

## Windego Park Auditorium/ Open Air Theater, Anoka

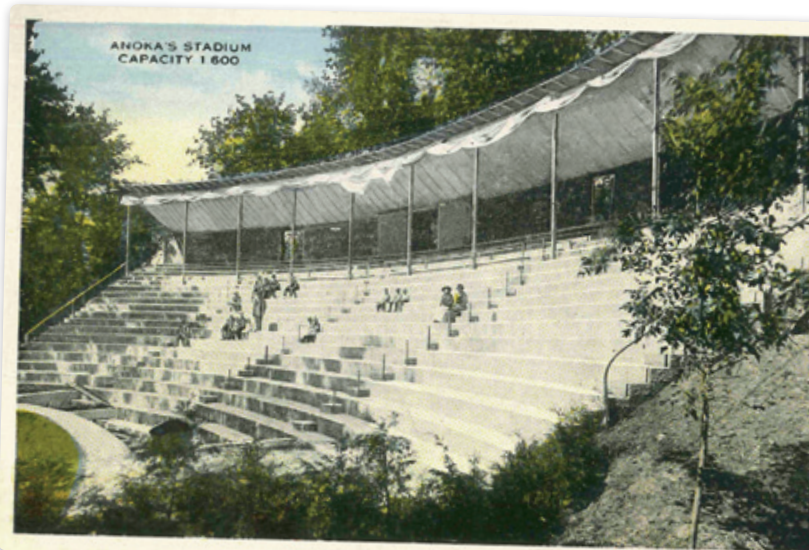


COMPLETED IN 1914 on the banks of the Rum River in Anoka, the Windego Park Auditorium/Open Air Theater is a rare work of open-air design by noted Minneapolis Prairie School architect William Gray Purcell. Gracefully set into a 30-foot hill, Purcell's design accommodated audiences of up to 1,600 people on curving tiers cascading down to an orchestra pit and elevated stage. Beyond its architecture, Anoka's amphitheater is nationally significant as part of the turn of the twentieth century's City Beautiful planning movement and the drive for universal arts education in the Progressive Era.

In Ojibwe belief systems, the Windego was a terrifying cannibalistic giant who could never be satiated. Rumors of Windego sightings in Roseau, Minnesota, were reported from the late nineteenth century into the 1920s, which may have influenced the naming of Windego Park. The ensuing amphitheater was the brainchild of Anoka resident Thaddeus P. Giddings, one of the most important American music educators of the twentieth century. As music department supervisor for the Minneapolis Public Schools, Giddings believed that community singing could bring music to all through participatory learning. While he was promoting funding for the amphitheater in Anoka, Giddings was also working with Theodore Wirth and the Minneapolis Park Board to bring live performances and "community sings" to Minneapolis parks and schools. By the 1920s, parks across Minneapolis were holding evening sings—often attracting thousands of people.

When it opened on a weekend in August 1914, Anoka's outdoor theater proved to be an instant hit, and it continued to draw thousands of visitors over the decades to come. Giddings's vision for arts engagement at Windego was his first large-scale success. In a 1916 talk to music educators, Giddings described the amphitheater on a summer night:

It is one of the most graceful places imaginable in which to sing or speak . . . the steepness and curve of the seats, the orchestra pit, the river behind. Many well-known singers and speakers have appeared here and all praise the perfect acoustics. The softest tone is heard in the most distant seat.



When it opened in 1914, the open-air theater was an instant hit. (WILLIAM GRAY PURCELL PAPERS, NORTHWEST ARCHITECTURAL ARCHIVES, UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA LIBRARIES)

Beyond Purcell's intimate canopied design, it was Giddings's ability to plan musical and dramatic events that made the open-air theater so popular. Here Giddings honed his skills as a community organizer for the arts—a talent that led him, in 1936, to become the founding director of an orchestra camp now part of Interlochen Center for the Arts in Traverse City, Michigan—now one of the most celebrated arts camps in the world. Giddings's departure left a void in Anoka, and interest in Windego Park events declined, largely coming to a halt by the 1940s. The amphitheater was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980, reviving interest in its preservation. Despite several restoration attempts by the nonprofit Windego Park Society (founded in 1997), the amphitheater continues to deteriorate and is now fenced off—an unfortunate condition for a rare historic resource rich in stories of education, design, and populism in the arts.

—Frank Edgerton Martin

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