

NIA Fifth Avenue Beach · History



The following is an article by Angel Williams published in the Broadside on Saturday, April 12, 1980. Photographs courtesy of the Manistee County Historical Museum

The evening of April 14, 1931, deep in the great depression, a committee with a dream was meeting for the first time. The dream was a playground at Fifth Avenue and plans were laid for making the dream come true. The first project was to visit people on the Northside and talk with them, explaining the plan to buy some sort of playground equipment. Times were bad, many were jobless, men walked the soles off their shoes looking for work and children moved home from the cities.

The small group of men planning and hoping had to be great salesmen and the public generous. By today's standards people were poor. The average donation was \$1, the largest \$10, but by April 21, they had collected \$184, the very first money raised by the Northside Improvement Association (NIA). By April 20 \$337, May 4, \$485, May 19, \$531, May 28 \$600.

On June 29, equipment for the Fifth Avenue beach playground had arrived and was being set up by city workmen. This included one 30-foot wave slide 15 feet high, one straight 16-foot slide, eight feet high, one eight foot baby slide., 4 ½ feet high, one 12-foot heavy swing outfit, one three-chair baby swing, one four board see saw, on large triple combination and one travelaire 24 feet in diameter. \$611 was raised on the drive and the total cost was \$600.

The organization then called "The Northside Playground Fund" was on its way. April 1, 1932, saw the name of the group changed to the Northside Improvement Association and the members increased from seven to 30. At the end of 1931, the treasury held \$1.91. On April 21 and 22, the NIA sponsored a benefit show at the Lyric Theatre for the purpose of raising money to use in the installation of floodlights for Fifth Avenue beach. The lights would insure safety for bathers and recreation and make Fifth Avenue beach the only lighted beach north of Grand Rapids. The organization also hoped to purchase tables, benches, stoves and other beach equipment. Besides the move, a stage show offered the "Northside Minstrels" and other local talent acts including Swedes Orchestra five hundred tickets were sold and the show netted \$100. In February of 1933, further plans were made. Two more lights to be purchased and changing three lights on the 40-foot poles so that the rays would hit the water surface. Money would be raised through popular subscription to purchase the two additional floodlights and erect a retainer wall at the edge of the drive to keep the sand off the road and the cinders off the beach.



In January of 1934, the association looked back on its first three years as the Northside's only civic body. It had developed one of the most popular bathing beaches and playgrounds on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan. It had obtained \$600 worth of playground equipment for children, a battery of huge floodlights, bath houses rewired and a bandstand constructed. Early in February a pinochle party with 42 tables in play was held to wipe out the deficit of \$17.70 from 1933 and to get a good start for 1934. In June, the NIA ordered an all-metal water slide for adults and children at a cost of \$165. Construction of the brick building which included ladies and mens sanitary rest rooms began at this time also. It is interesting to note that the 6,000 bricks came from the Grant School. In April the Northside Benefit Musical Comedy by Russell Fisk, "Idiosyncrasies of the Schoolroom" netted the association \$114.40 money used for the water slide. In August the NIA sponsored a three-day carnival at Fifth Avenue beach.

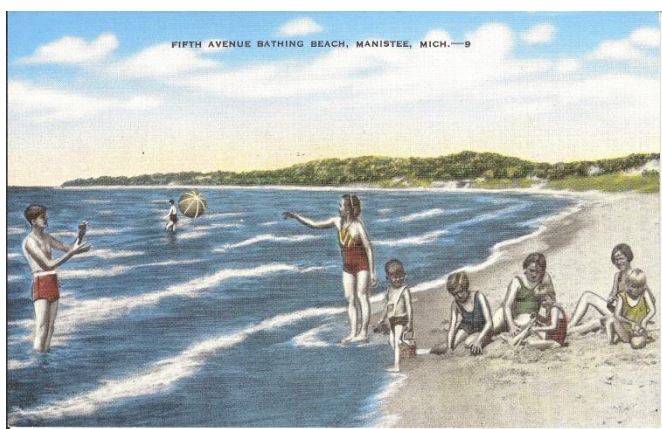


June 24, 1935, marked the fifth anniversary of the Fifth Avenue Beach and playground. It also marked the official opening of the shelter house the NIA project for that year. Congressman Albert J. Engel was invited to attend and Mayor Harold Hill and Thomas Hauk, president of the Board of Commerce, gave addresses. The program began with a parade of the Iron Works band and American Legion Drum and Bugle Corps. The mayor officially turned on the floodlights for the season, the shelter house was opened to the public for inspection and dancing was enjoyed to the music of Art Anderson and his "Lucky Devils". In October, the NIA play "Here Comes the Showboat" with home talent, was presented at the high school auditorium.

Time marched on. We had struggled through the depression and World War II. The year 1947 found the NIA still hard at work. Group pictures showed the original dreamers looking a little older and new members had come to help them. Besides the improvements already mentioned, were shuffle board courts, tennis courts, horseshoe pitching courts, a merry-go-round and a juke box. Calls for members to bring shovels, wheelbarrows, hammer, saws and post hole diggers meant work nights of painting, repairing and installing equipment. The area was further beautified with tree plantings, flower beds and a fountain. The shelter house and surrounding grounds were popular for school picnics. A highlight of the summer of 1947 was the band concert by the Iron Works Band, presented at Fifth Avenue Beach rather than on the Court House lawn written by Russell Fisk when he was in the Army of World War I. "Hell, Heaven or Hoboken". The winter of 1947-48, the tennis court and adjoining area on Washington School playground were flooded to provide a skating rink for Northside youngsters living far away from Sands Park. The flooding was done by Northside Improvement members who also maintained the rink. The water and electricity were supplied by the City.



The NIA received many commendations in return expressed their thanks many times for the help they received from the people of "our town" from the generous people who gave so willingly during the lean times, to the organizations, city works, city fathers, people who sold tickets, talent, people who loaned equipment for jobs to be done, who helped their dream come true. In 1952 the NIA received the Community Service Award presented by Manistee Walsh Post 4499, Veterans of Foreign Wars.



INTERESTING NOTE

A clipping pertaining to a meeting held June 7, 1934 strikes and amusing and nostalgic note called the "Battle of the Trunks".

Believing that men attired in trunks on the beach are repulsive to women and children a committee was appointed to appear before the City Commission and request that an ordinance be passed to regulate and compel all bathers within the city limits to either wear a two piece bathing suit or a full length one piece suit".