

REFLECTIONS AND MEMORIES OF MY YEARS AT POPE PARK

My first recollection of Pope Park started in 1943 at age 5. To give my mother respite care for a few hours on a Sunday afternoon in the summer, dad would take me to the park and sit on one of the benches on the east side. While reading his "Sunday News", (which cost ten cents), I would play in the sand box or perhaps go swimming in the baby pool which had a maximum depth of about eight inches and a water spray in the middle. Once that novelty wore off, he would then push me on the swings, bob me up and down on the see-saw, or wait for me at the bottom of the slide. I was no gymnast so the monkey bars didn't excite me. My special treat was going to the concession stand where he would either buy me a Dixie Cup or a box of Cracker Jacks each of which cost five cents. I loved the excitement of finding out what toy was at the end of the Cracker Jacks. And later we returned home for some of mother's home-made strawberry ice cream which we enjoyed eating under the grape vine in our very large back yard at 92 Willow Street.

At few years later I attended swimming lessons in the big pool. Sessions in the morning were an hour long and I attended with a friend. We were both taken there by one of my older sisters. Aside from the lessons themselves, the two recollections most vivid were the cold showers the students had to pass under to get initially wet. If you dodged the showers, which were monitored by teen-age life guards, then you repeated the procedures at their pace – and they made certain you really got wet! The next issue was the lack of privacy for changing back into dry clothes. The bathhouse only had stalls with neither a curtain nor even half of a swinging door. So to obtain privacy, you shared your stall with another girl who held up her bath towel while you changed and you, in turn, did the same for her. Our wet suits were wrapped into our wet towel and then placed into our bathing cap. Everyone had to wear a bathing cap or you didn't go into the pool.

Free-time swimming sessions were in the afternoon – I believe from 1:00 P.M. to 4:00 P.M. Admission was five cents for one hour. If it was extremely hot the sessions filled up rapidly and you had to wait for the next one. There were also evening sessions for older people from 6 to 8. It was fun walking around the pool at that time of day as an observer. Quite often there were swim competitions as well as synchronized demonstrations.

"Let's go sliding behind the pool." Providing there was enough snow and the weather conditions were optimal, that was absolutely the best past-time for winter. At the western end of the pool started the slopes which took us flying on our sleds and toboggans toward the flat land heading toward the Park River. Many Saturday afternoons were spent there with my friends; it was the greatest.

Once I entered my teens, my interests changed from swimming lessons to volleyball and paddle tennis. I and my friends from Laurel Street would go to the park after supper to engage in a sport or two or just "hang around" to meet other friends of the opposite sex. In retrospect, they were good years. They were healthy, safe and memorable years for me and the many friends and classmates I had on both Willow and Laurel Streets.

Lorraine T. Bernier
Retired – Resident of West Hartford