

THE PLAYGROUND FROM THE STANDPOINT OF THE
EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF THE CITY.*

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It was early suggested to me that an agreeable topic for this Congress would be "The Development and Maintenance of Marine Parks and Bathing Beaches," and on that subject I will speak briefly before closing. I can, however, talk with greater confidence, because of a more intimate knowledge, on "The Playground from the Standpoint of the Executive Officer." By executive officer, I mean the mayor, who, in practically all cities, and Boston in particular, has to supervise all arrangements for the purchase and construction of playgrounds and yearly maintenance.

All chief executives are, of course, in hearty accord with the playground movement. For that state of affairs associations such as this deserve great credit. But it is one thing to have even a hearty sympathy with the general theory of such a movement, and again to be certain to the extent of yearly allowing appropriations or loans entailing many thousands of dollars for its general advancement.

To go further, while we are all ready to contribute the sympathy, there are many who are in a state of uncertainty as to the best way to exercise it. We have before us problems connected with the work so serious that without their settlement a waste of public funds is apt to result. More important from your standpoint, there is the danger of a halt being called in the work itself.

The position of the chief magistrate in this matter is unique. He is called upon not only to make a decision as to the value of the movement, but he must also hold himself a judge of the returns to come to the city because of the money invested. No matter how extravagantly or wastefully a playground is equipped, there will be some children who will profit by it; but the responsibility must come to the mayor, if by allowing such extravagant expenditure some other section of the city is deprived of equal conveniences. May I ask if you have fortified the city officials throughout the country with sufficient data for their general advisement in the work which comes upon them?

You must remember that the average mayor is brought into the playground movement by either of two agencies, or both—the playground enthusiast or the real estate agent. Have we not reached the point as city officials where it is direction rather than

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inspiration which we need? We all believe in playgrounds, but as chief financial officers, we are anxious about the proper conserving of the money which we are to put into the work. I will put before you certain phases of the problem:

First. In creating playgrounds, is not our primary obligation to the small child with his sand garden and baby swing, rather than to the grown-up boy with his baseball and football?

Second. Is not the neighborhood playground of five or six hundred feet in area, and duplicated throughout the congested district, a better municipal investment than the field of large acreage?

Third. And this relates to the theory of administration—In the haste of acquiring playground area have we fully appreciated the equal responsibility of administering it?

In bringing these matters before the Congress, I am not begging the question for my own city. I am proud of the work which Boston has already accomplished in the development of playgrounds. When I inform you that one tenth of our park area is devoted to playgrounds, and that the city is maintaining a mile of its water front for beach bathing purposes, I know you will agree with me that Boston is not trying to involve the Congress in any sophistical discussion.

The money invested in our playgrounds has reached a total of \$2,528,050, and the yearly maintenance charge is now close to \$60,000. These expenditures make it important that a decision be made whether our course in the past is the proper one for the future. My anxiety for a settlement of this question is intensified by reason of the recent action of the city council in authorizing additional loans, aggregating \$165,000, for further extensions. The responsibility for the proper spending of this money rests upon me, and not until I approve can the loans, even though authorized by the city council, be issued.

Taking up my first question, regarding the mission of the playground to the small child, I should inform you that the Boston development has been almost entirely in favor of the boy and young man. There are some twenty-one playgrounds scattered throughout the city, and in many of them no recognition of the sand garden has been made. Diamonds and football goals predominate. On certain of the fields and in certain districts this is preëminently proper; but even where accommodations have been provided for the small child, I cannot but regard it as unfortunate that his section is almost invariably the least conspicuous. Is this right? In securing large areas are we not creating "sport fields" rather than playgrounds? Is it not possible that unconsciously we have worked away from the original theory? I am

not personally opposed to the idea of "sport fields." We have in Boston, Franklin Field, with an area of seventy-seven acres, given over wholly to such diversions. It would be delightful, if circumstances were such that a city could have one in each ward. My fear is, however, that we are in danger of developing these to the exclusion of the playground; and, as a financial proposition, Boston to-day is not in a position where it can afford to supply a double equipment for each district. With his bathing beaches, his parks, his indoor gymnasia all available within a reasonable walking distance, even to a boy of ten years, is it not time to pay more particular attention to the very small child? Is not the most urgent call on the city finances, from a playground standpoint, that from the small child?

My second problem, as to the desirability of the 500-foot neighborhood playground in preference to the larger field, can hardly be considered an independent question, since it is so involved with the problem just discussed. In providing money for any public improvement a most important question, from the standpoint of the executive officer, is its availability, or the amount of usage which will be given to it. A municipal bath house with 1000 showers would no doubt attract attention, and the theory of its building would deserve respect; but if never more than 100 of the baths were put to use, the wisdom of such an expenditure would be open to serious questioning. It appears to me, that an almost similar line of reasoning applies to the large playground as it exists. Dr. E. M. Hartwell, chief of the Bureau of Statistics in Boston, informs me that fairly accurate computation has shown that the usage of a municipal undertaking, such as a playground or bath, is practically limited to the radius of a six-minute walk. Assuming that our primal obligation is to the small child, this statement makes it apparent that no matter how large the area may be, it can never drain more than a small section of the surrounding territory. Because of similar information which has been brought to my attention, I believe—though I stand ready to be corrected—that our best developments should be the 500-foot area duplicated throughout the congested districts.

This, to my mind, should be given over wholly to the small children, the city's offering as a substitute for the streets. Within a few minutes' walk of the homes to which it caters, it should be a haven for the mother as well as the child. In the purchase of such land there would be much less trouble than in the taking over of large parcels. With a simplified method of purchase, the expenditure would be modest, and the chief executive who, because of the large amounts of money required in the first instance,

is obliged to delay for years work which should be commenced at once, would be able to acquire these small lots from time to time. It would help in the solution of the congested district problem. A dozen modest playgrounds established in the course of a year would mean vastly more for the general happiness than the large area, taken only after a legislative struggle of three or four years.

Let me issue a word of warning: We have come into a time of lean years in municipal expenditures; the work of the Finance Commission in Boston and of the Bureau of Municipal Research in New York has educated the public into a demand for publicity in municipal affairs which will act as a constant check against extravagance in municipal outlay. Under the circumstances, I feel that the case can be argued out more successfully for the playground as I have sketched it, than the more imposing one which has been our custom.

The third point which I intend to call to your attention is whether in our haste in providing playground plants we have perfected the organization for administering them. I am anxious for suggestions as to the ideal organization for the control of such a plant as we have in Boston, costing as it does some \$60,000 a year to maintain.

Playground government in the city of Boston (and this statement is necessary for the proper understanding of the problem) is in the hands of four different organizations; namely, the board of park commissioners, the board of bath trustees, the school committee and the superintendent of public grounds. The services of these four authorities have been invaluable. They have developed enthusiasm and application; but we have reached a point where it is a question as to whether we should not now be receiving a larger return on the capital invested and the fixed yearly charges. The credit for first noting this must go to the Boston school committee, which sought and secured from the legislature the right to take over and administer certain playgrounds in connection with the schoolhouse yards. This year the park commission, which is charged with the responsibility, set apart some \$25,000 of its appropriation for the school committee, and Dr. Thomas F. Harrington, director of physical training and athletics in the schools, was given charge. It was an experiment which was watched by all with interest, and by myself with special attention; for I saw in it the possible solution of the problem of a proper grouping of the work under one head. I regret to report, however, that I am obliged to look elsewhere, for in his forthcoming report Mr. Stratton D. Brooks, superintendent of schools, while enthusiastic over the results accom-

plished, gives no hope of a willingness to have his committee take full charge. From the proofs of his report, copies of which he has kindly furnished me, I quote: "The brief experience already had leads to the belief that the school committee ought not to attempt the control of parks used as playgrounds, but should limit itself to the control of play thereon by children of school age at such times and under such conditions as may be mutually agreed upon by the school committee and the board of park commissioners."

Here is where we are to-day in this matter. We have made lavish expenditures, but we have not as yet evolved a proper organization. The playground work, important, as we all admit, is only one of the minor duties of boards charged with large executive responsibilities, and I put this suggestion forth simply as a possible solution. Create an entirely new department on recreation and gymnastics, or something very similar. This could be placed under the control of an executive superintendent who should have Dr. Harrington of the school department as his coadjutor. In the event of such a creation, he should not only have charge of all the playgrounds all over the city, but should also have supervision over the baths and the indoor and outdoor gymnastics as well. Under such a system, I can see a continuity by which the child would be passed from the sand garden to the district field, to the gymnasium and bath, to a healthful and happy manhood or womanhood. But it is a problem not to be settled without most serious consideration.

With relation to the development of marine playgrounds and beaches in Boston, I have decided to compromise. I have brought with me a number of photographs of this special development which tell the whole story of what we are trying to do better than any words of mine could describe it. One entire mile of Boston's salt water frontage is devoted to bathing beaches. In addition, we have parks along the water front which extend for a considerable distance. We have taken possession of Dorchester Bay, our larger enclosed sheet of water, and made it possible for people to drive along the water's edge for almost the entire distance. This has been an expensive development. In 1883 the work was started, and to date there has been spent the sum of \$1,289,996. This stretch contains the famous L Street bath, which on holidays and Sundays during the summer months accommodates 15,000 bathers. This bath started originally as a district improvement and has grown gradually, until now it has become of service to the entire city. We have been endeavoring of late, however, to furnish the various water front districts with individual bathing accommodations. Accordingly, the Dorchester people

are taken care of at Savin Hill and Tenean beaches; the Charlestown people at Dewey Beach; the East Boston people at Wood Island Park; and the residents of the North End at North End Beach. The North End and Charlestown beaches were created only by condemning valuable wharf property, but I believe that it has proved a wise expenditure because of the benefits which have accrued.

I have brought over with me a set of photographs of a form of water playground activity which I believe to be peculiar to Boston, and which I think will be of interest to everybody. They are the photographs of the Randidge Fund excursions. By the will of George L. Randidge \$50,000 was bequeathed the city of Boston, the income of which was to be used for affording one or more excursions to the children of the poor of the city of all religious denominations during the months of July and August of each year. This \$50,000 bequest was accordingly invested in one city of Boston 4% bond, thereby yielding an annual income of \$2000 to be expended for this purpose. The first excursion was given in the year 1897, and they have been continued each year, with one exception, including the present season. In order to secure the largest return from this money two things were necessary: a cheap picnic place and a low transportation rate. The city government took hold of the project and for the picnic grounds contributed Long Island, situated in Boston Harbor, and for transportation facilities the free use of the municipal boat. In this manner the one or two excursions which Mr. Randidge hoped for have been increased to forty or fifty. By securing voluntary attendants the advance has also been helped. The wisdom of this course has been fully demonstrated, as each year there are received more offers of assistance than can be accepted. The unit of organizations from which the children are taken are the different religious societies of the city, Catholic, Protestant and Hebrew; by pursuing this method duplication is practically eliminated. The location of the grounds is a portion of the pasture land of the municipal almshouse. They are admirably adapted for this purpose, consisting of a good sized hill, together with two beaches of considerable extent; upon the grounds are six buildings, inexpensive in character, but amply sufficient for the purposes required. The children leave the city at nine o'clock in the morning on the steamer "Monitor," arriving at the grounds about 9.45. Until twelve o'clock they amuse themselves in the swings, tilting boards, etc., play baseball, bean bag and other games, as well as playing in the sand and wading.

At twelve o'clock they are called by the ringing of a bell to the administration building, lined up in single files, the boys on one

side and the girls on the other, and as they pass the windows each child is given the following luncheon: two ham sandwiches, one banana, two large cart-wheel cookies, and one pint of peanuts in a smaller bag inside, together with a large mug of lemonade. After luncheon these bags and the refuse are carefully collected and burned. At three o'clock in the afternoon the children are again called to the administration building and in the same manner each child is given a piece of ice cream wrapped in paraffine paper which dispenses with the need of spoons and dishes. At 3.45 they are again formed in procession and marched to the steamer, leaving the island at 4.15, and arrive in Boston at five o'clock. The total number of children taken upon the excursion this year was 14,846, at a per capita cost of 16 cents. There is but one paid attendant, the officer in charge. The police department furnishes an officer gratis who accompanies all excursions from the wharf, and who preserves order and assists in the embarkation.