

Hard work of many led to Stewart Park

One of Corning's busy residential areas, complete with recreational facilities and efficient housing, is Stewart Park on the north side of the city, off Baker and Winfield streets.

It got its start in the late 1920s, mainly as a badly-needed city park to provide a place for youth and family activities. After all, the Southside had Denison Park, so why, too, shouldn't the Northside also have a park.

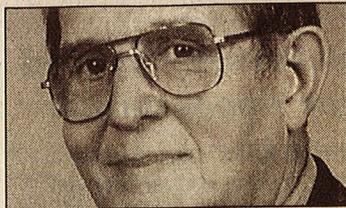
Spearheading the park project was a group of civic-minded men, including **Albert Bonnell**. He was the father of journalist/CGW public relations veteran **Don Bonnell** of South Corning. Here's his story of the park's history:

In that era, the several acres of public land which now encompasses Stewart Park were bounded by the upper end of Sly Avenue, Thorn Street, Winfield Street and the extreme easterly end by Baker Street.

The section along Sly Avenue and Thorn Street had a colony of New York Central Railroad men – engineers, firemen and switchmen. They, along with my father, a roundhouse employee, daily walked a mile or two to work at the roundhouse and north yards. Their path cut deeply through the Stewart Park property. It ran from the corner of Sly and Thorn toward Winfield Street and then through a wooded lot and hill, eventually coming out on Baker Street near the present VFW Post home.

That rough and hilly section was known to the kids and old-timers as the "Rock-a-Bye." It was used by scores of people from all over the Northside for sledding during the winter months.

My father, after talking with several of his railroad friends (Cornish, Dee, Gamble, Owens, Perry, Rockwell, etc.) saw the need for a playground for the neighborhood kids during the summer.



PEERING

Dick Peer

He found a corps of volunteers willing to work on the proposal. Then he took his idea to **John Bell**, who was the alderman for the Sly Avenue-area ward of the city. The alderman liked the proposal. He checked the city property records and found the large plot of land involved was owned by the Stewart family.

In those days the family owned and lived in what is now the Patterson Inn on East Pulteney Street.

The head of the Stewart family also liked the proposal and eventually deeded the land to the city for lifetime use as a public park. With the site now assured, it was time to go to work. Everybody started pitching in, being especially boosted by Alderman Bell.

Businesses and individuals loaned heavy chains and the use of earth-moving equipment, tradesmen from the New York Central Railroad helped out, and large telephone poles and lights donated by the phone company were placed with help from New York State Electric and Gas personnel. NYSEG also worked with the city in later years to erect lights in the park for evening play in the playground area and for evening outdoor picnics.

The first piece of playground equipment built by the volunteers were six large swings made from heavy chains attached to telephone poles.

This attracted so many children the first year that during '28 and '29 the city

and volunteers added sand boxes, picnic tables and benches, sliding boards and other pieces of playground equipment.

Two large baseball diamonds were built in the flat area along Sly Avenue. Many of the teens of the neighborhood worked summers as caddies at the Corning Country Club and they pitched in to build a small five-hole golf course.

The Rock-a-Bye hilly area facing Baker Street was cleaned of brush to make sledding safer and more attractive for children and adults alike. Eventually, the latter section became home to the worldwide Cinderella Girls Softball organization.

The flatland near Baker Street in the early days was used by Baker Street ball players as the home diamond in the early days of the City Baseball League, which consisted of eight teams from all parts of the Corning area. Many young Northside High

School baseball players got extended early training during the Depression years on the baseball diamonds in the park. Several of them eventually won pro baseball contracts after high school baseball under the coaching of Jake Jacoby, Frankie Rotsell and other diamond mentors.

As years went by, the park project which had started in 1927 grew by leaps and bounds – picnic areas and baseball facilities were expanded and some 30 years later an outdoor swimming pool was built.

Soon after the close of World War II, housing was short for homecoming veterans.

To alleviate the shortage, the city obtained several surplus military buildings from Sampson Naval Base on Seneca Lake. They were trucked to the Stewart Park site and rebuilt on land along Winfield Street. Scores of young war brides started building their families in that Stewart Park Housing project.

The project is a glowing example of what dedicated men and a community can do to fill a need by cooperating together to work for the benefit of all.