



Few Americans remember Joseph Lee,
but largely through his efforts
our children enjoy

a Place to Play

by Kevin V. Brown

"PLAY IS serious work," Joseph Lee once remarked. Lee spent most of his life, including 27 years as president of the National Recreation Association, proving it.

You could hardly find a more unlikely candidate. Tall and frail and singularly unsuccessful in athletics, he nevertheless participated in all of them. Though he came from a wealthy Massachusetts family, his lifelong interest was giving underprivileged children a chance to participate, too.

Next Friday, in playgrounds across the nation, descendants of those children will salute "the godfather of playgrounds" on the 20th anniversary of his death. As the eulogies are read, they will stand amid the splendor of modern recreational facilities and landscaped parks.

But there was little splendor when Lee began his task of finding children a place to play more than 50 years ago.

Lee was one of the founders of the Recreation Association in 1906, and in 1910 he became its president, a post he held until his death. In those early years the association was lucky to beg or borrow 30 square feet of vacant lot for a playground. The children played in dust, gravel, and cinders; abrasions and skinned knees were the fees they paid. Their recreation consisted of drills, songs, and marches around the play area. There was little else to do

on a bare lot. And there were few recreational leaders, no schools or colleges to train them.

There was some progress, however. In 1907 it was noted that "another gain has been made . . . the crowds of rough boys who used to gather at the outskirts of the play yard have greatly diminished and fewer appeals have to be made to the police department."

The idea, through Lee's efforts, caught on. In 1906 there were 41 cities with playgrounds. Today there are 20,000. And in most of them, instead of 30 square feet for playing areas, the recommendation is for five acres for each school district and up to 20 acres for each community.

There are large outdoor fields, and large indoor gyms; there are expansive swimming pools, and lights for games after dark. There are 65 schools in 27 states that train recreational leaders, and instead of the handful of leaders of 50 years ago, there are now 76,000.

The ideals of Joseph Lee were not summed up in statistics, however, and they are still being carried on in playgrounds across the nation.

As Lee himself once put it, "There is less need on the playground for teaching baseball than there is for teaching high moral character."



Joseph Lee's achievement was supplanting back-alley play areas of World War I era (inset) with modern playgrounds like the spacious Detroit beach center (below).



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