

Chapter 13: The First Public Parks

Throughout the decade of the 50's the town grew by leaps and bounds. The leap to the north of Britton Road with the annexation of Casady Heights 4th Addition in October, 1950 was followed by a string of annexations starting with the annexation of the Casady Heights 6th Addition in June of '51.

On October 24, 1952 , the Casady Heights 5th, 7th, 9th and 10th Additions were annexed. Finally, in December '52 the town annexed the 8th and last of the Casady Heights Additions. Seemingly over night, the town now extended half way to Hefner between May and Penn.

It is interesting to note that when the developers were fully in control of local government, not a single acre of land was provided to the town for use as a public park. It probably is no coincidence that there are no parks on the south side of Britton Road. Only when local government began to be weaned away from developer control were ordinances passed that would require developers to provide to the community a certain percentage of the land under development for recreational purposes.

As the town grew north of Britton Road, the developers were required to donate land, the first of which was a tract of land located on Britton Road between Oxford Way and Stratford. The land was deeded to the town in September of 1951 by developers Floyd Harrison, his son Joe Bob, and their partner Sylvanus Felix. Town Trustee Ben McCammon suggested holding a contest to name the park, an idea that apparently never caught on. The town's first public park simply became known as Harrison Park in honor of the developer and co-founder of the town.

The Summer of 1952 was a scorcher, --one that would be plagued by water shortages and marred by tragedy. Eleven year old Mike Bumpass went wading in a farm pond north of Casady School on the steamy Summer day of August 14, 1952. Mayor John Chiaf recalled the misadventure vividly.

"Mike couldn't have been very old at the time. No one really knows what went wrong or how Mike got into trouble, but when the police and fire got the call, the would-be rescuers joined hands and combed the pond," recalls Chiaf. "Someone stepped on the body and brought Mike up, --there was a doctor on hand but it was too late," recalled Chiaf sadly. "Mike's grief-stricken father, Highway Patrolman Gene Bumpass, was on hand as they pulled the body out of the pond," said Chiaf.

The community was literally in shock. Community leaders wondered if things would have been different is the town had had a swimming pool. Community leaders went to work.

In April 1953, Floyd Harrison deeded to the town approximately 3 acres of land in the Casady Heights 7th Addition for use as a park. Shortly thereafter, the town trustees fittingly named the park in memory of Mike Bumpass.

The grief that this unfortunate event engendered also provided the impetus for the donation of land for the construction of a new swimming pool. A committee under the tutelage of Town Trustee Dale Pierce, Jr. was formed to raise money to equip Mike Bumpass Memorial Park and to raise money to build a community swimming pool. Various civic groups pitched in to help raise the needed funds. Yet, despite their best efforts, they fell short of their goal.

Again, Floyd Harrison was asked to help. Somehow a deal was struck with Harrison to donate the north 200 feet of Block 13A of the Casady Heights 7th Addition for the construction of a pool. As part of the deal, Harrison deeded the land to Earl Nailor and Bud Moulton, who were owners of a pool business located just to the north of The Village. In exchange for the land, Nailor and Moulton agreed to contribute the balance of the labor and materials needed to build the pool. The creative and ingenious plan worked and the pool was built on the land just to the north of Bumpass Park. Nailor and Moulton owned and operate the pool for about ten years before eventually selling it to Wylie and Bonnie York.

Prior to selling the pool to the Yorks, Nailor and Moulton tried, unsuccessfully, to sell the pool to the City. Offers made in November 1960 and in June of 1961 for \$40,000 and \$35,000, respectively, were flatly rejected by the City Council who were well advised to avoid the high maintenance costs and liability associated with the operation of a pool.

For more than two decades, the pool would be a hot attraction and favorite hangout for area youth. According to Bonnie York, “the Split T and The Village Pool were *the* places to go in those days.” Some referred to the pool as “the crown jewel and main attraction” of the town.

Like their predecessors, the Yorks had a difficult time making the pool profitable. Apparently looking for alternatives, the Yorks attempted to get the pool property rezoned for a skating rink in May 1972. That effort failed.

In July of 1973, Councilman Stan Alexander suggested that the City look into buying the pool with a matching grant through the Association of Oklahoma Governments (ACOG). About the same time, The Village Lions Club proposed to raise funds to buy the pool, fix it up, and donate it to the city.

Nothing ever came of any of these proposals and, finally, after struggling with the pool for a decade, the Yorks finally were forced to close the pool down.

“The pool just cost too much to repair and keep up, so we finally had to shut it down,” said Bonnie York. “We sold the land to a developer after finding a legal way to get around the title restriction [Floyd] Harrison had placed on the land. Today The Village Condos sit on the property where the pool once was located. All that’s left today are the cedar trees that we planted on the north side of the pool as a wind barrier,” said York.

In the early days, Mike Bumpass Memorial Park also seemed to be focal point of community activity. Longtime resident Ruth Morton recalls moving into her brand new home on Gladstone Terrace only to learn that the John Marshall High School band practiced in the park across the street from her home in the Summer. Morton also fondly remembers football games in the park with teams ranging from 5 to 15 years of age.

“There were dances on the tennis court too and sometimes when the teenagers were shy or hadn’t a partner, girls or even boys, would dance together. Parents brought lawn chairs and enjoyed the fun and the summer evening,” recalls Morton.

Thinking of the undeveloped land to the north of her home brought many memories back to Morton. “There wasn’t any housing or development north of Bumpass Park and Penn was two lanes and was gravel road past Hefner. The Village was young and one of the main attractions for the boys, and perhaps a few brave girls, was to visit the pond in the field north of us where The Vineyard is today. There was an old working oil pump there in the field. At night windows were open as few had air conditioning in those days. The steady pumping of the nearby oil wells lulled us to sleep and the mooing of the cows in the Britton area greeted the mornings,” recalled Morton.

As the town grew, drainage started to become more and more of a problem. The developers being in total control of the town government from the very outset had not been required to invest in the necessary infrastructure to handle the storm run off. The problem was only exacerbated as more and more neighborhoods continued to spring up. Before long the worsening situation garnered the attention of community leaders including Kenneth Sain who served on the Planning Commission and later as Mayor of the town. Sain initiated a campaign to begin educating his colleagues about the serious drainage problem that existed at Village Drive and Stratford. Sain’s efforts eventually led to a bond issue to address the serious drainage problem as well as other needs of the community.

Much to Sain’s dismay, the proposed drainage improvements were not well received by the community and critics loudly ridiculed the plan referring to it disdainfully as “Sain’s Drain”. When the matter finally came to a vote in May of ’54 it, not surprisingly, went down to defeat. The stunning setback would delay further efforts to address this chronic drainage problem until the late ’50’s.

In October of 1959 a group of citizens descended upon the Council to demand action by the Council to begin addressing the chronic drainage problems along Village Drive. In response to the public outcry, the Council commissioned Phillips & Stong Engineering Company to do a cost study. Their report came back in December. The Council, apparently going numb upon hearing the figures, put the proposed improvements on ice one more time.

By the mid 60's, the drainage issue would resurface again in a big way. A petition containing the signatures of 122 residents was presented to the Council in September, 1966. Residents again demanded action. Evert Stong, now the City Engineer, was directed by the Council to provide new cost estimates. It might have seemed like déjà vu to some, but this time things were different and the Council was in a position both politically and financially to deliver the goods. Bids were sought the following spring and the first section of the channel south of Britton Road was finally completed in 1967. This initial accomplishment, however modest, set in motion a series of channel improvements which spanned a period of 22 years and culminated in 1989 with the completion of the last section of the channel between Vineyard Blvd and Hefner Road.

For many years the so-called "Village Ditch" provided a habitat for crawdads, snakes and other vermin and, most certainly, was a delight for many a young naturalists. Yet, before the improvements were made, serious flooding occurred along the banks of the ditch from time to time causing considerable property damage and sometimes endangering lives.

During one notable torrential downpour in 1977, water poured across Pennsylvania Avenue from Casady School and flowed down Dublin toward Village Drive. There the stream converged with a torrent of water flowing down Stratford Drive. The ditch quickly overflowed its banks. The resulting deluge washed parked cars off Village Drive into the unimproved channel carrying them down the channel all the way to the bridge at the south end of the Whispering Hills Apartments. Police Officer Jim Wingert was on duty that day and remembers the raging torrent reaching the doorsteps of homes on Village Drive.

"A female motorist trying to cross the channel at Carlton Way was literally swept into the channel. She somehow got out of the car and was pulled to safety by nearby onlookers. As the water receded, I remember being amazed as the subsiding waters revealed five submerged cars that had been washed up against the bridge," said Wingert.

Flooding continues to be a problem today in parts of The Village despite extensive improvements that have been made over the years.