

Vol. XVI. No. 14.

July 7, 1906



CHARITIES

AND The Commons

A WEEKLY JOURNAL OF PHILANTHROPY AND SOCIAL ADVANCE

Parks

Where townsmen stake their
claim to the out-of-doors

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105 East 22d Street
New York

ENTERED AT THE POST OFFICE
NEW YORK, N. Y., AS
SECOND-CLASS
MATTER

1001 Monadnock Bldg.
Chicago.

Ten Cents a Copy

Digitized by Google
\$2 a Year

The Trend of the Park Movement

G. A. Parker

[It is a combination of a singularly broad social view with practical experience in park management which gives Mr. Parker his unique position in the park movement. He served as head gardener at Vassar College and then of the Old Colony Railroad before entering into public park work in Cleveland, Boston and in Hartford, where he is now superintendent of parks. He has been called to other cities, but feels that here is a vantage ground from which to contribute constructively to the development of the park idea. His office is a veritable work shop.]

It takes more than a house, no matter how skillfully designed, costly or well finished to make a home. It takes more than a piece of land no matter how beautiful and well designed or elaborately planted, for a park to fulfill its function in municipal life.

Primarily a park is not a lot of open land within a city, even though there can be no park without such land. It is the people who use the land that constitute the park and not the land they use; just as it is the people who live in a city that determine the city and not the buildings and streets which are located there. New York would not be a city if every human being were to leave it, even though all the buildings and everything else were left intact; it would be but a city corpse. Not that a city can exist without buildings, but I want to bring out the fact that buildings are the shell and the people are the city. And so, a park unless used, is a dead thing, and not in the primary sense, a park at all, no matter how divinely beautiful it may have been. If this was not true, then before there were any cities, the world was one great park and most of it still remains so.

A park is land within a city where people may have the freedom and influences of the country; where a person can go and have such influences soak into him. And only so far as it can thus be used, does it differ from other vacant, unused, unprofitable land which may be within a city. Of course, unused land set aside for park purposes has a prospective value as parks, the same as vacant lots have prospective value to their owners.

I have written this to begin with, for I wanted to establish another view point of parks than by the acre. For several

years I have tried earnestly to solve the park problem by acreage and what the acres might provide. To illustrate:

Wherever marriage has united two lives as one and little ones are growing up, there is the home, let the roof which covers them or the walls that surround them be what they may. The uniting love is the essential factor of the home; comfortable and beautiful surroundings are only pleasant adjuncts. So, wherever people find within a city limit country freedom and country influences, there is the park; although the more truly beautiful those spots are, so much the better is it for the people. But, the scenes themselves, however beautiful, do not make the park; any more than a house, however grand, makes the home.

Apparently that which is the strongest attraction for the great mass of people is other people and the outdoor spots most frequented are the streets, for there they meet the most people. At the same time persons usually have a purpose for going on the street, which is an incentive for being there. But the street is purely urban in all its appurtenances with an artificial floor and artificial sides. Overhead there is the sky, ever beautiful, ever changing, but one seldom sees above the second floor without raising his head; and so anything to attract notice above that height must be more or less spectacular. Now, if urban scenes and influences can make that which is best of the human, body, mind and heart, then the whole problem might be solved by widening our streets into convenient promenades. But experience has proved in the past, and it is probable that it will remain true in the future, that purely urban conditions cannot produce that which is best in mankind; that only through country free-

dom and country influences can the best in man be developed. Therefore, parks are absolutely essential to city life, if those who are born and bred in the city are to be kept free from degenerating.

My preface is long, but it has become so unsatisfactory to me to speak of municipal parks as consisting of so many acres with such a ratio to area, population or valuation and costing such an amount and "having such a rank when compared with other cities," that I want to set up another yard stick to measure them by, especially as I believe it is a better one. Whether we are doing more or less than some other city is not of so much importance as is, what the parks are actually doing for the people they serve. It is much better, it seems to me, to range up our parks as measured by the people who use them, rather than by acres and cost.

As we look back over the park work, we see that certain tendencies have swept the country like an epidemic; except that they were for good, while epidemics are supposed to be evil. In the 50's of the last century came the demand for open spaces, the so-called lungs or breathing spots of urban life, and under its influence many of the large parks of our great cities came into existence. Then, in the 70's with the development of Central Park in New York and Prospect Park in Brooklyn came the desire for scenic parks of naturalistic effects. In the 80's the project of connecting individual parks with the system of parkways and boulevards was all in vogue. In the 90's, following the lead of the Metropolitan Park system of Boston, the outlying, country, parklike reservations became the leading innovation. And just now we are in the midst of the playground movement. We hear much about organized play, directed play, systematic and scientific play and the children are in the forefront in the thoughts of those interested in municipal park development. It is well that they are, for their needs are great and the future of our cities at stake. But the impression has come to me that too much direction, organization and system may defeat, in part at least, the very object of the movement and turn playing into a task. The need of organization is very

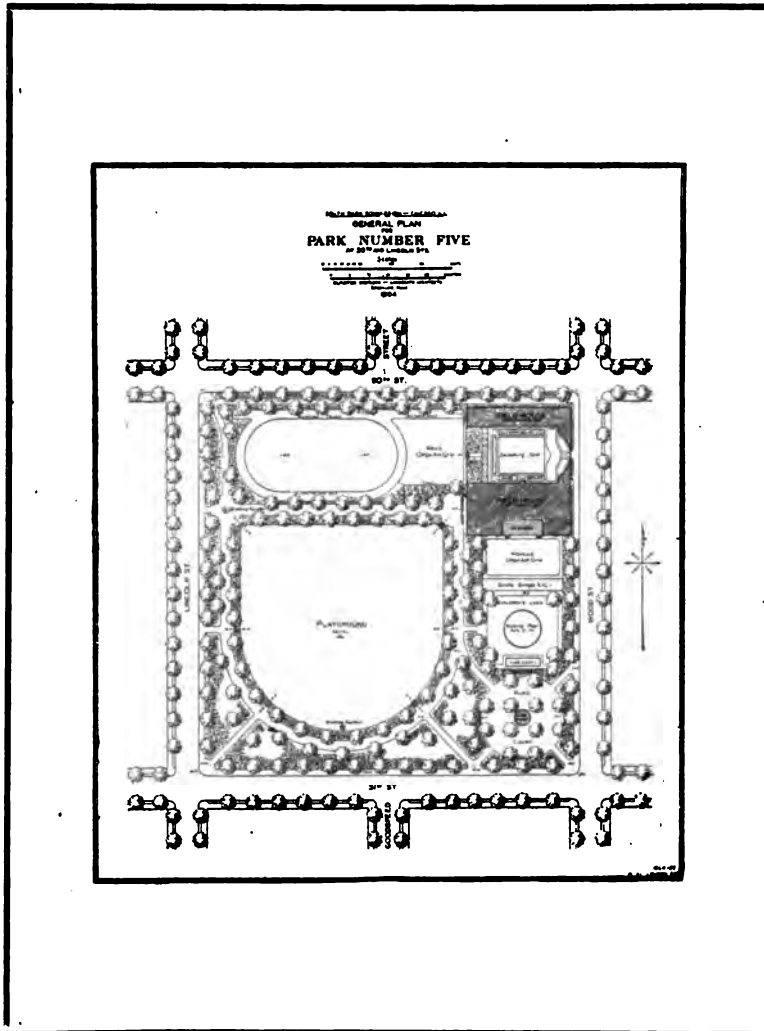
apparent. It may be that the freedom of the country can never come to the city child. Perhaps I can illustrate what I mean by relating an incident of last summer.

After a well planned, successful field day where several hundred children apparently enjoyed themselves hugely and the teachers certainly had a strenuous time, the park was nearly deserted and I sat down on one of the benches to mull over the events of the day. I could not see a flaw in the arrangements, or where it had not been a success. Everything seemed logical and correct in theory and results; and yet I had the feeling that something had been wanting. Slowly my attention was attracted to a dozen children, under ten years old, who had escaped from the procession as it marched off the park and had returned to pick flowers and to play by themselves. They were in the midst of a game of cross tag. There was earnestness and willingness and freedom and higher tension of action and much more display of spirit and muscle than had been shown during the day. They acted like a lot of school children just out of school or freed from a task. Soon they all stopped and went to picking flowers. To my great relief there was not a caretaker or patrolman about, for I wanted to see what they would do if left entirely to themselves. I supposed that I was unnoticed or if noticed, was unknown. For nearly an hour they had a royal good time and apparently went home the happiest children on the park that day. The next day one of the mothers came to apologize for her child's taking the flowers. And,—alas for my notion that I was unseen and unknown,—she said, "Yes, Mary said it was all right for her to pick the flowers for the superintendent was there and he did not stop us." Then she quoted what the child had said, a phrase I wish I could remember for it was worth repeating and it told the story better than I can, but it meant that they had had such a good time all by themselves and also had some "real play."

Then again, I mullied over the scenes of the day before and wondered if too much direction did not weaken the spirit

of the child, or maybe prevented that freedom of action which perhaps must be had to develop that individuality of character which makes the best of whatever there may be within us. And yet,

the day before had been so successful, so perfect in all its details, why should I feel there was something lacking, and what did that little girl mean by the words "real play."



The Modern Park-Playground.

One of a series of playgrounds for Chicago, Illinois. A typical plan to illustrate in a general way the features that are called for in a modern city playground and the manner in which the ground may be skillfully divided so as to make the best possible use of the space available. The design for every playground would normally be different, for no two sites nor the physical and human conditions surrounding them are exactly the same.



Prospect Park, Brooklyn. This picture illustrates the open parklike aspect of the Long Meadow,—the chief feature of the design. The extent of this meadow, about 50 acres, is enough to give it a sense of breadth. The surrounding groves are freely used for picnic parties.