Few associations have had such outstanding help from distinguished world citizens as has the National Recreation Association. In 1908—forty years ago—the Honorable Charles Evans Hughes, then Governor of New York, later to be Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, delivered an address on “Why We Want Playgrounds” before the Association at the National Recreation Congress held in New York City. This address has been reprinted many times, has been used in the far parts of the world as well as throughout the United States, and is reproduced below.

Simply, beautifully, clearly, Charles Evans Hughes points out how fundamental and how important play is. What he said forty years ago is just as timely and valuable today. The truly great thinkers of the world have all agreed on the importance of leisure and recreation in the development of the human race.

In the death of Charles Evans Hughes, the recreation movement lost one of its early prophets.

**Why We Want Playgrounds**

I am very glad to have the opportunity to take part in the spread of the gospel of play. I cannot hope to say anything which would add to your instruction. Indeed, I have been amazed in examining your program at the specialization which this field affords. I congratulate you upon what has been accomplished. As the fruit of your study and research we may be sure that there will not only be playgrounds, but progress, as well, along intelligent lines.

The successful worker must have the spirit of play in his heart, and the successful man is only a boy with a man’s experience. He must have the zest, the devotion, the spirit of comradeship, the capacity for self-forgetfulness, the boy’s wholesome outlook upon life, if he is to do a man’s work in the world. How are we to save civilization from being caught in its own toils? How are we to preserve childhood from being too early drawn into the contests of life? How are we, in our great urban population, to make possible the spirit of play, the opportunities for childish sports which are essential to the development of normal manhood and womanhood? To the solution of that problem you are devoting your study with no little measure of success already attained. I cannot aid you by experience or suggestion, but I bid you Godspeed from the bottom of my heart.

We want play—simply play—for the children of our great cities. Those who are fortunate enough to live in the country have, in their own homes, the playground. The orchard, the meadow, the brook, the swimming pool, the nearby wood, constitute the never-failing source for gratifying the appetites, the normal appetites, of childhood in the country. And with what feeling akin to despair do we look upon the growing thousands teeming in the congested quarters of our cities, with the slight opportunities of the roadway to take the place of the open country!

We do not think of them in the early years alone, but we look forward to the time when they come to play the parts of men and women in the
world, and we wonder what is to be the future. Is their experience of life merely to be that of the hard taskmaster, the struggle for bare existence? Is the growing feeling of discontent to be accentuated and increased because of this state of abnormal deprivation?

We want playgrounds for children in order that we may conserve the health of our people. A great deal is being done in these days to protect us against the spread of disease. We are fighting with intelligence and with new-found zeal the great white plague, but the dread disease of tuberculosis must be successfully fought by developing stamina, physical strength, through exercise in all the physical activities. We must nourish that strength in childhood. We do not want simply hospitals and pavilions, and notices giving instruction to those who are unfamiliar with necessary precaution. We want to save the health of our children, so that we may nurture a strong, well-favored community. That is the surest way to stamp out disease. If we were thinking of nothing but the preservation of health and the proper function of government in protecting against the unnecessary exposure of the people to infection and the inroads of disease, we would make it one of our first objects to secure adequate playgrounds for children in the free air, and give them opportunities of recreation not afforded by their overcrowded abodes.

We want playgrounds for children to conserve the morals of the people. There may be some who look upon human nature as hopelessly debased and beyond recall, as exhibiting here and there extraordinary illustrations of spasmodic virtue—virtue in spite of tendency. We have, alas! too frequent illustrations of the weakness of humanity. We are all conscious of the pull downward, but the pull upward is far more powerful, and that is the reason we are, in the twentieth century, under free government with its benediction of prosperity. We want to help that pull upward. It would be a very wise man who could sever from environment and association and unnecessary temptation the tendencies to evil, and say how much they are responsible and how much is due to innate vice.

My opinion is that the average boy is a good boy and the average girl is a good girl. I believe that the average man and woman would rather do right than wrong; I have a profound confidence in the capacity of human nature to seize that which is good, to hold true to its ideals with a progress that is spiral, but none the less onward, always pressing to humanity's goal.

We have many unfortunate occurrences. We are constantly lamenting the continuance of this abuse or that error, but we are gathered together in this country because of our confidence in the good judgment, the good sense, the right intention of the average man. If it were not for that, we could not expect to maintain free institutions. Now, knowing this makes for a reduction of unnecessary temptations, it makes it more easy to have wholesome living. It gives normal youth a fair chance for gratifying normal appetites. It is a safeguard of the country and of the institutions of our government.

The best way to train a boy to do right is not to lecture him into tears about his wrongdoing, but to show him the delight of an honorable and happy boyhood. It is to give him opportunity to prove what is in him in good works. And the good will always, in the main, with exceptions that only prove the rule, prove to be the greater attraction. Boyhood and girlhood must have a vent in play. It is natural; it is right.

This country of ours has grown up nourished by youth who came from the country. We have reinforced our cities with the best blood of the rural communities where boyhood and girlhood have had a chance. The mothers of the country, the mothers of the men that have made the country, have had girlhoods and decent opportunities; and the boys, with their love of nature and their opportunities in the happy, careless, outdoor life, have developed a strength that, in these strenuous days, has enabled them to bear the burdens of statesmanship. We cannot, as our population becomes congested, keep men good by force. That is the old, mistaken, unsuccessful effort of despotism—a few with the advantages keeping the many good, obedient, docile by force. You cannot succeed on that line in a free country. Men must be their own policemen, and the conscience of each must be the guardian of the safety of all. Some say we must train in our great cities those who have had none of the chances which the fathers of our country enjoyed, to know and love the right. How are we going to do it? The schools are all right, but there is little that you can do by explicit teaching. Moral consciences are all right, but there is a certain point beyond which you cannot expect receptivity. If a boy or girl is to take easily to moral instruction, to listen readily to the voice of conscience, he or she must have a wholesome life. A few hours in the fresh air, a few hours of self-abandon in innocent fun, a chance to be a normal boy or girl will do more to reinforce your moral lessons than many, many days of mere teaching. Thus the playground will be, without
any direct effort, one of the regenerating and uplifting forces of the community. The ordinary man, if he has a chance to live a decent life, will live it; and if you want good men and women in the world, devote your efforts to a large degree in removing those obstacles which are in the way of decent, virtuous, wholesome life.

We want playgrounds in order that we may aid in the development of the sentiment of honor. I do not know of any better way to teach the boy to be honorable and straight than to give him a chance to play with his comrades. In the playground he learns it without any suggestion of rebellion against instruction and precept and preaching. He learns it because he does not want anybody else to cheat him, and he is “down” on the boy who does not want to play fair. And in the long run, because he is “down” on the boy who does not play fair, he will establish standards of conduct which we must maintain in the community and particularly in our great cities. If there is one thing that we need more than another it is the constant emphasis among our citizens on that spirit of fair play, that willingness to give and take, that generosity in defeat and that lack of assertiveness in victory which we identify with true sport, and which is learned best of all in childhood upon the playground.

Now, I do not know that by the work of playgrounds we mean necessarily the development of particular forms of athletic sports. I am not an expert in the matter. You may have other ideas. I confess that I do not like to see any strenuous athletic contests except on the part of those who are trained for such contests; then I do like to see them. I do not think it is necessary to turn boys who have not had training and the requisite hardening into the hardest kind of sport with a strain of anxiety and overeffort, merely to encourage play. We also want, it seems to me, to have the science so perfect that no one will see the science. We do not want routine and schedules and a training which smack of a playground congress. We want just fun for boys and girls—with an absence of self-consciousness and an opportunity for cheerful self-abandonment, with genuine interest, with every variety of diversion that science can suggest, but with the stimulus to the same feeling that the happy country boy finds when he goes whistling to nature’s playgrounds.

Now, I am glad, as I have said before, that so much is being done in these directions, and astonished at the prospect which is unfolded by your deliberations. It is another proof of the fact that if you get below the surface of anything—no matter what it is—you will find a field for the study of a lifetime. You have a rich field here. How it makes one’s heart ache to go through the crowded quarters of the city! During the last few weeks I have been going through the upper part of the State, the beautiful, beautiful State of New York, of which I grow fonder every day. I have seen the rare beauty of hill and dale, the charming countryside and the great mountains, and the delights of lake and stream; and then turn from this to the great metropolis with its wonderful statistics of commerce, its wealth beyond the dreams of avarice, its great prosperous population, and, at the same time, with a population of so many who are denied the opportunities that we want every brother man to have.

We cannot make society over. If there is anybody here who is indulging in the dream that you can have administration that takes no account of human nature, go on with your dream, my friend, but it is only a dream. There will be no change in human nature, and nothing can be done governmentally in a successful way that does not take account of the laws of progress; but, on the other hand, we can do a great deal more than we are doing, and there is not any reason in the world why we should not give the youth of our great cities a fair chance. We are going to do it, and I am grateful for this aid in that effort which promises so much—not only for our cities, but because of our interdependence, for the country as a whole.

**Congratulations!**

It is now fifty years since the American Institute of Park Executives was founded. The National Recreation Association leaders at this time wish to record the satisfaction they have had in working so closely with the Institute leaders for more than forty of these years.

In the early days of the Association much help was received from the rich experience of George Parker of Hartford, and Theodore Wirth of Minneapolis. For many years the Association has turned to Will Doolittle and many other park leaders.

A number of the Association staff, such as Harold Lathrop and Will Hay, have come out of the park movement. Association workers, such as Lebert H. Weir, James B. Williams and others, have been active in the Institute. Through the years there has been a fine spirit of good will.

The leaders in the Association extend to the leaders in the Institute their best wishes for the next fifty years.