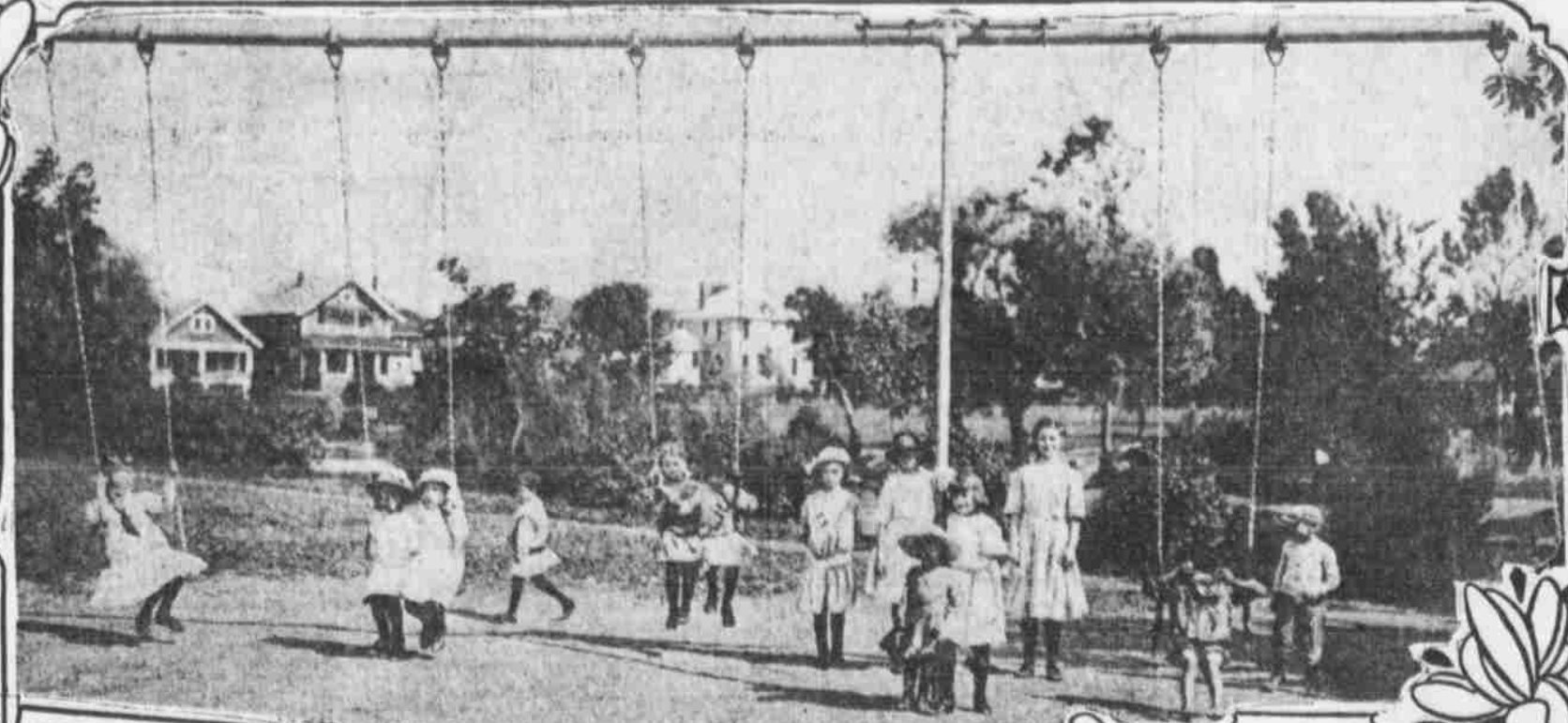


Play Grounds for the Little Folks in Omaha's City Parks



The Giant Stride



Some of the Swings at Kountze Park



Swimming Pool at Miller Park



On the Glider - at Bemis Park

By A. M. EASTERLING

MONY a mickle makes a muckle." So runs the old Scotch saying, and in verification of its truth may be cited the condition of the park playgrounds, where Omaha children now disport themselves. Years ago Omaha had nothing in the way of supervised playgrounds; then came an agitation, some money was raised and a sort of playground association was formed. Its one summer of activity was productive of quite a bit of desultory talk—i.e., but no definite plans for its future, and, like many another promising fad, it drooped and died for want of public support. The germ had been planted, though, and out of it came the systematizing of play at the public parks, where apparatus has been installed of the most modern sort, and where accommodation is provided for the entertainment of thousands of children. Park Commissioner Joe Hummel has given this phase of his administrative job much attention and has achieved very creditable results with the limited amount of money he has had. He estimates the cost of equipment now at about \$3,000, and the cost of maintenance, which includes the pay of the supervisors at the several parks, at something under \$100 a week.

Thus by patiently putting together little at a time the park commissioner has brought to pass a condition that has been approved by experts of the "playground" cult, even though he did decline most emphatically to give over a considerable portion of the small sum at his disposal in order to defray the cost of having an imported prophet of play look over the situation and make recommendations. The \$500 that was asked for the pay of the visiting brother will establish several swings, slides and the like for the use of the kiddies, or will more than defray the cost of maintaining and supervising the present plant for longer than five weeks, which is some length of time, even in Omaha.

No Place for a "Tough Guy"

Thousands of kids, the majority of them under 12 years of age, congregate as by instinct in the seven supervised park playgrounds Commissioner Hummel has provided. The girls play in one place of the park, the boys in another, occasionally all together. There is no ruffianism. Sometimes a "tough guy" tries to run things, and as often as this happens a supervisor comes along and the tough guy leaves.

So the small boys and girls have come to realize that the supervised park playgrounds are theirs. No gang leader or overgrown tough can molest them. The little tots began to play as their grown-ups worked—with all their energy and with a boundless enthusiasm. They splashed in the ponds, they climbed ceaselessly up stairways to slide down gliders, they clung to "giant strides" tenaciously and they hunted tadpoles with serious persistency.

"Are they happy?" asked Miss Mary Leary as she viewed the kids at Kountze park. "Are they healthy? Is it worth while?" And then her gray Irish eyes moistened and the big mother heart of her sent the red blush to her bronzed cheek. "Why, sir, I know them all. I have lived here so long and watched them since they were babies. They are a delight to the heart and a pleasure to the eye. See how brown and healthy they are! They are growing, and they are growing strong and healthy in the open air. Worth

while?" and she lapsed into the brogue. "Why, there's nary a one of 'em but is worth all the money and the time ye have spent on the seven playgrounds of the city."

And she was right. She was right, for one reason, because William Gunn said she was, and William Gunn, being a curious character, wise with the wisdom of many children, ought to know. He is Joe Hummel's chauffeur and his dialect is Scotch, and he knows children as the grown-ups know each other—a thing unusual in a modern man. Many a kid could call him by name as he lumbered through the parks in his automobile.

"Playgrounds have been my hobby," said Mr. Gunn. "Not because playgrounds are pretty, but because the children gather on them and make a big, glad noise while they play in a manner to harden the muscles and brighten the eye. What has been done for them is beyond reckoning in money. We're giving the city kids the times of their lives."

Proud of His Achievements

Commissioner Hummel is proud of his parks and his supervised playgrounds. He tries to be conservative and display proper and becoming modesty, but he's awfully proud. He has done a big work for around \$3,000 and he is supervising the completed work for less than \$100 a week, and he is proud of it.

"First I thought we could at least keep the youngsters off the streets and out of mischief by establishing playgrounds," said Commissioner Hummel. "And so we established one, but it was so popular that we saw it would serve a bigger purpose than keeping the kids off the streets. We could teach them self-reliance, give them a place of recreation where parents could have no fear of their environments or companions and—this you may not believe—but we could at the same time provide for the parents one of their most enjoyable hours of the day—the hour when they

could sit in the cool park shade and hear the shout of the playing youngsters, watching them grow strong in the sun and wind."

Seven Parks Now Equipped

The supervised park playgrounds naturally grew until they embraced about all of the available sites—Hanscom, Miller, Riverview, Bemis, Kountze, Fontenelle and Deer parks—and the territory was even stretched beyond the city limits, to include Elmwood park. In all swings were installed, and teeter-totters and slides, and where possible base ball diamonds were laid out and a pond was prepared.

Over each a supervisor was placed, preferably an elderly person, acquainted in the neighborhood. In such parks as Riverview, where foliage is dense, houses sparse and the nights, therefore, lonesome and dark, a man was put in as supervisor, but in parks like the Kountze a woman was selected, and the selections have been accepted without fault-finding by the patrons of these places.

In the beginning certain cranks and childish persons raised a considerable rumpus, assuring the park commissioner that so many kids would gather in the playgrounds that the walkin would shake with their shouts for block around. To some the laughter of a little child is not unpleasant, and there are even those to whom the wild, shrill cry of the boy at play is a pleasant sound. The park commissioner depended on these latter being in the majority among the residents around the parks. He must have based his judgment on sound reasoning, for instead of protesting and stopping their ears with nervous fingers, the men and women gather to watch, and it sometimes takes the stern commands of the supervisor to prevent these grown ones from joining in the play, sliding down the gliders and usurping the teeter-totters.

"Have to watch 'em," said the laconic Frank N. Williams, supervisor of the Bemis park play-

grounds. "Big, fat fellows come right in and climb in the swings and squeeze into the gliders and yell and screech worse than the most boisterous boy. But the neighbors do not seem to even mind that. For sure, modern playgrounds are a great thing, and there ought to be more of them."

To these youngsters Omaha is a very liveable place and the most liveable spot in it is the nearest playground. There they may be natural. There they may squirt mud between their toes, hide in big piles of sand and shoot down the smooth inclines without fear of a scolding. No grouchy, sour-faced person can come into this domain of the young of Omaha and order them out as trespassers. It is theirs, all theirs, and a mighty fine thing to have and to hold.

Still, the youngsters are not jealous. The more the merrier, and that is the reason a carload of kids can come tearing down from Benson and join in the festivities without creating a ripple of protest. They are all youngsters together—healthy, happy youngsters—a husky bunch, as every playground proves.

In the evenings bands play in some of the parks. The park commissioner has bought a "band wagon" in which the players sit when at parks where there are no band stands. These concerts attract many, and the safe, sane supervision makes it possible for all to come and until 10 o'clock of a summer's night sit in the cool breezes and moon for a little while.

Two Millions Invested

Something like \$2,000,000 has been spent on Omaha parks and boulevards, but very small sum has gone into Commissioner Hummel's new playground plans. There are, however, twenty-four square miles within the corporate limits of the city; there are great resources; there are fine, undeveloped park properties and there is a growing demand for playgrounds and there is a park commissioner who is trying to meet these de-

mands. He is just beginning, and being a practical fellow not given to dreams and hazy speculations, he is going about his business in a workmanlike manner—and the kids are for him, strong.

There is yet another recognized advantage to the city's supervised park playgrounds. The base ball diamonds in the several parks and on vacant city property have become orderly places, with games scheduled by kid leaguers and played without mishap. Formerly these base ball diamonds were bloody battlefields. Two nines, arriving to play, would find the diamond occupied and, believing they had as much right as the occupants, the matter was argued in a free-for-all, the victors proceeding at the finish to chase away their defeated fellow sportsmen and start the game.

Keeps Base Ball Schedule

Now the park commissioner's secretary is the kid leaguers' clearing house. He has a schedule of games for nearly every day in the week for the entire season. "First come, first served," is the rule, and weeks before the season opened the rush was on. With supervision of playgrounds amateur sports are becoming systematized. These sports are encouraged in every way possible. Not only are diamonds prepared and protection guaranteed, but the young sportsmen are given advice by the park commissioner, who now and again gathers the old veterans and holds a conclave with the kids.

Growing demands for playgrounds will swell the cry for more money, for apparatus, supervisors, police protection, and this is one of the problems weighing on the park administration.

"We could use more police protection to great advantage now," said Commissioner Hummel. "The supervisors are handling it well, but as the playgrounds are more widely used, and especially when the schools are out, the lack of better police protection will be menacing."

Looking to the Future

Private citizens are helping, with money and moral support, to make the playgrounds real recreation centers. The legislature will be asked for aid, that more money may be appropriated to the playground fund. Vague schemes, requiring much money and "expert advice" are being constantly proposed, but the park commissioner, working with the materials at hand, is seeking to solve the problems as they present themselves. It has even been suggested that extensive properties in the downtown business district be purchased, the buildings demolished and the land improved for playgrounds. The park commissioner, looking a little way into the future, is holding on to city property in the sections where the population is increasing, and he believes these places will be of great value as the business district drives the residences back into the suburbs.

All of the parks and the majority of the small neighborhood playgrounds are in strategic positions. The whole city is being served in a manner more or less efficient. There seems to be, however, a tendency to picnic in the playgrounds farthest from home. Thus, the north side wraps up a lunch and rides to the south side to spend its days off and the southsiders go north. Even so, says the park commissioner, the chief thing to do is to give them some place to go, north or south, to loaf and play.