



Photo courtesy of June W. Kennedy

A hazy summer day some 70 years ago provides the backdrop for the Abbot Worsted Company Band. The band, outfitted and supported by Abbot Worsted Company in Forge Village just after World War I, reflected the social concerns of the benevolent company for its employees.

Abbot's paternalism painted town with countless benefits

By June Kennedy

Some 20 years after the Abbot Worsted Company sold its Forge Village mill building to Murray Printing Company in 1956, people still could vividly recollect the positive impact of John C. Abbot's paternalistic business.

Richard Hall recalled: "Abbot Worsted Company had an Abbot Hall — a social building for its workers at each of its mill sites. They became known as Murray Hall in Forge Village (torn down in 1980), the Legion Hall in Graniteville and Fletcher Club in Nabnasset.

"Back in the 20's they had silent movies. Boy! No words can describe the mayhem that took place at the old serials like Pearl White. I remember the 'Clutch in Hand'. Poor Pearl White was being strangled by the Clutch in Hand, terrible monster.

"Hilda, a cousin of mine, once got so excited she stood right up in her chair, shook her fist to the screen and said, 'G-D-I You let her alone!'

"Then there was an ol' fella that came in there. He'd get all excited. You could see a big ring of empty seats around him; he'd get spittin' on the floor.

"I'm telling you, it was worth a \$10 bill just to go to the movies every night. We had a good piano player. Regina McLenna was the pianist. She could make every mood come out just the way you'd want it to...just perfect.

"That makes me think. We used to have occasionally a vaudeville act come out from the big city, come to the hick town for a show.

"We had some pretty smart boys in the village at the time. There was one of these escape artists came out one night. He was supposed to be put in a straight jacket — all chained up and put in some kind of a meal sack. He had so many minutes to get out and free himself.

"Well, he asked for volunteers from the audience to come up and put him in this outfit. Some of the boys had it all prearranged. There were padlocks all over the thing, and just as fast as they put these padlocks on, they'd fill the keyholes up with gum.

"They got him all in the thing and he started. I think he'd be there yet if they hadn't let him loose. He was so mad he never came back to Graniteville, that fella.

"Also in this era, back in the '20s, Jack Abbot of the Abbot Worsted Company was one of the best loved men in the community. Quite a sportsman, he organized a baseball team right after World War I.

"The present ball park in Graniteville at that time was equal to or better than any of the major league parks. That is absolute fact. It was just beautiful.

"He had a crew of men working there all week long during the summer — even had an underground water system. The infield and outfield were like a golf green — big pine forest all around it.

"People came from all around just to see the park. It was one of those rarities. He put a lot of money into it. Unfortunately the seating capacity wasn't very great. It would seat about 2500 people with bleachers all around. But I have seen the time at some of the games — and automobiles were really scarce in the '20s — when you could hardly find a parking space in Graniteville.

"As every year went by, Mr. Abbot built up the team like a

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major league club. They belonged to the Greater Boston Twilight League. Even had a little world series. These teams were either young fellas going up to the major leagues or old fellas coming down.

"I remember Dixie Walker playing in Graniteville. He was with the Brooklyn Dodgers. The Yuran Brothers — they went up to the major league in Detroit. Al Davidson struck out Leo Durocher four times in a row when he was in his prime; he pitched for Abbot. King Beta from Detroit played for Abbot's team.

"These were semi-professional ball players. Three nights a week they played ball in Graniteville in the leagues. It was their profession. What an interesting time! I'm glad I lived through it.

"Bob Coyne, the old cartoonist of the *Boston Post*, usually had a cartoon a week about Abbot's team. It was really major league stuff."

Bob Pineer recalled: "Abbot Worsted Company ran activities in Graniteville and Forge Village — same show, same night. Started in Graniteville a half hour before Forge. When the first reel was through, they trucked it quickly to Forge Village."

Florian Woltowicz remembered: "I don't think people realized how much Abbot Worsted Company did for its workers and the town. They maintained one of the best soccer teams in the country — field was in Forge. Players were imported from England and Australia. They used to run trains from Forge to different cities.

"Every year they'd put on a minstrel show in the old Abbot Hall; it was always good! The uniforms and instruments for the Abbot Worsted Band were maintained by the Company. There were many concerts. There were tennis and handball courts, a bowling alley, croquet and even a hockey team under lights.

"In fact, at the time I went to school, our teeth were taken care of free. Abbot paid for it. I remember having a tooth pulled for nothing at the Tavern where the Company had their hospital. Dr. Cowles had his office and dentist chair there. May Lord was nurse for years and years. A lot of free medical care and examinations were given to the mill workers."

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

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