

NORMANDY FARMS



Mississippi steamboat named the Belle of the Bends. Eickhoff gathered old photographs of the Belle of the Bends and met with a representative of a playstructures company.

"[We] approached the design with the objective of giving the playstructure the look of a paddlewheel boat, but also have a high degree of play value," says Eickhoff. "We went through the catalog and began selecting events and components that would mimic the shape and structure of the Belle of the Bends. We also paid close attention to the color of the components, because most steamboats were red and white with black stacks and wood decking."

Oh, It Also Needs to Withstand Floods

Slowly the design for the 100' x 48' structure began to take shape. Eickhoff placed clatterbridges on either side to capture the swayback feel of steamboats, and flanked the structure with matching sets of red arch climbers to represent the paddlewheels. Graceful white arches were chosen to link the

decks and add height to the structure, and Eickhoff found several white life preservers to attach to bright red play panels. Other panels in the captain's deck were customized by the playstructures company to look like pressure gauges and to hold the ship's wheel.

The crowning achievement of the Centennial Park playground design was the pair of towering smokestacks that Eickhoff fashioned out of 24-inch plastic drain tile, which he stood on end and topped with specially fabricated golden crowns. The smokestacks oriented the playstructure to face downriver and give it a recognizable profile even when viewed from the nearby Centennial Bridge. Finally, Eickhoff completed his work of art with four flags that added movement to the site and further reinforced its nautical theme.

The playground opened in 2001 and has been extremely popular ever since. It even weathered a major spring flood that left the playground and its poured-in-place safety surfacing under four feet of water.

The keys to the success of the park were undoubtedly Eickhoff's passion for the theme and his attention even to the smallest details in pulling it off. "This is not something that you would do in every park," says Eickhoff, "but any city with a heritage or history to celebrate could do the same thing we did. A themed playground will require more design creativity and planning, but if done right it can become a big drawing card."

"This playground brings in families from all over Davenport, and it is perfectly suited to the site," adds Alban-soder. "The important thing is that we chose the right theme for this environment. The structure just looks like it belongs there."

Down on the Farm

More than 1,000 miles to the east, in Foxboro, Mass., the right playground theme for the owners of the world-renowned camping resort Normandy Farms was, well, a farm.

Since 1759, nine generations of the Daniels family have farmed this land, raising sheep, chickens and dairy cows. In 1972, the Daniels converted a portion of the farm into a campground and enjoyed immediate success. They never looked back.

Today, Normandy Farms is to campgrounds what Versailles is to gardens. The 100-acre facility hosts more than 70,000 site nights per year, and keeps campers from all over the country coming back with a stunning collection of facilities, including a recreation center, four pools, saunas, Jacuzzis, basketball courts, golf, fishing and craft classes.

In 2002, Al and Doris Daniels decided to expand yet again, this time by adding a gargantuan playground with separate play areas for children ages 2-5 and 5-12. "We wanted this to be our statement to the kids that Normandy Farms built the best playground that we could," says Al Daniels. "We want the kids to go away telling their folks that they want to come back

here because they love this playground.”

Choosing the farm theme for the playground was a no-brainer for the Daniels. “Our family has been here for more than 200 years, and I think that history is what has kept our family involved in this business. We currently have 17 family members involved in Normandy Farms operations, and to everyone it just seemed right to give our playground a farm theme.”

The play area for younger children takes the shape of a tractor, which was fashioned from a specially crafted Permalene panel. Gear panels and driver panels further enhance the farm machinery style of the structure. The nearby larger playstructure is an amazing combination of state-of-the-art play events and a brilliant Normandy Farms theme. “We have a bright red barn with red and white door panels, and cut-outs of roosters in the loft and a cow peering over the side. Adjacent to the barn is a very tall silo, which was custom-made by [the manufacturer] from curved posts,” says Daniels. All told, the playgrounds will

include nearly \$130,000 in play equipment, including an extra-long curved track ride, and a 360-degree tunnel slide connected by a red and black arch bridge to a giant double slide.

Although the playground is still in its salad days, Al Daniels is convinced of its eventual success. “I already know that our playground will be a big hit with kids—its massive size and theme will wow them. I’ve learned from developing other projects that if you put the time and effort into planning, they will be successful,” says Daniels. “I don’t see this playground as any different. It’s going to be incredible.”

Wheels A-Turnin’

Unlike Centennial Park and Normandy Farms, the playground theme for the new Department of Transportation (DOT) Child Development Center, in Bartow, Fla., is grounded in the present, not in the past.

The center, which opened in September, serves the families of DOT employees who work in the district. According to Dennis Hall, facilities management administrator for the DOT,

they knew from day one that they wanted their playground to have a theme. “Our employees are responsible for maintaining not only the roads and bridges, but also the airports, seaports and public transportation in our 12-county district. We felt that we wanted to incorporate as much of that as possible into our playground,” says Hall.

“We invited three state-approved playground manufacturers to submit designs for this site, and we selected [our manufacturer] because they came back with a plan that had the main playstructure designed to look like an enormous yellow dump truck—the same color as the maintenance vehicles that we drive. They incorporated our DOT seal onto the sides of the vehicle,” says Hall. “Everyone who looks at it realizes right away what it represents. There are driver panels inside the truck where a child can stand and act like they are driving the truck.”

In addition to the large truck, the play area includes motorcycle- and airplane-themed spring riders and an oval tricycle track marked with custom-made railroad and pedestrian crossing signs. Adjacent to the main play area is an age-appropriate play space for children ages 2-5 that has been designed to look like a train, complete with an engine and caboose. Both play areas are fully accessible and feature a poured-in-place surface shaded with shade structures.

Hall’s decision to celebrate the work of department of transportation employees with a themed playground will undoubtedly be affirmed by the joy and laughter of the children who attend the center. In anticipation of the facility’s grand opening, Hall held a contest among employees to name the center. Appropriately enough, the winning name was Highways to Tomorrow Child Development Center.

Whether you look to the past, present or future for inspiration, themed playstructures can add an entirely new dimension to your next playground design.

CHILD DEVELOPMENT CENTER

