

Summer at the Cambridge Skating Club before the Cambridge Tennis Club

For many years, the end of the skating season at Willard Street signaled a transition, not to tennis, but to the beginning of the children's gardening.

When the club was founded, Annie Longfellow Thorp's 1¼-acre field was an informal summer playground for neighborhood children. Beginning in 1914, with Mrs. Thorp's permission, a civic improvement association formed to use the property for a children's gardening program.

The first summer, the property was divided into 100 plots (8 x 16 feet), with irrigation provided by a connection to the Willard Street water main. Each child paid 25 cents for a season's rental of a plot. Seeds were supplied and also the use of all necessary tools. At the time, vegetables were considered boys' work, and flowers girls'. The association hired a young Wellesley College graduate to supervise the gardens from "sunrise to sunset" and a "practical farmer," who owned her own farm, to visit three times a week to help with the technical side of the venture. A recent Harvard graduate, trained as a social worker, was also on the team.

It wasn't all gardening. The children enjoyed sports in the park across Mt. Auburn Street and swimming near the Cambridge Boat Club, then at the foot of Ash and Hawthorn streets. At that time, the River Parkway (renamed Memorial Drive after World War I) ended at Hawthorn Street, so the "playground" extended to the riverfront. Beautifully landscaped, the park – one of the most popular in Cambridge – was lost when Memorial Drive was cut through to Gerry's Landing in 1949.

As for the gardens, the season ended with prizes, a field day, and field trips. Some of the children earned a bit of money by selling their produce, and with the experience gained in "Garden City" (as it was called), later found summer work caring for neighborhood gardens.

In 1926, the City Park Department began to support the project. Children's gardening continued at Mrs. Thorp's field through the 1920s, and after the club was able to buy the property in 1930. With the



Two views of Mrs. Thorp's field. The building in the background (at the north end of the field) was the clubhouse – a reduced and whitewashed version of the original bowling alley. City of Cambridge Park Department Annual Report, 1928.

rationing and shortages of World War II, the grounds of the club became a full-out Victory Garden, adults joining – according to one of them – in the "joys" of gardening. The club was a center of neighborliness during the war – both on the grounds and in the clubhouse for Red Cross work.

When the war ended, people were relieved to put growing, preserving, and canning behind them, and gardening at the Cambridge Skating ceased, replaced in 1954 by five tennis courts installed by the newly formed Cambridge Tennis Club.