

MANSFIELD MEMORIES: Branch Street grounds home to town's early athletic contests

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MANSFIELD - This is the first in a four-part series on athletic fields of Mansfield.

The Branch Street grounds was one of the earliest athletic fields in town. It was located off Branch Street where we would today find Eddy Street. For about 20 years, it was Mansfield's main athletic field.

The grounds first came into use in the late 1880s. It featured a baseball diamond that faced toward Branch Street. In centerfield was a "towering" pine tree where fans could find shade. If a batter hit the pine it was an automatic double.



Mansfield High baseball team, 1906, which played at the Branch Street grounds.



"Kimos" of Mansfield club football team in 1905, one of the teams which played on the Branch Street grounds.

Club baseball began on the Branch Street grounds in the late 1880s. These were local teams comprised of players generally in their late teens or 20s. They charged a modest fee for admission, usually 10 cents. They played clubs from nearby towns. Teams sometimes came from as far as Hyde Park, Jamaica Plain and Cambridge. Mansfield's club teams were talented and won more games than they lost.

But the Branch Street grounds was rugged. One account from an 1889 game against Mount Hope described "puddles four and five inches deep in some places." Still Mansfield sports fans showed up in support. One ballgame in 1892 was described as "magnificent" where the "cranks and shouters, including representatives from the clergy, town fathers, and other officials, were present in large numbers and cheered lustily."

The Branch Street crowds were not always kind to visitors. That same year The Mansfield News decried poor sportsmanship on the Mansfield sidelines. They said of a game versus Attleboro: "It is perhaps too much to expect the "hurrah"

element, which is made up largely of boys, will ever learn to be courteous and cease to jeer the errors of the visitors.”

A few weeks later the newspaper lamented the deplorable behavior of fans from a neighboring town by saying “most of them were under the influence of liquor, and one or two more than ‘three sheets to the wind.’”

In 1896 the high school baseball team was “waxed” by the grammar school boys by a score of 20-15. “The juniors won’t be any happier over the event when they graduate,” said the newspaper.

Mansfield fans were loyal, vocal, and sometimes thrifty. A letter to the editor in 1902 asked why some were not willing to pay the price of admission.

“Why so many grownups witnessed the sport from the street instead of entering the grounds is a conundrum that no self-respecting man can answer,” the letter read.

“Come in, gentlemen, and support the sport you seem so much to admire at a distance.” It was signed “A Baseball Crank”.

By the 1890s high school football was also being played at the Branch Street grounds. The early high school football teams played sporadically and usually didn’t even have a coach. Mansfield’s club football teams also played at the grounds.

At times the Branch Street grounds were used for challenge baseball games. Such as on July 4, 1899, when the Fire Department defeated S.W. Card Manufacturing with the stakes being a “collection purse.” The Fire Department won 17-7. The game was followed by a “genuine Rhode Island clam bake.” In later years longtime residents also recalled a circus visiting the Branch Street grounds.

The land was owned by local builder David Eddy. He built houses on the grounds and it became Eddy Street.

“To Mr. Eddy belongs the credit of developing this once waste land,” said The Mansfield News in 1910. “It is now one of the most desirable locations in town.”