



Photo courtesy of June W. Kennedy

The Abbot Worsted Company soccer team poses for a photo in the early years of this century. The company's semi-professional soccer, baseball and hockey teams reflected the solid support of company president John Abbot, who paid athletes a stipend and hired special trains to convey them to matches in Bedford, Fall River, Pawtucket and Holyoke.

Abbot employees took time out to enjoy sporting competition

By June W. Kennedy

Abbot Worsted Mill in Forge Village not only provided employment for a large segment of the town's population, its management also took a paternalistic interest in the employees' needs after working hours.

In an interview nearly 20 years ago, a former Abbot employee and founding member of the company's soccer team, Billy Kelly, recalled: "Everybody loved Mr. Jack Abbot. Under his care we had free doctors and a hospital. He rented the Company houses; charged \$6 a month in those days. During a slack period when we were only working four days, he'd only take half rent — and you wouldn't have to make it up either.

"Oh, he was a generous man. I know he used to ask me once or twice at Christmas time, 'Billy, do you know anybody in the village or in the town that's up against it?' He really was very charitable.

"Jack Abbot loved sports too. The hockey rink was right across the street from my house [Elks Club]. That rink was only a few feet shorter than the Gar-

den [Boston]. Dartmouth played there. Harvard played there. Not in the league — it was kind of a friendly thing.

"There was baseball in Graniteville and soccer in Forge Village. The soccer field was laid out by the same people who laid out Braves' Field in Boston. It was the best drained field, laid with tile. The grass was like velvet.

"Abbot Worsted had a professional soccer team, you know. I remember taking Jack Abbot to see the soccer game between Bethlehem Steel and Fall River. That day he saw soccer played the way it should be. 'Well, Billy,' he said, 'What are we gonna' do? I want a soccer team.'

"I was the only one in Forge who could play soccer. I hadn't been away from England too long then, so I got in touch with two or three fellows: Bob Perry...I went down to meet him at the boat; Billy McDade, one of the best players in the country, and Lawrence Kane, both from the Irish Internationals. Well, that's how it got started.

"I was the manager of the team, and I played, too. We played from 1919 'til 1926. All

the players were imported to work in the mills and play on the team both. Most of the men were already in this country. They'd come from England, Ireland and Scotland. One, Jack Dundas, was born in Australia.

"Weekly wages for the team's players was \$35 a week, and they didn't even have to work hard. Mr. Abbot only charged them \$5 a month for rent, and he put two women in there for housekeeping.

"Every Tuesday the team went out to do calisthenics and on Thursdays to do their training.

"It really was professional soccer. As many as 400 people would leave Forge Village aboard special trains headed for games in Fall River, Pawtucket or Holyoke. Workers got permission from the state to work a half hour overtime each night so they could go to these games.

"You know, three times we were beaten in the Eastern finals. This cup started out ocean to ocean, about 1800 teams in this competition. They played it in sections. We were the Easterners.

"Oh, yes, I remember the dis-

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appointed crowd of 2500 when Shawsheen Woolen Company beat us 2-1 in the Eastern finals. We were three times a bridesmaid, but never a bride.

"Forge Village was the sportiest town in America — soccer, baseball, hockey, bowling alleys, all in that little village. Tuesday and Saturday night there were movies. Oh, there was just a little rivalry between Brookside [Nabnasset] and Graniteville. Uptown Westford seemed superior, looked down on those who had to work for a living.

"But the mill people were honest, hard-working and fun-loving...and neighborly, too. If you were sick, they'd have the chicken soup right there. Oh, and the old mill bell sounded 9 o'clock curfew for all the village children too.

"With the closing of the Abbot Mill in 1956, it was the end of something beautiful. People who wasn't here at the time couldn't understand what a place this was!"

June Kennedy is a Westford resident and author of "Westford Recollections", a series of historical vignettes and photos.

May 4, 1989