

Rotary Riverview Park  
By J.J. Johnson 2017

Waupaca has a lot of wonderful parks. The city's first official park was South Park but one of our parks with an interesting history is the Rotary Riverview Park located behind the Main Street buildings along the fairly recently named Cooper Street. Cooper Street was named for Waupaca's first lawyer, William Cooper, whose wife is often accredited as being the first white woman to settle in what is now Waupaca. And, for the record, there is a Riverside Park located on Royalton Street. But the distinction of the two parks can be confusing as newspaper accounts over the years have called the Rotary Riverview Park both Riverview Park and Riverside Park although it was originally just called River Park. And the land that is now Rotary Riverview Park was not always land.

In the spring of 1850 a group of surveyors were laying out the wagon road that was expected to one day be the main street of the community. According to the records, the stakes for this road were found running four rods into one of the largest cornfields in the Indian Lands. It reportedly was about two acres in size and when you consider there were no modern machines back then it represented a lot of work. The settler who had planted the field was quite adamant about the surveyors moving their stakes off his land. When the surveyors explained they needed to run the road as marked in order not to have turns in the settlement's main road it meant nothing to the settler. They explained they could not run the road too close to the lake on the south end and they wanted enough room to allow for buildings on the east side with an alley behind the buildings so there would be access to the buildings from the rear. The settler essentially said he didn't care and as far as he was concerned they didn't need to have buildings on the east side of the road. In the end, the road was not laid out through his cornfield and while there was room on the north end of the main road it did not allow room for an alley behind the buildings. In fact the buildings were so close to the river's edge that it was reported that some store owners built outhouses that extended out from the back of their building and allowed wastes to fall into the river below.

The river was wide and looking at older maps at one point there was an island in the river and a later map shows two islands in the river. Charles Rollin Brainard in 1894 wrote about these islands. According to his account in the early 1850s there was one island in the river just below the eddies on the eastern side of the stream. The island was about an acre and a half in size and had great butternut trees that were probably a hundred years old. He told how the branches of the butternut trees dropped their branches over the banks and how the waters under these trees would be crowded with boys diving for the nuts that fell from the trees. By 1894 he noted the trees were gone and only shrubs remained on the island.

Regarding the second island, he said it had its beginnings in 1854. "The youngsters who were learning to swim drove a barrel stave into the bottom at about the middle of the stream, not daring to

venture clear across. Some brush lodged against the stave, silt accumulated, a spray of grass became lodged and being kissed by the sunlight, began to grow. Accretion followed accretion, until the second island was formed with the prospect of an early junction with the main land.”

We next learn of one of the islands in a biography of Thorwoldt and Anna Nelson. It relates that in the spring of 1898 they moved to a house at 211 North Division Street. “There was plenty of land for gardening, a barn for a pair of horses, with a stable beneath for a cow, an island for the cow to graze in the summer and a playground for the children. Thorwoldt built a small bridge to the island. On this island the children picked violets, climbed the butternut tree and had picnics with the neighborhood children. The children played house in a little box house that the boys had made.”

Thorwoldt made further use of the river as he cut and hauled logs to Waupaca. Once the ends were stamped with a brand to identify them as his when they reached the saw mill, he rolled the logs down the hill from Main Street just south of where the old city hall/fire department stood. In the spring, once the ice broke the logs would float downstream to the mill.

In a reminiscence by Lloyd D. Smith, he states that when he came to Waupaca in 1908 the city’s recreation and park facilities were comprised of “Peter Holst’s little private tennis court and South Park”.

In November of 1933 Mayor Gmeiner made a trip to Washington D.C. where he received promises that federal funds would be made available through the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.) to aid the city in straightening out the Waupaca River behind Main Street and in so doing construct a drive along the back of the business buildings along the river bank. The project narrowed the river and of course eliminated the islands however the top soil from them was scraped off to be used later to cover sand brought in to fill in portions of the river channel.

Peter Nelsen was the foreman for the project, Roy Knudsen worked on the sewers, Donald Taylor was the timekeeper and Bill Feathers was the “dynamite man” according to an article written by Verna Pryse in 1954 as one of Miss Kurkowski’s Junior Historian projects. In all the re-routing of the river gave employment to about seventy-five men. Money to pay the workers came from the Civil Works Administration (C.W.A.) program which allotted Waupaca County funds to cover wages to the men working approved W.P.A. projects.

Much of the sand used to fill in the area came from the Nick Larson farm southwest of Waupaca. Sand from his farm was also used to slightly reshape Shadow Lake when Highway K was straightened to eliminate six blind curves in a half mile of roadway. Additionally, O.L. Bestul of Scandinavia oversaw cutting trees down from a hill near the cemetery and sand from there was also hauled by truck to be used as filling in the old river bed. This was a first step in changing the riverbed as it was necessary to create a road so cars and trucks could drive down to the work area. Once the sand was delivered, Edsil Huntoon

and his crew shoveled the sand by hand, hauling it where needed in wheelbarrows, while Frank and Harry Hoaglin used their steam shovel to dig out the new water course of the Waupaca River.

Stone was brought in from the Sim Simpson farm to line the edge of the river and a Mr. Hougland ran gas shovels to break through the frost. The large numbers of trees in the area were cut down from where the new channel was to be redirected and the wood was taken to the jail where inmates cut it into stove wood. Once the trees had been removed Mr. Feathers blasted out the remaining stumps.

Supposedly none of the work done at this time affected Waupaca's foot bridge.

In March 1934 the city found itself in contention with the C.W.A. over funding for some of the bills incurred during the work to re-route the river. The C.W.A. stated their funds were to be used only for the labor involved in any project and that any supplies or materials needed were the responsibility of the community. The bills that were disallowed had not been part of the original budget for the river project were for items to handle situations not foreseen in planning the costs and arose through emergencies. Some of the items in question were costs for hay (and hauling it to the site) for John Lilteich, John West and C. Kruske in order to cover the ground to keep it from freezing during extreme cold weather; the steam hose to thaw the frozen ground, and supplies such as wheelbarrows, picks shovels and lumber, the latter items which had been purchased from the Wisconsin Public Service Corporation, Pioneer Hardware, Leader Hardware, Fullerton Lumber Company, and the Fuller Goodman Company.

In all the disputed bills amounted to \$1,185.62 which even if the city ended up having to pay, the costs saved by the city by the C.W.A. (Civil Works Administration) hiring the workers, which removed them from the city's relief lists, still would have saved the city money over all even without the benefit of the river being changed to allow for land behind the Main Street buildings.

In the first week of April, with the work along the Waupaca River barely being completed, the area was hit with a weekend of heavy snowfall, followed by two days of pelting rain. Waters overflowed the newly created channel and "lapped again at the back windows of a dozen stores". Both the Water Street and Shearer Street dams overflowed and flooding was reported all along the Waupaca River – in fact across about half of Wisconsin - but at the Shearer Street dam it was noted that with the river changed so that it no longer ran up against the buildings, the previous accumulations of beer bottles, tomato cans and waste paper that used to accumulate at the Shearer Street dam no longer created issues as businessmen apparently were no longer just tossing their trash out the back window and into the river to be washed away.

In the beginning of May in 1935 the city received a federal grant to landscape the new river park. A horticulturist from the University of Wisconsin was hired to draw up plans and bids were let for nursery materials once the plan was received. In anticipation of the landscaping project, relief workers

were hired to start seeding and rolling the area. Additionally the city council allocated \$400 to the park board for use at South Park and the new river park.

On November 7, 1935 the Waupaca County Post announced: “Waupaca’s perennial project, a suitable skating rink for youngsters, was farther ahead this week than in previous years at this season, when the council acted favorably on a Junior Chamber of Commerce resolution asking that a rink be built on the new city park known as the river project.” The resolution presented to the board asked that the JayCee organization be allowed to do surveys and develop plans for a rink. Permission was given and two members of the city council asked to be a part of the planning stage in anticipation of being able to provide a rink large enough that younger children and hockey players could have enough space to enjoy the ice without any conflict or danger of an accident or injury to anyone. This was a welcome change in attitude on the part of the council which had denied the JayCeers permission to set up a rink in the new river park the previous year.

The rink was obviously a success as Robert Babin in his autobiography entitle “My Boyhood In Waupaca”, recalled that two W.P.A. workers, Algee Zimmerman and a Mr. Hoppe, “set up a fine, well-lighted ice-skating rink each winter for several years on the flat land down next to the river behind the old city hall. There folks of all ages could ice skate all day and well into the evening. We boys had some rousing hockey games and skating races there over the years, and our school hockey team played its home games there.”

The rink reportedly was used by more than 700 Waupaca youngsters and adults, many of them coming multiple times to enjoy the chance to skate at the new site. During the last week of January 1936 a survey of its usage showed that in the week there had been 829 people on the ice: 358 boys, 197 girls, 127 men, 77 women and 70 spectators.

In that summer the American Legion sponsored a free carnival that was set up in River Park. The carnival put on two shows, a Hawaiian and Mickey Mouse show, included rides for the youngsters, games for men and women, and refreshments. The park was chosen as it was centrally located and kept pedestrians and cars of attendees out of the downtown traffic. Reports of circuses being held in the park are also recorded.

In October 1937 the recreational director for the W.P.A. sponsored a “Ghost party” in the park. As part of the festivities a bonfire was held on the river playground at 6:00 p.m. which was followed by a “smoke dance”, ending at the city hall where the people played games, sang songs, took part in harmless stunts and generally had a good time.

It was in 1939 that the then Riverside playground had a number of new activities added for the enjoyment of the community. A badminton court was put in and a basketball court set up. A game called

“tree golf” was introduced and became quite popular with the youths. Even with these new features, Riverside Park retained areas for horseshoes, tennis, softball, croquet, and the other stand-by activities.

Over the years Waupaca has tried many things to help with the parking situation downtown. In September 1948 an ordinance was passed restricting a number of the business streets to one hour parking limits between 8:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. on weekdays and from 8:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. on Saturdays with Sundays and holidays being open parking. To also help with the parking problem, the city council announced that there would be additional free parking in the lot behind city hall. The entrance to the lot was on the north side of city hall and the area had been lighted and up-graded for this purpose. At the time of the announcement the only item not yet completed to make parking convenient for patrons was the construction of a ramp going up to Main Street, but it was in process of being constructed.

A movement was begun in 2001 to make improvements to Riverview Park. The idea was to do the changes in two phases with a total estimated cost of \$900,000. The first phase involved putting in a stairway/ramp, an amphitheater and a brick shoreline to improve fishing. The cost was expected to run about \$300,000 but the city was able to obtain a DNR (Department of Natural Resources) grant which would give matching funds – thereby the grant would provide \$150,000 if the city provided an equal amount. It was hoped that this phase would be completed in time for the 2002 Riverfest celebration held annually in the park in July but the one bid for the job in April came in over budget, delaying the process.

There were some concerns that it might be better to obtain new playground equipment for the park rather than spending so much on the proposed stairway and ramp, amphitheater, fish outcroppings and canoe launch while others felt that the city should not spend money improving the park until the business owners fixed up the backside of their buildings. Alderman James Boyer went so far as to remark that the backs of the buildings made the area look like a ghetto.

By August the Waupaca fire department had also expressed concerns over the east side of the buildings in that there were numerous power lines, electric and telephone, going to the buildings from utility poles in the park. If the city were going to go ahead and make extensive improvements to the area they hoped to address the problems presented by the wires. While the buildings appeared to only have two floors when looked at from Main Street many of them were actually four stories high on the back side of the structure and many of the buildings did not have fire escapes. The wires hampered their ability to use the aerial ladder truck to rescue people in the case of a fire. The Firehouse Apartment building and the Riverview Coffee Haus had buried cable wires and the department hoped to see the wires to all the buildings buried. In the dark it was hard for firefighters to distinguish between a phone wire and an electric wire. They pointed out that they estimated that over the previous ten years there had “been at least five fires in downtown Waupaca, two of which resulted in fatalities” and that since the department

had purchased the aerial ladder truck around 1997 it had used the equipment at three fires, “including the fire that decimated downtown Iola in June 1999.”

In August the Finance Committee approved \$42,000 to bury the utility lines but they “still needed \$4,000 worth of work on three private buildings” according to City Administrator Henry Veleker. Of that amount the city hoped the owners of the buildings would pick up half the cost and was seeking some private donations to help cover the other half. Of the \$42,000 the DNR increased the total amount allowed for Phase I to \$500,000 of which the cost of burying the utility wires was included. The city’s matching amount was drawn from the Facilities Planning Account which was budgeted for consultant and architectural fees to remodel the armory for the police and fire departments.

The city actually had three years to spend the matching grant but hoped to complete the first phase in 2002 so again advertised for bids in June with hopes of completing that portion of the improvements by November. By this time, however, it was learned that the city would either need to obtain an additional piece of property or change where the staircase would be built.

At any rate, bids were let out and this time six bids were received. Three of these were disqualified due to technical difficulties. From the remaining three the city accepted the bid from Boldt Construction of Appleton and Phase I of the improvements to the park was scheduled to begin in the middle of August with an expected completion date around mid to late November. Boldt Construction began working on the ramp and stairway in late September. They started putting in a block retaining wall on the 26<sup>th</sup> but when they returned to work the next day they found the block had moved several inches due to the sand base being unable to support the weight of the structure as it was designed. All work was stopped and the city administrator and the council were notified of the problem. The city council approved up to \$4,000 to be paid the K. Singh & Associates to make three borings of the soil and based on these results city officials, engineers and others met to determine their options. Some options discussed were estimated to cost up to \$90,000, \$27,000 of which would be the city’s share.

City Administrator Henry Veleker presented three options to the Finance Committee in May of 2003, approximately seven months after work on the project had ceased. The options were to either abandon the improvements to the park altogether, divert the funds to other projects such as playground equipment and such or continue to create a ramp and stairway using a different design. After examining the situation the committee recommended that the city continue with the projects in Phase One with a new design that eliminated the staircase/rampway design and instead consisted of a three-tiered concrete rampway that could make use of the archway for the Main Street entrance that had already been constructed and was sitting in storage.

The additional land needed was ultimately purchased from Darlene Shaffer and Pophams. There was also some thought of purchasing the buildings that housed the Miller Insurance Agency and Vernae’s

Beauty Salon in order to expand the amount of public property going down to the present park which would help develop a shared dumpster area or a small plaza for public seating but that did not materialize.

By April 2003 the city had spent about \$194,000 for the work Boldt Construction had completed prior to September 27. While Alderman Boyer was concerned that the city recover monies spent with what he stated were “no results”, City Administrator Veleker assured the council that expenditures to that date were for work that had to be completed even if the design were changed. Work for the design itself, and the redesign, had been donated as a result of the consultants and contractors for the project. Boldt Construction, K. Singh & Associates and Jewell & Associates agreed to absorb all costs associated with Phase I work that could not be used in the new updated design. They did this not only to be good partners but also to avert any liability claim the city might make and thus the situation had not cost the city anything. As far as redirecting the funds to any of the other options, the city looked for a decision by the end of May to learn if the DNR grant would even cover half the cost to divert the funds’ use in another option. Also, much of the work accomplished already had been donated by Waupaca companies. The donated work included the “time and machinery to remove the old asphalt and grade the lot in preparation for seeding”, “all the poured-in-place concrete for the project, and reduced costs to bury the electrical lines and feeds to the buildings.

Additionally \$13,500 dollars had been donated by Main Street Waupaca from their Mardi Gras dinner and Garden Walk. These funds were designated for use in landscaping the park as well as helping some businesses with the cost of upgrading their electrical services as a result of burying the electrical and cable lines. Altogether these efforts amounted to almost \$40,000, all of which were applicable toward the DNR’s matching grant as long as work done to the park met the grant requirements.

With the delays issues regarding the upgrade caused some controversy in the community. Concerns over the possibility of raised taxes was countered with the idea with improvements made to businesses adjoining the park would bring additional money to the tax roll. Some wanted a referendum due to the controversy over constructing the ramp system while others said if the city had to hold a referendum every time there was differing opinions on the council’s decision it would not only increase costs, delay completion but basically nothing would ever get accomplished. And another group asserted that if the city turned down the project they would lose the grant money which would then go to another community. Then there were those who pointed out that the city would need to obtain additional land or change the plans. This was helped when the Common Council approved an additional grant whereby if the city spent an additional \$160,000 between 2003 and 2006 it would receive \$80,000 back from the DNR. This allowed the project to continue to move forward and as Veleker pointed out, with the donated work and monies the city would only be liable for a minimal amount of actual monies to pay out to reach

a total valuation of \$210,000 for which it would receive \$500,000 worth of work. He further noted that this would give the city a “140 percent return on its investment”.

Separate from Boldt’s bid for the rampway was \$17,162 to construct an amphitheater, \$12,676 for the canoe launch and \$9,474 for fish outcrops. Altogether there were four firms involved in the Phase I project: Boldt Construction, Schreiber/Anderson; K. Singh & Associates and Jewel & Associates. Another firm later contacted the city offering to donate the equipment and labor to do the parts of the project not involved with the ramp itself if the city covered just the cost of the materials but when it was brought up to the council on June 3, 2003 Mayor Brian Smith voiced concerns about whether the city would be able to do the parts of phase one not part of the rampway as it sounded to him like the city was not getting the amount of improvements it had approved for the money that was appropriated for the park improvements. It was decided that staff could negotiate with the various firms involved to ensure the full Phase One items could be accomplished.

Ultimately all of the components of Phase One were completed and the city was able to move on to working on Phase Two. This second phase called for the construction of a pedestrian bridge to replace the existent foot bridge over the Waupaca River, sidewalks within the park, increased lighting and additional landscaping. These improvements were expected to run about \$575,000 of which the city’s share would be about \$115,000, which meant the state’s grant would cover about 80 percent of the cost. Phase Two went much more smoothly and construction was completed in 2004.

The foot bridge over the Waupaca River had long been a part of Waupaca’s history. In Ware’s History of Waupaca County he records: “The only bridge the stream could boast was made of fallen trees with all their branches intact, piled together above the falls, and the pedestrian steadied himself by holding onto the branches as he scrambled over.” It wasn’t until October 31, 1874 that Christian Johnson, Thomas Paine and Hakon Nordvi petitioned the city to build a foot bridge across the river, near Rosche’s Pioneer Foundry. After receiving approval to look into costs for the project they re-met with the village board on November 6 which approved \$25 to erect a bridge near Division Street. The bridge “was to be four feet wide with a strong railing.” There was a poll tax to aid with the expenses but families too poor to pay the tax were exempted.

It appears this bridge remained in use until August 1884. This bridge had “a bent with iron braces on each side”. It was noted that not only would the bridge be a convenience for those wanting to cross the river but be enjoyed by moonlight strollers. An article in 1910 confirms that the bridge was heavily used by “lovers of all ages oblivious of the world around them” and by small boys dropping in fishing lines or just tossing in stones to watch the fishes scurry around in response to the disturbance to the waters.



In 1909 a movement was begun to again replace the existent foot bridge and in February 1910 bids were let for this purpose. It was interesting that bids had to be accompanied by a bond or by a certified check of 5% of the amount of the bid. In a history of the foot bridge found in the Waupaca Record there was a note that at some point after the fallen tree was replaced there had been a wagon bridge (perhaps the reason for a poll tax) that was used by farmers taking their produce to town and returning to their farm with items they had purchased while in town. This wagon bridge was replaced with the 1884 bridge. The single bid that came in was for \$440 and the Board of Public works felt the city could build the bridge itself for \$331.36. The Waupaca Republican reported that when the bridge was constructed in 1910 the city also improved the “south approach by grading the hill and filling in along the river bank where the path was often wet.”

Although not part of any of the WPA projects the city received, it did “fix up” the foot bridge in the early to mid-1940’s. Eventually this bridge was replaced but the bridge was shut down around 2012 when the city’s insurance company expressed safety concerns caused by the river undercutting the abutments.

The following announcement appeared in the Waupaca County Post on October 19, 2006: “The Waupaca Rotary Breakfast Club, which raised funds for a metal sculpture and playground equipment, held a dedication ceremony at Riverview Park Wednesday, October 11. The sculpture was made by ThyssanKrupp Waupaca Foundry and the brick walkway around the sculpture was built with funds raised by members of the community.”

The fishing opportunities in the park were further improved after Trout Unlimited contacted Al Neibur at the Department of Natural Resources in regards to creating a demonstration area where they could promote trout habitat management and ecology. The DNR was contacted in regard to Trout Unlimited’s proposal as it stocks between 3,000 and 6,000 trout in the Waupaca River each year. In part this park was selected as the Waupaca River is considered one of the prime trout streams in central Wisconsin. The goal of the project was to develop a trout habitat demonstration area for educational purposes, to improve the habitat for numerous fish species by adding bank covers, mid-channel boulders and a mid-channel island and to allow access for physically challenged anglers by developing access points for them. The project involved no costs to the city while promoting use of the park.