

Forge Village Beauty Recalled

By G. B. Seavey

(The author of this historical article is a resident of Belmont.)

For summer visitors who enjoy the blue waters of Forge Pond, which at Forge Village forms the headwaters of Stony Brook, few if any today ever knew that a century ago a thriving picnic spot was located on its shores.

Known as Excelsior Grove, an early description calls it "a beautiful hickory grove with all the usual desirable appurtenances for picnic, Sabbath school and pleasure parties desiring to enjoy a social time in a delightful place."

It was on land later occupied by the Daniel Gage Ice Company of Lowell, but prior to the coming of the white man was doubtless the gathering spot of many of the Indians. Being near the outlet of the pond, it is possible that Old Andrew, the Indian, who sold his warre (weir) to the town of Groton before 1680, made his best catches here.

But now, even the icehouses are gone, victims of the changing times and a spectacular fire a few decades ago. All that remains is a spot of valuable, level ground, between the shores of the lake and the Boston & Maine Railroad track.

This grove was established in 1815 and a description of its facilities included the important point that it enjoyed good transportation service. 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. (later taken over by the B & M) for Forge Village."

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 little village as possible, the description goes on to say: "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." The local chamber of commerce was in full swing!

A special note was made that no in-

toxicated liquor was to be allowed on the premises. Yet maybe there were neighboring farmers who could have supplied a draught or two from last year's cider pressing.

The person to get in touch with for a permit to use Excelsior Grove was Imla Lawrence, of whom there were many in Forge Village along with the Wrights and the Prescotts at that time.

To have a picnic grove on the shores of a pretty pond and without facilities to go out on the waters soon brought action from a local citizens' committee. A goodly number 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.

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 was 1.00. There was apparently no rush to buy the stock, although it was priced low enough. The initial sale was 84 shares, bringing in a total of \$84. It was spread among 41 shareholders, Luther Prescott buying seven, five others five shares, and the rest in smaller amounts, mostly a single share.

These shrewd Yankees, however, evidently saw a good business transaction even when it applied to the entertainment field. From 1849 to 1864 the yearly dividends ranged from 4% to 15%.

LET'S GET ABOARD the boat. It was a side wheeler, called a crank boat, which seated 20 or more passengers. Two men turned the cranks to rotate the paddle wheels. A softer job went to the third member of the crew . . . he sat in the rear and steered.

The fares were rather complicated and to get a cheaper rate it was better to overload the unique craft. The charge for the use of the boat for any time not exceeding half a day was six and one-fourth cents per hour for each individual, for passengers not exceeding 20. Any number over 20, the rate was an even four cents per excursionist.

What was important in establishing Excelsior Grove in a few years caused its demise . . . the nearness to transportation.

(Continued Tomorrow)