

# Excelsior Grove now for recreation

By GORDON B. SEAVEY

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 headquarters of Stony Brook that Andrew, the Indian, had his "warre" (weir) where he snagged fish attempting to swim down stream.

One hundred thirty-five years later, the Indian whoops have been replaced by laughing bathers seeking relief from the July sun. During the intervening years, there have been several varied changes.

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

Trained lifeguards watch over the bathers as others picnic in family groups or take sun baths on the sandy shores. Unfortunately most recreational equipment has been eliminated due to continual vandalism.

Excelsior Grove received its start when a goodly number of local people met at the store of Jonathan Prescott on August 11, 1945, 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 a good combination.

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."

## A Delightful Place

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

Literature 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 Co. 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."

Evidently planned to bring as many social parties to the then small village as possible, the printed literature went on to read: Committees or societies and parties are respectfully invited to examine the premises and decide for themselves whether there is a more desirable

resort for excursion parties in this section of the country."

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

Without facilities to go out on 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 \$1.00. Total sale of \$84.00 was spread among 41 shareholders. Luther Prescott, who ran the local tavern, headed the list with seven, five others bought five shares each and the remainder in smaller amounts.

The investment turned out well for these shrewd Yankees even when it was applied to the risky entertainment field. During the fifteen years the "park" was in operation, the seasonal dividends ranged from 4% to 15%.

## All Aboard

Let's get aboard the boat. It was a side wheeler, called a crank boat. It seated 20 or more passengers. Two men in the middle turned the crank which rotated paddle wheels. A softer job went to the third member of the crew: he sat in the rear to steer.

The name of the vessel has long been lost. It surely was not "Matawanakee" as that artificial name had not been invented for the lake. History tells us that there was never an Indian nor a tribe of that name, nor a camping ground. Today the name is still Forge Pond, the only such named body of water in the world.

The system of fares was rather complicated. To get a cheaper rate, it was better to fill the unique craft to capacity. The charge for the rides was six and



Lifeguard sentry replaces lonely watch of Indian braves at Forge Village Pond. Westford. (photo by Joan Croft)

## Ice Houses Built

Reason for the demise of Excelsior Grove is not known. It is believed, however, that its location value for other purposes was greater. 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 was ideal for ice houses.

Thomas S. Hittinger of Belmont purchased the property in 1864. He was recognized as the first to export ice to southern U.S. cities and the Caribbean. He brought the ice to Boston and loaded sailing vessels. Packed in wet sawdust, the ice survived one-fourth cents per hour for each individual, for passengers not exceeding 20. Any number over this amount, the rate was an even four cents.

long days at sea, later to enhance the tables and drinks of the wealthy in hotter climates.

His investment in building and outfitting the six-story icehouse at Forge Village was \$65,000, a most sizeable sum in those days. For the year 1981, records indicate that 175 men were employed cutting and harvesting the ice, and fifty hired horses worked during the season.

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 newer unit burned July 14, 1931.

With the events of this sort, plus the invention of the household Frigidaire, it could be said that the harvesting of ice on Forge Pond became a business that "went down the drain!"

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