



STILL "A DELIGHTFUL PLACE TO ENJOY"
...for Patti Hughes and mother Valerie

Sun Staff photo by Mike Pisoni

A getaway spot, then and now

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WESTFORD - The outlet of Forge Pond was believed to have been the rallying point for the few Indians who roamed this area of Middlesex County. It was here, at the headwaters of Stony Brook, that Andrew, the Indian, snagged fish attempting to swim downstream.

Now, 133 years later, the Indians have been replaced by laughing bathers seeking relief from the July sun. During the intervening years, there have been varied changes.

Once known as Excelsior Grove, the tract is now in the hands of the townspeople as one of their two public beaches, and the valuable property is secure for generations to come as a recreation area. The other, Edwards Beach at Nabnauset Pond, purchased just last year, is another popular summer spot.

Excelsior Grove received its start as a recreation area when a number of local people met at the store of Jonathan Prescott on Aug. 11, 1845, to organize the Forge Village Boat Corporation. David P. Lawrence was named chairman; Abel Prescott, secretary. To have a pretty body of water so close by, with possibilities for boating as well as a picnic grove for the villagers, seemed to be good fortune for the town.

An early description called it "a beautiful hickory grove with all the usual desirable appurtenances for a picnic, Sabbath school and pleasure parties desiring to enjoy a social time in a delightful place."

Westford

Three years later, in 1848, the Stony Brook Railroad started operating. It could feed passengers to Forge Village as the railroad station was almost next door.

The public relations of the times read, "Those desiring to enjoy a social time in a delightful place can do so by taking passage in the cars of the Stony Brook Railroad Company. From Lowell, in 30 minutes you will alight within 20 rods of Excelsior Grove on the margin of a large and beautiful pond, where such innocent amusements and exercises as water excursions, swinging, dancing, music, etc., may be fully enjoyed."

A special note was made that no intoxicating liquor was to be allowed on the premises. Yet, there were some enterprising nearby farmers who could have supplied a draught or two from the past year's cider pressing.

A lack of facilities to venture onto the waters soon brought action from the committee. Seven men were chosen to procure a large boat as soon as possible and prepare a code of bylaws. Stock in this company sold for far less than some glamour stocks of today. The initial price for one certificate was \$1. A total sale of \$84 was spread among 41 stockholders. Luther Prescott, who ran the local tavern, headed the list with seven; five others bought five shares each, and the remainder was distributed in smaller amounts.

The investment turned out well

for these shrewd Yankees, even when it was applied to the risky recreation field. During the 15 years the "park" was in operation, the seasonal dividends ranged from four to 15 percent.

The reason for the demise of Excelsior Grove is not known. It is believed, however, that its location was more valuable for other purposes. The new railroad line ran through the property, it was centrally located in a prospering village, and the ground was level. It turned out that it waitinger of Belmont purchased the property in 1864. He was recognized as the first to export ice to southern United States cities and the Caribbean. He brought the ice to Boston and loaded sailing vessels. Packed in wet sawdust, the ice survived long days at sea, later to enhance tables and drinks of the wealthy in hotter climates.

Hittinger sent some 35,000 tons of ice by rail to Boston for John P. Squire and the amount stored for the Southern market was 50,000 tons.

Daniel Gage of Lowell purchased the property later. In a terrible conflagration in 1920, the tinder-dry wooden buildings burned to the ground. Rebuilt, but to a smaller degree, the new unit burned again on July 14, 1931.

With events of this sort, plus the invention of the household refrigerator, the ice business on Forge Pond melted.

Today, the hickory trees are gone, but old Excelsior Grove carries on the tradition of being a "delightful place to enjoy."