

Early History of South Park
By J.J. Johnson 2016

Just as the women of our community were instrumental in our city being awarded a Carnegie Library so we can thank them for their early efforts in improving this wonderful location as this park has truly been a work in progress – the latest improvement being this beautiful new shelter building we are now enjoying. What we consider as “South Park” basically consisted of three different sections.

Back in the days when Waupaca’s business section ended at what is now Fulton Street, the upper portion of South Park was known as Wright’s Grove, it being part of the property owned Charles Wright (who served as the president of the village board of trustees and was the first mayor of the City of Waupaca). Wright’s Grove was basically the upper level of the park. It was a popular gathering place for civic gatherings, many organizations’ state-wide gatherings, horse traders and gypsy encampments when they came through the area.

In 1884 the City Council decided to obtain grounds for a city park before all suitable land for such a purpose was converted to other use – and while land were still reasonable inexpensive. Wright’s Grove with its naturally wooded land and near access to Big Lake (Shadow Lake) and Judson’s Lake (Mirror Lake) was a natural choice. The lower portion of South Park was owned by the Browne family and was separated by a fence that had been erected by the Browne family to protect their property from horses girdling the trees, campfires that got out of control and people cutting large trees to obtain wood. They had even hired a man several summers to set out young trees and protect the area from fires.

Wright’s Grove was widely used by groups for various functions, but remained in its natural state until about 1906 when the Woman’s Club started a campaign to improve the area into an actual “park”. Their efforts were somewhat stymied as the grounds did not have a water system in place but did receive permission from the City Council to make what changes they could. The first work began in the spring of 1907 when work days were organized with husbands being volunteered to assist in the project. That year brush was cleared and trees and shrubs were planted.

With some gentle persuasion by their wives, in the spring of 1908 the City Council appropriated funds to make improvements to the park. Mayor Gurley appointed a Waupaca City Park Commission which consisted of five members and appropriated \$300.00 for their use. The first thing the Park Commission did was hire a landscape gardener from the University of Wisconsin, to create plans and specifications for the park, which included the addition of a bandstand in the southeast corner (where our shelter house now stands). They also installed a water system and put in a basic drive around the grove but work on the grounds itself were done by volunteers under the direction of the Civic and Forestry committee, a joint committee of members of the Monday Night Club and Woman’s Club.

Work days were planned once a week and notices were placed in the County Post asking people to show up with shovels and rakes. People were asked to bring any spare maple, elm, basswood or butternut trees to the park for planting. Between times people were asked to drop off flowers, shrubs and vines. W.H. Laabs held the distinction of laying out the plans and planting the first shrubs. Of the thirty-five trees planted there were about twenty-five maples donated by A.D. Barnes and five small pines trees were donated by Sam Taylor and planted by Will Ware and Carl Jaeger. A fence ran along the property and vines were planted along its entire length as was a bed of dahlias. Three other flower beds were also planned which were to be tended by the club women throughout the summer.

J. Peter Johnson donated a hitching post and people were asked not to hitch their animals to the trees or fence in order to protect the new plantings. Mayor Gurley offered to furnish grass seed for the entire park but Ole Hole donated twelve quarts of grass seed towards this project. To assist the women, S. Klein hired a man for a day to do whatever work the women wanted done. To make the park more user friendly Mrs. E.E. Browne, Mrs. H.R. Roberts and the Central Lumber Company donated materials to make benches for visitors to the park to enjoy.

Around the end of May of 1909 the Woman's Club decided it would like the park to have a fountain similar to the one located at the Wisconsin Veteran's Home and began to raise funds for this purpose. To install the fountain would cost about \$200.00 of which only \$62 in donations had been collected by August. To raise the remaining amount it was thought that the women would donate the money from selling coffee at the annual Potato Bake and while they did not make enough to cover the entire remaining amount needed, it was close enough that other donations completed the task. The Park Commission hired Professor Standstein to draw plans calling for a fountain to be placed in the center of the park. To protect the grass the plan called for gravel walks to be placed from each of the four corners of the park to the fountain where they would merge into a gravel walk encircling the fountain itself. It was further suggested that benches be placed along these walks.

While waiting for donations for the fountain the Park Commission was not idle. They put in a new drive and added a drinking fountain. A dozen hydrangeas were planted along with a dozen pink and white peonies. A large bed of red geraniums were planted in the center of the park and two half circles beds of bridal wreaths were added. The lawn was placed in condition and a few trees and shrubs were planted.

It was also in 1909 that the Park Commission officially named the grounds "South Park".

Apparently the Potato Bake was a success as by mid-June 1910 the park had its fountain. The Park Commission ordered it Chicago, H. Ebbe donated his time to put it in and Chris Peterson constructed the sixteen foot diameter basin which was then set off with a crushed stone walk for \$150. With the fountain in, many more plants and shrubs were added to enhance its scenic beauty.

On May 13th, 1912, for the first time, lights were turned on at South Park.

The lower portion of land that bordered the lakes was owned by the Browne family. The city had a temporary arrangement with the Browne family that allowed the public to use their land for swimming and hundreds took advantage of their generosity. The Browne's did not mind the people using the land but did not want to relinquish ownership of the land. In 1913 there was a growing interest in purchasing this land to obtain legal access to the lakes and officially add on to the park grounds. At the spring election in 1914 the matter of whether or not to purchase the land was put before the voters. The results showed that a large majority of the voters favored purchasing the land from the Browne family even if it became necessary to commence condemnation proceedings. Nathan Cohen offered to build two bath houses if the city secured the land between South Park and Shadow Lake. It was proposed to Congressman and Mrs. Browne that they donate the land to the city for use as a park with the agreement that the land would revert back to them if the public ever stopped using it as a park. As part of that agreement it was offered to change the park's name to "Browne Park" but the family turned this offer down as they did not want to give up ownership of the land. They did give the city permission to put up two bath houses for patrons as long as people did not have any fires or harm the young trees as had been done by gypsies and horse traders and caused them to erect a fence between the park on the upper land and their property along the lakes. Some reports indicate that the city did erect the buildings in the summer of 1914.

In July of 1916 there were two reports regarding putting up bath houses for those who wanted to use the beach. The Waupaca County Post reported in the issue of the 6th that Dr. Chandler had led a group of citizens in putting up a bathing house on the east side of the channel that connected the two lakes and added a small bridge over the channel to aid people going to the lake. In the next issue, it reported that William Peterson designed a bathing house, for use by the public, and with the aid of his brother J.P. and Andrew Anderson (along with others who supplied lumber and labor) built a dressing room bordering the swimming area on his property on Berlin Street. Peterson allowed anyone to use the bathing house as long as they did not vandalize the building through graffiti or whittling.

In 1920 there was another push, this time by the Waupaca Chamber of Commerce Association, to purchase the Browne land along the lakes. E.E. Browne offered to sell the property – for park purposes only – for \$3,000. In July the Common Council accepted these terms and E.E. responded that he needed to bring the matter up to his wife, who was the actual owner of the property. However through a mix-up in communications the matter seemed

to have gotten dropped. He said when he was not re-contacted by the Council he thought the matter was ended and so did not mention the negotiations to his wife. When the Council tried contacting Rose Browne directly, it was learned she was on an ocean cruise until October and that E.E. was to be busy on the campaign trail so matters would have to wait until November.

When Rose finally did respond it was a definite refusal to sell the land. She had purchased it with the intent of building a retirement home at some time and felt the land would have been destroyed as one of Waupaca's beauty spots had she not stepped in and taken control of it. She added that shortly after she had purchased the property she had deeded two strips of land "with the expressed written understanding that the city construct a sidewalk on the west side of the park and that water mains be extended to the property. Neither obligation had been fulfilled." She added that she felt the present park area was sufficient for the city's needs and that the city would be better off spending their funds on other public improvements. She closed asking that the city consider the matter closed.

The Common Council responded that the land had been part of an exchange and not a gift from the Browne family. In fact, Rose had gotten more land than the two strips she had turned over – one of which had been a street as she also received a guarantee that all laid out streets would be closed forever in that area. When the Civic and Commerce Association requested that the Council begin proceedings to condemn the land in February 1921, the Council agreed. Rose then reconsidered her position and advised the Council she would sell the beach area and the wooded prominence for the originally proposed \$3,000. Things should have calmed down at that point but it was discovered that during the course of the discussions, Rose had sold a portion of the land off for \$700 and there was some thought that that amount of money should be deducted from the sale price but in March of 1921 the city agreed to pay the full \$3,000 and discontinue the condemnation proceedings.

Getting back to the upper area of South Park, during the mid to late 1910's the Yellowstone Trail Association was increasing its efforts through the state. Waupaca fought for and was granted the right to be part of this national advertising program designed to increase tourism to the communities along the route. So successful was the program over the years that the city instituted a free camp ground adjacent to and south of the developed portion of South Park to accommodate travelers and get them to spend more time - and money - in Waupaca. The campsite was located on the lands lying adjacent to and south of the original South Park and in September 1921 received high praises from the Yellowstone Trail Association. Their representatives stated the campsite was an asset to Waupaca's slogan: "Waupaca's Worth While" adding "The camp, itself, is certainly a splendid one and you can well be proud of it as from all that I have learned in coming in contact with tourists (people who have staid there), they are high in their praise of the camp."

The campground was a great advertising tool for the community. A local businessman who was on vacation in South Dakota was approached by another traveler who saw the name Waupaca on the businessman's car and said, "I want to meet you because you're from that town in Wisconsin where they have that wonderful camp site." But despite the great reviews by visitors, around 1924 there were a lot of reports of pilfering, buildings being broken into and various violations of park rules and a controversy arose over whether the city should close the camp altogether or charge a user's fee to the campers. On a conservative estimate the campsite brought in \$70,000 a season to the community and businessmen suggested rather than closing the camp it might be better for the community to keep it open but charge fifty cents per vehicle per night. The money would make the camp self-supporting while paying for night security. The campsite caretaker, Mr. Thomas, was not able to handle everything alone and it was decided to appoint someone to keep an eye on things at night and assist during the day hours from the fee. This person was given full police powers and was advised to arrest anyone who committed problems at the campsite, park and beach.

Besides the issue before the city council over whether or not to charge visitors at the campsite, a referendum was placed before the public to decide if \$1,000 should be appropriated toward the improvement of the

camp. The monies would be used towards sanitary facilities, cooking facilities and the proper disposal of garbage - items that would improve the park for residents and campers alike. The referendum passed by a large majority.

A fire in 1925 damaged a lot of the trees in the upper park area, including over 70 pines ranging from five to fifteen feet in height. Part of the improvements to the park in 1926 included trimming the dead trees along with clearing and raking the grounds. In the middle of the camp site the city added a covered four range kitchen and six picnic tables were placed throughout the park. Down at the lake, the beach dock was repaired and even improved. To improve the appearance a Spirea Van Hutti hedge was planted to separate the campsite from the park proper but until it was fully grown the fence would remain in place.

By 1926 the fifty cent nightly fee brought in enough revenue to provide the park with police protection at the park and beach area (by Morgan Skinner), telephone service, use of the kitchen and clean toilet facilities.

In 1928 Winfield Mix was in charge of the campsite. Most of the improvements made centered on the beach area in the form of a new dock, diving board and two new floats. Seats were added for those who chose to watch the swimmers enjoying the water.

The early 1930s saw a lot of changes to South Park. Early in 1931 the American Legion's Auxiliary had a concrete platform put in front of the door of the woman's bath house and included twenty-one wide concrete steps going down to the beach. The steps made it much easier to go up and down the hillside and alleviated the discomfort of walking up and down on the burning sands. They also had Chris Peterson repair the large slide as it had been hard on the children's hands for many years.

A controversy arose around August 1931 over the road leaving the city on the south side by the new park. Originally, County Trunk K was not laid out in its present position. In checking the Sanborn map of 1909 Lake, Brown, Tioga, Junction and South Streets ran one block west of Washington Street (up to the swamp area). Main and Washington Streets extended two blocks south of Junction Street. South Street ran the same length as Junction Street. Leaving the city, there were numerous kinks in the road as indicated by this portion of the Sanborn map. The county road then went over what the local newspaper termed as "the famous old 'cemetery hill' which [was] too steep to maintain economically and included three blind hill curves. It is thought that the land deeded to the city earliest by Rose Browne contained the land south of Junction Street.

The idea was to run County K along the west side of the park, making a gentle curve through the swamp that would rejoin the old road that ran around the lake. To do this would eliminate the sharp curves near the old dumping ground and around cemetery hill. It would then go past where Nick Larson had a farm, across the sand hill. Cutting into the hill along the curves would provide the material needed to fill in the area through the swamp and the depression located a little further south to create a solid base upon which to build the more level and gently curved road.

Some citizens wanted the road built on undeveloped city property which ran more north and east of the proposed route through the park lands. Examination of these plans showed that moving the road that way would result in a number of road hazards and after much debate it was agreed to have the road rerouted through a portion of the park. Additionally, using park lands would cost the city less than half the cost of the proposed route through the other city property. Even after the decision was made, there were those who were not happy with the ultimate choice.

In the Waupaca paper on October 22, 1931 it was reported, "Several days ago a destructive fire spread over a portion of what is popularly known as Waupaca camp site for no other reason than a failure to clean up brush and rubbish that had been permitted to accumulate from year to year. "Several acres of timber land to the southwest of the camp site and a portion of the tract purchased from Congressman Browne Had that wooded tract been trimmed up a year ago so the citizens of Waupaca could walk about and comprehend its beauty and possibilities of further improvement, we venture there never would have been any proposal to relocate county trunk K through that city property."

During the great depression Waupaca received many Works Progress Administration (WPA) projects. At South Park local men built sidewalks and cleared brush. In the cleared land the men planted more than one hundred and fifty trees. They also removed over forty wagon loads of stumps from “mosquito hollow” and leveled the land. Antique-styled bridges were built over the creeks that ran through the hollows leading to Shadow Lake. On the north end of Shadow Lake several loads of sand were added to the beach and both of the bath houses were moved further up the hill with concrete floors added.

In 1934 the Jaces, Lions, American Legion, Monday Night Club and Association of Commerce joined forces to ask the city to discontinue the campsite and instead use the land more exclusively for a park and playground for local residents. In presenting their request Tom Browne, son of E.E. and Rose Browne, argued that over the years the better class of tourists have changed to staying over at hotels, cabins and tourist homes and was now being used more by “auto gypsies” and drifters. Despite their united front, the controversy over the park’s usage was still on-going in 1938 as many felt that the park could easily cater to both the local children and tourist. It is not known at this time just when the campground was discontinued.

In September, 1936 the change in the location of county trunk K was finally made. With the use of a big Diesel tractor and a scoop trailer (a small tractor with a snowplow arrangement) sand was taken from the hill between Nick Larson’s farm and the cemetery. The hill had previously been cut back when the WPA project to relocate the Waupaca river behind Main street was in process and needed a lot of sand as fill behind the buildings. Sand removed at this time was pushed into Shadow Lake. At the end of the project “six blind curves in a half mile of roadway” had been eliminated.

In 1955 Waupaca’s Volunteer Fire Department did purchase and install playground equipment for South park and the following year the built a new bath house at the campsite.

The city allowed the Waupaca Historical Society to locate the recently purchased Hutchinson house on the upper level of South Park as a city museum in 1956.

In 1958 subcommittees were created from the Jaces, Lions, American Legion, Monday Night Club and Association of Commerce to consider solutions to the over-crowding. Each group was to present their organization’s ideas for the future use of South Park. They took into consideration a playground area, picnic area, swimming beach, etc. Once their ideas were formulated the members of the subcommittees got together to merge the best ideas into a final development plan.

So prevalent was the over-crowding on weekends by the crowds of people, traffic and parking problems that cars filled the park’s parking lot and spilled over onto the city streets, often blocking the driveways of residents in the south end of town. To help control the situation two of Waupaca’s Auxiliary Policemen were hired to work at the park every Sunday through the Labor Day weekend. Additionally that summer an 85-car parking lot was constructed in the lower western area of the park. Part of the idea was to try to separate the pedestrian and traffic congestion. On one Sunday there were over 200 cars parked throughout the park.

In 1997 a new bath house was again constructed at the upper level of South Park. It provided the public with bathrooms, showers with hot water, a first aid room, and a staffed area during the beach’s open hours for patrons to secure their clothing and valuables while they were swimming.

A five-foot-wide, 500 foot long sidewalk was constructed from the lower shelter house to the beach through funds received by the River Ridge Trail Association. Monies for this project were provided through the Opportunity Fund Grant from the Community Foundation for the Fox Valley Region. The sidewalk was designed to meet the specifications recommended by the American with Disabilities Act to ensure easy access to the beach area by disabled people.

A new shelter house was built on the upper level of South Park in 2014 and many of the aging trees were cut down to provide a more open atmosphere to people visiting the park.