

## THE ROCKINGHAM COUNTY PLAYGROUND

By  
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A geyser of public energy erupted in Rockingham County in 1922. The energy focused on Wentworth and the Rockingham County Playground was its creation. Part nature park, part recreation center, part camp meeting—the playground was unique in the county's recreational history. Local opinion held it be unique in the nation.

Like most real achievements, the playground was the idea of a few people with the will and resources to make things happen and to whip the public and the county institutions into a frenzy of action. The action involved cooperation throughout the county, a phenomenon not always observable in later years. The sheer speed of achievement is surprising to anyone used to the deliberate pace of committees, public bodies, grant proposals and endless fundraising. They just did it.

The record begins with a resolution passed by the Rockingham County Board of Commissioners on May 15, 1922 to grant “the privilege of using one hundred acres” to “the Rockingham County Playground Association” for “Camping and Playground purposes.” Location was to be determined by the County Commissioners, the County Welfare Officer (J.H. Allen), Mrs. J. S. Hunter, Mrs E.D. Pitcher and W. B. Weaver.<sup>1</sup> It soon became apparent that Allen and Weaver were the people who made the playground happen.

The location was to be the “old Whittemore track of 110 acres purchased twenty five or thirty years before.” Alas, the Commissioners' good intentions exceeded their arithmetic skills for they granted twenty three acres of that same track at that same meeting to the County Board of Education for a Farm Life School (Wentworth School). This conflict was resolved and 87.2 acres were leased to the playground association for \$100.00 per year.<sup>2</sup> Development began behind the school site.

The playground association left no known archives and memory of the playground has faded. For activities of the first two years, 1922 and 1923, the Reidsville Review files are the main source of record. In 1924, the Leaksville News joined in covering playground news. Files of both papers are preserved on microfilm. This reliance on newspapers is not all bad. Playground use was mingled with that of local, and world events. The playground was a part of its times. The third and fourth decades of the twentieth century—the interval between the great wars and the lifespan of the playground-- saw the “Roaring Twenties”, the Great Depression, and the New Deal. The playground was touched by them all.

After May 15, 1922 events developed rapidly. By June 9 the Review reported the land leasing, organization of the playground association, and the association's plan. There was to be a camping site, playground, a lake for boating and swimming, a dining hall and kitchen, tennis courts, athletic track and baseball grounds. Features to be arranged included open air services, concerts, story hour, singing clubs and lectures by noted speakers. Churches and Sunday Schools were to be active in conducting and managing the playground and moral and educational advantages would be great. A beautiful wooded tract, reached good roads, would be a place for huts and tents erected by families.”<sup>3</sup>

1 Minutes of Rockingham County Commissioners, May 15, 1922.

2 Ibid, July 3, 1922.

3 Reidsville Review, June 9, 1922 (hereafter referred to as “Review”).

On June 13, 1922 it could be announced that Leaksville-Spray, Reidsville and Madison Red Cross chapters would spend \$500 to erect a hut at the playground and hire a nurse. She was to assist mothers and children and “be available for work in the county.” The hut was to be a “temporary hospital.”<sup>4</sup>

When the playground leadership was announced, its comprehensive and influential (sic) membership was evident. The “Board of Managers” was announced on June 16.<sup>5</sup>

Ex officio members:

R.B. Chance	Chairman, County Board of Commissioners
George W. Martin	Chairman, County Board of Education
J. H. Allen	County Welfare Superintendent
Mrs. Ethel Wells Moore	County Home Demonstration Agent

Other Members:

W. B. Weaver	Spray
P. H. Gwynn, Jr.	Reidsville
Mrs. J. S. Hunter	Draper
Mrs. E.D. Pitcher	Spray
V.H. Idol	Madison
P. R. Webster	Madison, R.F.D

Bethel Withers

Trustees:

E.D. Pitcher	Spray
Jas F. Womack	Reidsville
J. O. Ragsdale	Madison

A week later the directors had perfected their organization with J. H. Allen as president and W. B. Weaver, vice president. Committee assignments were made within the group with one notable addition--Luther H. Hodges as Publicity Chairman. This roster indicates broad-based membership of prominent citizens and public figures. The Spray members show Marshall Field and Company support and therefore, YMCA support. E.D. Pitcher, Chief Finance Officer of Marshall Field in the south was Finance Committee Chairman. Mrs. Pitcher was Treasurer.<sup>6</sup>

The Review predicted that 5,000 children would enjoy the playground before summer was over.

The paper was effusive in reporting the formal playground opening in July--“thousands attended”, “a vacation resort already”, “our employees, a contented lot free from strife have a place to meet.” “Folks may sleep in tents or rustic cabins and take meals in immense dining halls.” Already, the lake and ball fields were usable. There was an address by Professor M.C.R. Noble of the University of North Carolina (“a wit”) and a Sunday sermon by The Rev. Dr. Howard E. Rondthaler, President of Salem College (“a gifted, godly man”). A sacred band concert was given in the afternoon.<sup>7</sup> There would be a lot more of those.

The Review editorialized, (sic)“There are innumerable private and municipally owned playgrounds and

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4 Review, June 13, 1922

5 Ibid, June 16, 1922

6 Ibid, June 23, 1922

7 Ibid, July 25, 1922

parks, but so far as we know, this is the only county-wide proposition of its kind in the United States. Superintendent Allen and some of our progressive citizens have, however, started something that will rapidly spread throughout the land.” This theme would echo repeatedly.

The Review on August 22 reported P. H. Gwynn of Reidsville and a dozen Boy Scouts present at the playground. (P.H. Gwynn, Jr., school principal.) Sunday morning services were led by P.H. Gwynn of Leaksville. (P.H. Gwynn, Sr., “banker and preacher.”) At the Red Cross hut children were weighed and measured and given “attractive brochures and cards.” There had been a “Christian Endeavor” meeting and another sacred concert, by the “Kicher's (sic) Variety Band.”<sup>8</sup>

About this time, August 1922, the playground association published an informative booklet stating the object of the playground: “to promote and encourage civic virtue and to aid in development of the physical, educational, religious, charitable, literary, and social interests of Rockingham County.” The listed benefits” included electric lights, two deep wells, YMCA, Red Cross hut, girls lodge, tents and huts, private huts, dining room, swimming pool, baseball field, and swings and slides.<sup>9</sup> Pretty good for the three-month old organization.

Numerous family and group campers were reported in late August- “Campers Galore” was the headline. White Reeder and J.K. McConnell, Y secretaries, each had fifteen boys camping from Spray and from New Leaksville. Both had health lessons at the Red Cross hut. There were picnickers(sic) from Leaksville, from Stoneville (a Sunday School party) and from Reidsville (Presbyterian Sunday School). A group of young lady campers attracted a visit from a Greensboro string band and “a good many individuals of the masculine gender.”<sup>10</sup>

The playground was a popular success. Now began a(sic) era of bigger dreams.

If “Campers Galore” marked late August then “stories galore” would describe the September 1 edition of the Review. “Record Crowds at Playground” (by Playground Reporter)<sup>11</sup> was one headline. Seven Sunday School picnics were listed for the previous week and R.B. Chance camped all week with nine boys from his Sunday School class. The Smith River Council, three hundred strong came with band, baseball and food.

Canning Club girls from Rockingham and Guilford and their Home Demonstration Agents as chaperones(sic) camped, fifty-three in number. “Playground Reporter” noted that “Reidsville sends us classy girl swimmers and Leaksville-Spray trained young athletes-(sic) evidently Reidsville needs a Y, Leaksville-Spray needs a pool.”

One disappointment that week – heavy rains prevented a baptizing service.

W. “Bert” Weaver, “about as big a crank over the county playground as Jerry (J.H.) Allen” told Reidsville Rotarians at their ladies' night about the “accomplishments and possibilities of this recently acquired county asset.” He advocated building an exhibit hall there “to display all products

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8 Mr. Kirchies, “Manager of Music”, Marshall Field and Co., often appeared at the playground with the Spray Community Brass Band or the Kirchie Family Band.

9 Review, August 25, 1922.

10 Ibid.

11 “Playground Reporter” is not identified and this is the only reference to such person. One of the Olivers (three on the Review masthead), Playground Manager V.L. Marsh, or the Publicity Chairman, Luther Hodges, perhaps?

manufactured in the county and pictures of every favorite son -- Governors, Senators, etc. <sup>12</sup>

Representatives of the county's five Masonic Lodges met at the playground and discussed erecting a building there for their joint use and scheduled a general membership meeting on the grounds.<sup>13</sup> An era of large meetings had begun.

The nine councils of the Junior Order United American Mechanics in the county planned a picnic for 1000 members, families and friends. Twice that many came to witness J.M. Sharpe, prominent local attorney and state officer of the Junior Order present a silk flag to the Coleman - Southard Camp of the American Legion. <sup>14</sup>

Reidsville Rotarians adjourned a meeting to solicit funds for the playground and they planned a blanket sale, similar to one conducted in Spray. <sup>15</sup> Later, Bert Weaver got a pledge of financial support from the club. If these were omens of future fiscal problems, they did not diminish the praise from afar.

Josephus Daniels, former Secretary of the Navy, wrote in his Raleigh News and Observer, that the Rockingham playground was the "largest contribution for suitable playgrounds made by any county" and "only one of its kind in the U.S." He gave credit to J. H. Allen. <sup>16</sup> Daniels had been in the county on behalf of fellow Democrats in that election year and heard about the playground. J. H. Allen was a fellow Democrat.

The Honorable Whitehead Klutz, representing a national recreation association, praised the county's "wonderful community spirit" and offered assistance.<sup>17</sup> He had been President pro tem of the North Carolina Senate in 1909.

The Honorable Brooks Fletcher, Chautaugua Lecturer, had heard about the playground in the summer of its beginning and had spoken and written about it around the country as "only one of the kind in the world, paved the way for similar playgrounds in other counties throughout America."<sup>18</sup>

Heady stuff for a provincial county.

The first big event reported for the 1923 season was the Junior Order picnic on July Fourth, with a reported 5,000 people present. The silk flag this year was presented to B.H. Johnson, playground manager. J.M. Sharpe again did the honors. The Junior Order National Organization had voted to establish an orphanage in North Carolina and local members wanted it to be in Rockingham County.<sup>19</sup> It was established at Lexington.

Later in July, 1200 to 1500 tobacco growers heard Dr. J.Y. Joyner urge co-operative selling of their crop, a subject that would keep that industry and the court system busy for years.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Review, Sept. 1, 1922.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Review, Sept. 24, 1922.

<sup>15</sup> Review, Oct. 13, 1922.

<sup>16</sup> Review, Nov. 20, 1922.

<sup>17</sup> Review, Feb. 14, 1923.

<sup>18</sup> Review, April 13, 1923.

<sup>19</sup> Review, July 6, 1923.

<sup>20</sup> Review, July 16, 1923.

Masons were back in late July for a picnic they hoped would be an annual affair to rival the well established Mocksville picnic. Oxford Orphanage sent its singing class.<sup>21</sup>

Other major events that summer included an address, "The Value of the Child", by Josiah W. Bailey, future United States Senator; community singing and boys whistling contest, sponsored by Miss Weatherington's County Summer School; and Sunday services featuring noted preachers.

Camping, picnics, concerts and general recreation continued with the scheduled big events. Beginning on Wednesday, July 17, Miss Simpson, the county nurse conducted a well baby clinic at the Red Cross hut. She was now "county nurse" rather than "Red Cross nurse." Other health concerns were bovine TB and clean milk.<sup>22</sup>

In 1924, The Leaksville News began to share in reporting playground news, but both papers together could not find the levels of news reported in 1922 and 1923. There were no more reports of "record crowds", "campers galore", "vast dining halls", or "playground managers". Big events became rare. Surely, some public use continued, but the news was mostly concerned with camping by organized groups. Boy Scouts, Cherokee Camp Fire Girls, "county club girls" (forerunners of 4-H clubs) and Home Demonstration Clubs used the facilities. The playground became more and more associated with the newly formed Cherokee Council consisting of scouts from Rockingham and neighboring counties. The name itself evolved-(sic) playground to Camp Cherokee at the playground to Camp Cherokee. Scout camp seasons were gradually extended, but there was still time for the Agricultural Extension Clubs to camp.<sup>23</sup>

Dominance by the scouts was formalized in 1929 by a ten year lease to Cherokee Council for \$100 per year. The only reservations were that county sponsored organizations were to have free use of the grounds when the scouts were not using them and other users would be allowed for a nominal fee. Camp Cherokee it(sic) was in all references.<sup>24</sup>

Suddenly the name became Rockingham County Playground again. New Deal economic assistance and work relief agencies had funds for development work on public property. A report to Governor J.C.B. Ehringhaus showed expenditure of more than \$27,000 on the playground from 1932 to 1935. Only sanitary privies (\$53,000) exceeded that amount in the county.

Pictured in the report is a lake front, pier, beach and two buildings overlooking the swimming area. The caption read "lake park and recreational buildings constructed in Rockingham County."<sup>25</sup> The lake, called the 1934 lake, replaced the original in one which was of concrete construction and gave problems of washouts and silting as early as 1923.<sup>26</sup> The new lake, on a different stream, remains in 1998 in splendid condition, either well constructed in 1934 or improved later. And there was a later

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21 Review, July 13, 1923.

22 Review, July 18, 1923. In the Greensboro News and Record, Rockingham People and places Section, July 22, 1998, seventy-five-years-ago by Jack Scism, the well baby clinic and Red Cross hut are located "at Reidsville." Wentworth or playground would have been more accurate.

23 Rockingham County Extension Records, Grace Brannock, Extension Service History 1917-1989, and History of Home Demonstration Work in Rockingham County, Mrs. R.P. Mitchell & Mrs. J.S. Turner (1930?) The Leaksville News and The Review announced the openings and closings of various encampments during 1924 to 1929.

24 Leaksville News, June 7, 1929.

25 Emergency Relief in North Carolina, edited by J.S. Kirk, et al, 1936 "A Record of the Development and the Activities of the North Carolina Emergency Relief Administration 1932 - 1935 (Report to Gov. J.C.B. Ehringhaus.)

26 Butler, Lindley S. Spirit of the Arrow: A History of Tsalagi Lodge 1939-1989; Burlington, NC; Tsalagi Lodge 162, 1989, p. 5.

improvement project.

In 1938 a committee from Boy Scouts requested The County Commissioners to allow and assist a project with the Works Progress Administration to improve the playgrounds. The Commissioners approved; provided there was no expense to the county; the donation of sand, stone, and trees from county property and use of "county teams, not to interfere with farming at the County Home."<sup>27</sup>

WPA records list the expenditure of \$24,796 to "develop for public use in Rockingham County near Reidsville, including constructing bathhouse, showerhouse, cabins, infirmary, swimming dock and tower, commissary, shelters and amphitheater, installing water supply systems, conducting conservation and development work, excavating, grading and performing incidental (sic) and appurtenant work. County owned property."<sup>28</sup> The project brought the camp to near its final form.

Then, an unexplained pair of real estate transactions took place. In January 1939 the county and the Cherokee Council agreed to cancellation of the Scout lease of the playground. A recreation commission of seven members was to be appointed by the Chairman of the Commissioners to "maintain the playgrounds for the benefit of the public generally."<sup>29</sup>

Apparently, no action along that line took place and in January 1940 the county agreed to sell the property to the Boy Scouts, to revert to the county if no longer used for Scout purposes.<sup>30</sup> And revert it did when Cherokee Council established its Caswell County Facility in the mid-1960s. Camp Saurakee for handicapped children operated on the playgrounds and the site, with a few buildings, became the location for the County Opportunity Center.

Thus ended the Rockingham County Playground. What happened after those first two frenzied years of multiple uses? The available record is not clear. Perhaps the money ran out, finances must have been tenuous from the first. Perhaps the novelty wore off. Perhaps the improving roads and increasing cars which brought people to Wentworth later allowed them to go further afield. Other facilities multiplied: Leaksville – Spray got its pools, YMCAs got other camping places as did 4-H and Future Farmers. Big events – July Fourth, revival meetings, semi-professional baseball - proliferated in all the towns. That early lake must have been a problem until the 1930s and the Scouts were firmly in control by then.

What about Weaver and Allen, those "cranks about the playground," were they disappointed? Probably not. They never got a great exhibit hall or a permanent family resort. However, they lived to see the evolution of a major regional Boy Scout institution. They saw the Red Cross hut evolve into a public health movement. They saw national and state parks come into being with camping and other outdoor opportunities. Their YMCAs and civic clubs served youth. They created a "new county asset" with a life of over seventy years and a future life if someone of their vision wants it enough.

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27 County Commissioners, Minutes of December 5, 1938.

28 WPA records, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Microfilm roll T 936-10, Item 30807.

29 County Commissioners, Minutes of January 9, 1939.

30 County Commissioners, Minutes of January 8, 1940.