italiana at the park, and continued until its closure.



The park was put up for sale in 1993 due to dwindling revenue and high operational costs. Many attempts to save the park and keep it open failed. The park had too short a season and too small a population base to make a profit. A commercial land developer bought the land with plans to develop it into a shopping center. The park officially closed after the 1994 summer season.

Today, Peony Park is a strip mall with restaurants, a bank, and a grocery store. The only remaining structure still standing today is the Keno parlor and a short section of the original fence surrounding the park, left by the property owners as a tribute.

