

THE HISTORY OF STACY J. GRAYSON PARK AT STEELE CREEK

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Stacy J. Grayson Park at Steele Creek was originally state-owned property scheduled to become Watauga State Park. City records first mentioned the Watauga Project in 1941, when Bristol, Tennessee agreed to furnish water to the State facility.

In 1946 and again in 1949, the Board of Commissioners urged the State not to abandon their plans for the development of Watauga State Park. They cited the great need for such a recreational facility on our community. Shortly after this, the City was advised that the State could not fund the development of Watauga State Park at Steele Creek since they were funding Warrior - Path State Park in Kingsport. Their policies would not allow them to fund two State-owned and operated parks so close together in East Tennessee.

In 1953, the City of Bristol, Tennessee leased 405 acres from the State and began making plans to develop the Steele Creek area themselves. Records show that in 1956, the first plans were drawn up for the development of a park at Steele Creek -- but actual work was not started at that time. Strong complaints were voiced by the citizens of Bristol, Tennessee and Virginia concerning the lack of adequate recreational facilities in our community and urged the Board of Commissioners to do something about the situation.

Due largely to the vision and determination of the Mayor in 1961, Stacy J. Grayson, plans were finally put in motion for the development of a park in the Steele Creek area. In July of that year, our first Parks Commission was established. They were to have almost full responsibility for developing and operating all recreational facilities. The vision was a coordinated program, the task was enormous, but the first "giant step" had been taken. The Chairman of the Parks Commission was Jere King, who was later the Mayor of Bristol, Tennessee. All of the members of that first Commission played prime roles in the development of the Park at Steele Creek and other recreational facilities in Bristol, Tennessee. In September of 1961, the first paid employee, Superintendent of Parks and Recreation, was hired.

The following letter from Border Guild, Inc. was sent to Chairman Jere King: "The members of Border Guild, Inc. wish, through you, to commend the City of Bristol, Tennessee for establishing a Commission of Parks and Recreation. Through our Community Service Committee, we are constantly looking for means of serving our City. We hope that when your plans for a park at Steele Creek have progressed further, you will contact us so that we may perhaps play a part in this development."

At the November meeting of the Parks Commission, the following recreational activities were suggested:

General

1. Camp sites
2. Golf course
3. Amphitheatre at Stone Quarry property
4. Picnic area and barbeque pits
5. Picnic shelter
6. Lodge
 - (a) Boat rental
 - (b) Concessions, etc.
7. Fire truck for children
8. Swimming pool
9. Boating
10. Nature trails
11. Skeet range
12. Horseback riding

Pre-School Children -- 5 years and under

1. Sandboxes
2. Slides
3. Teeters
4. Swings
5. Spray pool
6. Climbing apparatus
7. Children's zoo

Age 6 to 12

1. Seesaws
2. Swings
3. Slides
4. Climbing apparatus
5. Merry-go-round

Age 12 to 18

1. Tennis courts
2. Badminton
3. Volleyball
4. Basketball goals

Age 18 and over

1. Concrete checkerboard
2. Shuffleboard
3. Archery
4. Horseback
5. Tennis
6. Basketball goals
7. Badminton

In February, 1962, Mayor Grayson and the Board of Commissioners approved bond resolutions to pay for a wide variety of facilities for the City of Bristol, Tennessee. The sum of \$120,000 was authorized for use in the development of parks and playgrounds -- the largest portion being allotted for use at Steele Creek. The overall plans for the development of that area were announced. They included a dam to create a man-made 40 to 60 acre lake with sand beaches, picnic areas, trail rides, shelters and playground equipment. The plans also included a 9-hole municipally-owned golf course. The overall area contained approximately 2,200 acres -- 405 which had been leased from the State by the City.

Since City funds could not be used for any development outside the city limits, plans were announced in August, 1962, by the city officials, of the annexation of the area south of Steele Creek. This measure was taken to bring the Steele Creek area within the city limits, thus enabling the Parks Commission to proceed with their development plans for the area.

During that same year, Mayor Grayson empowered Charlie Worley to secure a new lease on the Steele Creek property for the maximum number of years possible. Graves Engineering was employed to draw up the plans for the park, the final revised plans being approved by the Board of Commissioners. Kearfott and Associates were employed to draw up the initial design of the dam site with the help of a TVA Engineer. The Sullivan County Health Department made a survey of Steele Creek for possible sources of pollution. It was announced that the water from the creek to fill the dam site would be safe for swimming.

STEELE CREEK PARK TO BECOME BRISTOL'S FIRST WEEKEND VACATIONLAND was the headline in the Bristol Herald Courier on Sunday, February 10, 1963. The newspaper featured pictures of the Park's dam site, the cleaned lakebed, future beach area and grills. The park, designed to contain a 60-acre lake complete with beach and boating facilities, had already been cleared of timber by the Parks Department crewmen. Picnic tables which were to be scattered throughout the park area were made from the timber cleared from the lakebed. Several small bridges to cross the creek were made from the cleared timber. The park, when finished, would cover some 400-acres. It would host a riding stable and bridle paths which had already been carved out of the woody mountainside. Shaded by countless pines and hardwood trees, the park, when completed, would have facilities for some 600 to 1,000 visitors daily.

In 1963, Darrell Winslow was hired as our first paid Director of Parks and Recreation. He worked closely with members of the Parks and Recreation Commission in the development of Steele Creek.

On April 9, 1964, the City of Bristol, Tennessee was awarded a rare 99 year lease on Steele Creek Park. Governor Frank Clement and Mayor Grayson signed a State-City Agreement which would enable the City to operate the facility until March 20, 2063. This replaced the original 10-year agreement with renewal options granted in 1953. Under this new lease, the City would be allowed the use of the State owned land for recreational purposes with the following provisions:

- (1) Land shall be devoted solely to recreational uses and public recreational purposes or it will revert back to the State.
- (2) The City submit any and all plans and specifications for construction, operation and maintenance of recreational facilities to the Department of Conservation for approval. No work on improvement be done until approval is acquired.
- (3) The City allow the State to inspect facilities under construction and the State will have the power to order the City to correct any and all defects on errors in construction and maintenance.
- (4) No part of work may be sublet without State approval.
- (5) The City shall establish a system of charges for use of facilities, making no special concessions or discounts and shall grant no passes permitting use of these facilities by any person including Federal, County and City Officials on terms more favorable than those enjoyed by the general public.
- (6) The State may dissolve the lease upon 30-days notice if the City does not abide by the terms set forth.

In May, 1963, the barn had been completed and 16 horses were stabled at Steele Creek. The riding trails were opened to the public.

The dam was finally closed at Steele Creek on May 2, 1964 and the waters from the creek started filling the giant 65 acre lake. Plans were announced for the opening of the Park in early June. When the Park did open in June of that year, there were complete facilities for sunning on the white beaches, diving platform, parking for 250 cars, hiking trails, boat ramps, canoes, grills and picnicing areas, concession stand, restrooms, softball field, over 2 miles of bridle trails and horseshoe area.

Lifeguard stands were stationed at strategic locations and the park was patrolled by a mounted park policeman. In July of that year, the riding ring was completed.

The January, 1965 minutes of the Parks and Recreation Commission noted that plans for the zoo had been abandoned and it was suggested by Darrell Winslow that this area be developed for camping. There would be room for 40-campsites. Needed were 40 tables, toilet facilities, water and a camp road. The project could be completed with Park Personnel for approximately \$10,000. Quoting from his report - "It seems this would be an excellent project for some civic group to undertake for the community since it would draw a great number of outside visitors to our City."

In April of that year, the Kiwanis Club made an offer to organize the installation of the train at the Park. Seventy percent of the gross intake would go to the club until the train was paid for. After that, the club would receive twenty percent for 10-years but would put ten percent back into the Park each year.

The expenditure for 1965 ----- \$15,911.41

Receipts ----- \$21,399.84

The golf course was completed and opened in August, 1966. Ken Messerole was responsible for the layout of the golf course and Bill Hunt was the professional hired by the City. The course was built for \$65,000.

In September, 1967, the Commission voted to remove the horses being stabled at Steele Creek and do away with the barn. It would be converted into bath facilities for a camping area since no action had been taken on Mr. Winslow's suggestion in 1965.

Paul Cook, Jr., acting Parks Director, was asked to start on the camping area as soon as possible. He pointed out that spending a great deal of money on a campsite and finding out later it should have been located elsewhere in the Park was a waste of money. He suggested it would be wise to formulate tentative plans for at least the next 10-years to be a guideline for placement of facilities. The 10-years have passed.

The Commission agreed to allow some amusement organization to install kiddie rides at the park, to be placed in such a manner as to create a relaxed condition, thus reducing a carnival atmosphere. These rides were discontinued sometime between 1967 and 1972, but no mention was made until 1972 when the Commission turned down the request of another organization to once again install kiddie rides.

In June, 1971, Congressman James H. Quillen and Mr. Robert Lusk, Supervisor of Cherokee National Forest, delivered a deed to Mayor Jere King, deeding 1,212 acres to the City for Steele Creek Park from the U.S. Forest Service.

In January, 1972, the Parks Commission minutes showed the first mention of the pumping station at Steele Creek. Mr. Bill Gillespie, member of the Parks Commission, advised the members there was no immediate solution to the overflow. The Staff was instructed to prepare a "plan of action report" to be presented at the next meeting. The report would give the daily procedure followed as well as the results of the new Chlorination System for the swimming area.

In March, it was agreed that a petition should be circulated seeking signatures of people who would like to have the 9-hole golf course made into an 18-hole course. If enough interest was shown, a move would be made to approach the Board of Mayor and Commissioners in hopes of securing the land for the development.

In September, 1972, the Parks Commission voted that all swimming be discontinued at Steele Creek until all pollution was eliminated. If the problem of the pollution could not be eliminated, the Commission recommended the construction of a pool. The revenue from the swim operation was estimated at approximately \$6,400 per summer, and it was felt that without that facility, park attendance would be curtailed considerably. The attendance report for March 1, 1972 through September 4, 1972 at the Park itself was 94,450.

In early 1973, the Bristol, Tennessee Board of Commissioners and Mayor Jere King voted to change the name of Steele Creek Park to the Stacy J. Grayson Park at Steele Creek.

In May, 1973, the Stacy J. Grayson Park was deeded to the City from the State. Included in the deed was a section of land which the State owned but was not leased by the City. The Park now had 2,163 acres. State Senator, Gwen Fleming, had worked closely for the past 18-months in Nashville with Walter Crinley, Director of Planning and Development, to help obtain the land. The deed was signed by Governor Dunn, State Attorney General David Pack, and Conservation Commissioner Granville Hinton. This deed contains the exact provisions set forth in the lease granted the City from the State in 1964.

The records show that on October 17, the Parks Commission agreed to purchase water testing equipment to check the bacteria count at Steele Creek.

In March, 1974, the Commission once again discussed the possibility of acquiring land for expansion of the golf course. A report was given on the water tests conducted in the swimming area at Steele Creek. After receiving the report of the significantly high amount of bacteria count present in the lake, motion was once again made and passed that the swimming area be closed. I assume it was finally closed to the public at that time.

In May, 1975, Ed Street Construction Company in Johnson City agreed to draw up plans for a pool at Steele Creek at no cost to the Commission. The Parks Commission agreed to the proposal and recommended that the City Council Members be informed of the efforts to pursue construction of a pool at Steele Creek.

The Parks Director presented a site plan for the future development of Stacy J. Grayson Park at Steele Creek. The Commission had wanted a master plan of a significantly more comprehensive nature but agreed this plan would suffice as the needed portion for Federal grant assistance.

During the 70's many things transpired at Stacy J. Grayson Park. Naturalist studies of the knobs were done. Every type of plant and animal species native to the eastern United States were found -- some of these species are not to be found anywhere else in this area. This alone should be a great incentive to create nature trails at the Park.

A Committee was appointed concerning leasing land to the Country Music Foundation, and policies and procedures concerning group usage of Park facilities. Country Music Days are held at the Park each year now and the Museum is located there.

Blue Grass Music, which is such an integral part of the heritage of this area, can be enjoyed there every Tuesday night.

Interest continued in construction of a pool at the Park. It became the primary item on the agenda at several of the Commission Meetings.

People are still enjoying golf, sunbathing on the beach, boat rides, the train rides and picnicing at the Park. The Day Camp, though not showing a profit and in danger of being dropped because of inadequate funds to pay the counselors, is very popular with the children that attend and it is always filled.

Improvements are constantly being made at Stacy J. Grayson Park. There remains a strong interest in making the municipal golf course into an 18-hole course. The most recent development on swimming facilities at the Park was August 20, when State and Local Officials met to discuss a massive clean-up program for the polluted lake at Stacy J. Grayson Park. The lake is ranked eighth out of about 120 bodies of water on the Tennessee Clean Lakes Program priority list. Though funding is tied up until October, 1982, the State will apply to the Environmental Protection Agency for Clean Lakes Funds for the lake if the localities appropriate the matching funds.

Let's hope the future will be a bright one -- that it will see the opening of nature trails, the campsite developed, the 18-hole golf course completed and swimming facilities--whether a pool or a clean lake--made available to the citizens of Bristol, Tennessee and Virginia as well as all the visitors from Southwest Virginia and East Tennessee that come to enjoy the beauties of Stacy J. Grayson Park. It is a challenge for our community -- but with work and determination IT CAN BE DONE!

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