

The Founding of the Waterville Boys' Club, 1924

by David A. De Turk

In 1924, there was great concern over the future of America's youth. In part, this was an international phenomenon. In November of '24, a speaker described the world-wide "Youth Movement" sweeping Europe and North America. Much of this effort seems to have been the result of World War I, a war in which millions of young people, according to some the best part of a generation, lost their lives. The memories of that great conflagration created the impetus to improve the physical, mental and moral conditions of the succeeding generation. This concern about the youth of the future was intensified by the countervailing forces of the Jazz Age, the perceived "immorality" of the Lost Generation and the growing pressure to regulate child labor and expand education. The *Zeitgeist* of the '20s was clearly filled with a desire to provide young people with opportunities to grow up healthy so they could contribute positively to world peace and prosperity.

In New England, there were already more than 60 boys' clubs. Closer to home, concern over how to keep boys with too much time on their hands busy led to the establishment of playgrounds and swimming facilities (built in the summer of 1923) throughout the Elm City. The Lockwood Company gave the city an island in the Kennebec River off Water Street for a playground, while Harvey Eaton made a conditional offer of 12 acres of land in the North End of the city, a plot bounded by Hazelwood, Drummond and Park avenues, for a play area.

Encouraged by the Community Service club, which was responsible for most of the youth effort in the city, facilities and programs grew, with special emphasis on summer activities. Lack of a major indoor facility limited winter fun mostly to skating. Community Service, under the leadership of President A.F. Cyr, Secretary Mrs. Anna Drummond, and Treasurer Cyril M. Joly, sponsored a benefit concert in March to help fund the summer playground program.

Meanwhile, another force was at work in Waterville.

In June 1923, the Waterville Chamber of Commerce purchased the historic Eagles Home on Temple Street with the intention of building a community building on the site. In fact, the Chamber was talking about building a convention center on Temple Street, similar to Portland's Exposition Building. The hope was that Waterville would then be able to compete for conventions, trade shows and other events which would improve the local economy.

As these plans were being discussed, the Boys' Work Committee of the Chamber (including A.F. Cyr, Frank Smith, Prof. T.B. Ashcroft, Horace T. Muzzy and Mrs. H.L. Emery) expressed the modest wish that a room be set aside in the Eagles building for youth activities.

Thus, the seed was sown for development of a boys' club.

The nascent movement was given additional impetus in May when Robert Armstrong, founder and director of America's largest and most successful Boys' Club, in Worcester, MA, came to Waterville to address the local Rotary Club.

Armstrong described the success of his club's efforts with a membership of more than 5,000 boys to an attentive audience.

By this time, the movement included representatives from Rotary, Kiwanis, the new Lions' Club and the George N. Bourque American Legion Post. Armstrong's visit was covered in depth by the *Waterville Morning Sentinel*, which also editorialized in support of a Boys' Club in its May 22 edition.

Interestingly, a Boys' Club already existed in Waterville even while these new plans were being considered.

Organized in the Fall of 1923, the club used rooms provided by the Unitarian Church, with jumping mats and boxing gloves available in a supervised and organized program which ended a successful first year in June 1924.

The new plans picked up pace in September 1924 when a decision was made by the Chamber of Commerce to establish a Boys' Club in the Eagles Home, a club specifically modeled on the Worcester club described by Armstrong.

A committee headed by Nat H. Barrow planned to remodel the building and open the club in December. The Chamber already had \$5,000 available for work to be done by contractor Augustus Carey (remodeling actually cost \$15,000 before it was completed.)

Initial plans called for the addition of a gymnasium at the back of the house with a reading room and social hall in the old building.

The Eagles building itself was one of the oldest and best-known homes in the city. It was built by Harvard graduate Timothy Boutelle. Boutelle, in 1804, became the third attorney to settle in the Waterville vicinity. He later became one of the most successful lawyers in the state.

Boutelle bought the land facing the north side of Temple Street and built his first home on that site. About 1853, he moved his home down the street and erected the mansion, one of the show places of Waterville.

Boutelle died in 1855. The house was then occupied by his daughter and her husband, Mr. and Mrs. Edwin Noyes. The property soon became known in the city as the Noyes' estate.

When Waterville began thinking about building a public library, it bought the property surrounding the Noyes home (with financial support from A.O. Lombard.)

Shortly after that, the house itself was sold to the Eagles, who owned it until the 1923 sale to the Chamber of Commerce.

By this time, the Boys' Club movement was supported by many prominent donors. The committee had no fears about financing the project! In October, the Waterville Woman's Club, under the chairmanship of Mrs. George F. Johnson, conducted a membership drive for adult sustaining members which brought in 70 new members and increased the total membership to 250. These adults pledged \$2 per year in membership dues.

As money came in and building renovations got under way, the committee chose a "superintendent" for its new club: J. Frank Goodrich.

Goodrich is a story in himself.

Born in Maine, two-year-old Goodrich moved to Passaic, NJ, with his

parents. He attended "common school" there. In 1911, he married. His wife died in 1919. It was then that Goodrich decided to return to school, even though he was left with a young son after his wife's death.

Returning to Maine, Goodrich enrolled at the Coburn Institute, where he completed the four-year program of studies in two years, finding time to become an outstanding football lineman on the Coburn team.

He then matriculated at Colby College, Class of '26, where he continued his career in football and academics. He also served as director of the boys' club at the Unitarian Church.

In the summer of 1924, he he spent two months at the YMCA college in Springfield, MA, and visited the Worcester Boys' Club to study its methods.

He was, it appears, the natural choice to lead the Waterville Boys' Club.

And so he did. After some delays, the renovated Eagles' Home was transformed into the Waterville Boys' Club in December.

And what a club it was!

A 50-foot by 40-foot gymnasium with an 18-foot ceiling was added to the rear of the building. Interior renovations produced a library, pool rooms, toilet, kitchen and dining room for 150 people on the second floor. The basement featured shower baths and lockers for the young members.

The Waterville Boys' Club invited the community to take its first look at the club during an open house from 2-9 p.m. on Friday, December 12, 1924.

On Saturday, December 13, the club opened its doors to the first 100 youthful members.

The facility was still owned by the Waterville Chamber of Commerce, but the newly-formed Boys' Club board now had a five-year lease on the property.

Leading the club administration was Nat H. Barrows, president; William W. Quinton, vice-president; Frank L. Elliott, treasurer; and George A. Johnson, secretary.

Board members included: G.G. Averill, Robert Nivison, Ralph Jewell, Leon O. Tibbetts, Charles F. Miller, Charles E. Glover, Jefferson C. Smith, Dr. John G. Towne, Herbert O. Brown, Dr. George F. Parmenter and Cyril M. Joly.

Goodrich's assistant was Ellsworth Millett.

And so, in an amazingly short time, Waterville had a Boys' Club of which it could be truly proud. It was an auspicious start to a long run of service to the youth of the area.

Source: *Waterville Morning Sentinel*, January-December, 1924