

Playground rises above swampy start

By Gordon B. Seavey

It's hard to visualize that 75 years ago there was a patch of land, about four acres to be exact, in the center of town that was swampy and "rough."

With an elevation of 400 feet at the town hall, and this land owned by the Foss family next door, how could it be useless and not drainable?

It lay between the second Academy building, then only 15 years old, and the recently constructed grammar school with all frontage on Main Street. Oldsters will remember teasing peeping frogs in the spring-time when the waters would fill a depression alongside the Academy, now the location of a pair of tennis courts.

The school board lamented that all that was needed to complete the grounds around the new grade school, named for long-time Academy principal, William E. Frost, was to procure the land and with a few hundred dollars each year this land could be "brought into proper condition for a good athletic field" to be enjoyed by both schools.

A local benefactor came forth with a proposal. She was M. Elizabeth Whitney, wife of a banker who made her home in the triangle formed by Main and Leland Streets. On March 21, 1910, the annual town meeting voted to accept with gratitude her offer not only to build a playground but to establish a fund to help care for the grounds.

In her honor, the new playground was given the name of the Hiram Whitney Playground, for the use of all the townspeople without charge of any sort. There was to be no commercialization.

When the local Boy Scout Troop #1 wished to cash in on the sale of "tonic", candy and ice cream cones at local events, they were forced to pitch their tent on adjacent private land. Sometimes when the need arose to raise money for a worthwhile event, people were allowed to toss coins into a solicitor's can and a tag was given in return. Without a tag, one was considered a cheapskate.

Mrs. Whitney was asked to choose the committee to supervise her gift and also the grounds. She selected two men and they in turn chose the third. The group consisted of Oscar R. Spalding, Herbert V. Hildreth and Edward Fisher. Incidentally, they invested the \$5,000 to be used for maintenance mostly in American Telephone.

Most of the land, on which there was a small apple orchard, was purchased from the Foss family.

Work of "transforming the rough, wet and unsightly field was entrusted to Harvey W. Tarbell," a well-known Lowell contractor. His equipment was adequate for those days and much hand labor was needed to install a drainage system.

Many of the workmen were recent Italian immigrants whose strange language intrigued the students watching the project. Italian was not taught in the Academy, which then had an enrollment of 54; the Frost School, 105.

To expand the ground, Donald M. Cameron, William Woods and Oscar Spalding donated additional small parcels of land.

Finally the day came to officially dedicate the transformation of swamp land into a regulation baseball diamond (up to then, games were held on the Common), a tennis court a row of swings, eight in number, a seesaw with six boards, and a giant swing. Cement benches were spotted here and there and only recently removed because of old age.

May 27 was the day selected for the

dedication. Frost students marched onto the field, led by Helen McCoy and Daniel Maloney and witnessed by a crowd of 600. The lower grades were sunbonnet babies and teacher Winnifred Burnham was Mother Goose to 60 goslings. Nine of the older girls danced a Highland Fling as an orchestra provided music.

Principal Ruth Fisher was there with teachers Burnham, Martha Grant and Mattie Crocker.

Ethel Sargent was the May Queen and fellow students did the May pole dance around her. And then came ice cream and cake for all, provided by Mrs. Whitney — a gala day.

Old timers will remember a large boulder, naturally split, being hauled from the

Boston Road area to provide the granite marker which reads: "Whitney Playground - 1910." Six horses dragged the boulder to its new location.

Recently, the St. Onge family, in memory of son Richard T., has added more equipment to the Whitney playground in the form of giant cement animals, a big Swiss cheese with plenty of holes for real young folk to climb through, and a thrilling slide.

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