

Sylvan Lake Lodge

Sylvan Lake History

- 1891
Construction on Sylvan Lake dam began.
- 1893
Original Sylvan Lake Lodge built.
- 1920
Custer State Park Board purchased Sylvan Lake Resort.
- 1934
Sylvan Lake cabins and store are built by the CCC.
- 1935
Sylvan Lake Lodge burned down.
- 1937-1938
New Sylvan Lake Lodge was constructed.
- 1991
New 12 room addition was added to the lodge.

Peter Norbeck with guests riding to Harney Peak on the burros. (right)



Original Sylvan Lake Lodge (left)

The Black Hills' First Lake

In 1890 Theodore Reder visited a rock-enclosed valley eight miles northeast of Custer. Here he noticed a narrow crevice in a solid wall of granite that was the only opening that drained the valley. The idea of a lake and tourist attraction in the hills was quickly visualized when he filed ten mineral claims on the site. In 1891 he began working on filling the crevice with concrete to make a dam. More than two ox-drawn cartloads of cement were hauled to the site. The dam was thirty-three feet high, forty feet wide and six feet thick when finished in 1892.

Sylvan Lake and Sylvan Lake Lodge during the first years of operation (right)



A Tourist Attraction in the Hills

The next project was to construct a hotel that would serve the visitors that were expected to visit the area. Mrs. Theo (Elizabeth) Reder designed the three story, sixty room hotel complete with wide porches and gingerbread trim. It was to be located in a sheltered nook near the dam. The charming white hotel became an immediate attraction in the Hills after it was completed in 1893. It was an ideal place for hikes both around the lake and to the summit of Harney Peak, which has a vast panorama of the Black Hills, Badlands, and Plains. Guests could ride to the top of Harney Peak on burros, canoe across the lake, and catch the abundant fish inhabiting the lake.



Trouble on the Horizon

After the Custer State Park Board purchased the lodge in 1920, troubles arose. Difficulties in the operation of the hotel started in 1923, mostly from the needs to meet a growing clientele. Electricity fluctuated with the supply of gas, and though there was abundant water from springs and the lake, getting it to the hotel was an issue. Those problems were nothing compared to the disaster that struck on June 30, 1935. Faulty wiring in an unused chimney caused a fire that resulted in the destruction of the entire hotel. The lodge was reduced to blackened timbers and a pile of ash.

Blackened Timbers and Ash

Modern Lodging

35 lodge rooms

32 cabins with
Kitchenette

38 campsites
with electricity

**Boat and Water
Sport Rentals**
605-574-2561

Paddleboats:
3-5 people
Rowboats: 4 people
Hydrobikes: 1 person

Half hour, 1 hour,
half day, and full day
rentals are available

**Harney Peak
Trailhead**
located on east side
of Sylvan Lake;
parking lot is
available

The fire that destroyed the entire hotel was reported by a fisherman at 7:30 am. Most of the guests were enjoying breakfast in the dining room and were evacuated immediately. The Custer Fire Department and firefighters from Game Lodge arrived in time to prevent the fire from spreading to the forest surrounding the area. Patrons of the hotel and citizens of the Black Hills mourned the loss. State officials decided that the lodge would be rebuilt as soon as possible. Scovel Johnson's plan for Sylvan Lake suggested that a ridge would be the most scenic place to rebuild the lodge. With views of Sylvan Lake, Harney Peak, and Mount Coolidge, the new hotel cost \$150,000. In 1938 Custer State Park Board chairman announced the opening of the new resort in September.

Grand Openings

The new hotel opened its doors on September 15, 1938. It offered twenty-nine rooms, twenty-one of which had individual baths while the remaining eight were equipped with connecting baths. The dining room seated 136 guests but was able to accommodate 160 visitors at banquets. A Native American theme was carried out in the hotel decor. Spearheads and arrows motifs were incorporated into the architectural features. The hotel was a popular place for the military men, stationed out of Ellsworth Air Force base near Rapid City, during World War II.



Sylvan Lake Lodge during the disastrous fire in 1935.
(above)

Additions and Updates

The lodge constructed a new wing in 1991 with renovated rooms, a lobby, and a restaurant. There are several rustic cabins nestled among the pine and spruce forest. Sylvan Lake also constructed a newly renovated auditorium in 2008. This is an ideal location for family reunions, wedding receptions, and other group functions.



Sylvan Lake Hotel Boasting Native American decor. (above)



Sylvan Lake hotel and resort opened in 1938.
(right)



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