

From Silesia Mills to Southwell Field

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The way it was

By George A.
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The beginning of construction of the Southwell Field recreational area along the Merrimack River in North Chelmsford calls to mind previous use of this, or adjacent, land for sporting events.

Following World War I, the U.S. Worsted Company operated mills in North Chelmsford under the name "Silesia Mills." As was common at the time, the mills sponsored the Silesia Mills Athletic Association with a semi-pro baseball team, affiliated with the Massachusetts Twilight League. (Abbot Worsted Company in Westford also sponsored a baseball team at that time.)

The team's home ball field was Silesia Park, located in the field east of Vinal Square between the railroad track and the river. They had bleachers and a club house. Games were played regularly on weekday evenings at first, Sunday baseball being prohibited by law.

However, at a Special Town Meeting on July 2, 1923, the voters exercised their local option by a margin of two votes (260 for, 258 against) to accept Sections 21 to 28 of Chapter 136 of the General Laws entitled "Observance of The Lord's Day," so that it became lawful to take part in or witness athletic outdoor sports or games, subject to the Statutory restrictions, on the Lord's Day between the hours of two and six in the afternoon.

The Silesia ball club took immediate

advantage of the newly passed law and scheduled a game for Sunday, July 8. This was Chelmsford's first Sunday ball game. It was reported that 2,500 fans were in attendance to enjoy the game that was preceded by a band concert.

The present writer recalls attending a ball game at Silesia in the early 1920's with his father, who asked, "Did you notice that player on the opposing team with high cheek bones? He's Jim Thorpe, a full blooded American Indian and probably the greatest athlete the world has ever seen."

This was, of course, long after Thorpe had passed his peak.

Thorpe had attended the famous Carlisle (Pa.) Indian School, where he made the 1911 and 1912 All-American football teams, was a great baseball player and was practically a one-man track and field team.

Thorpe could run, jump, hurdle, and

throw the weights, and in the 1912 Olympic Games at Stockholm, he won the decathlon, several medals, and was declared by the King of Sweden "the greatest athlete in the world."

But, the next year the Olympic officials found that Thorpe had once accepted a small amount of money for playing semi-professional baseball. This made him a professional athlete, and forced him to return the medals and trophies he had won as an amateur.

Thorpe became a professional baseball player with the Canton Bulldogs and, at one time, played with the New York Giants.

By 1929 Silesia Park was no longer used for baseball and had grown up to a hayfield. The present writer remembers helping to line off a football field there for the high school games in the fall of 1929, after the hay had been mowed and harvested.

(Football had become a regular team sport at Chelmsford High School only two years earlier, in 1927.)

Construction of the Southwell Field project demonstrates once more that the more things change, the more they remain the same.

Because, that's the way it was.

George A. Parkhurst is a Chelmsford historian whose family has lived in town since 1654.