

## The History of Ernest Thompson

### Seton Scout Reservation

#### THE ERNEST THOMPSON SETON SCOUT RESERVATION

By Willard R. Devaul

Comments added by Edward H. Anderson to extend documenting the Reservation to the year 2000.

I have been asked by President Murray to jot down my recollections of the conception, birth and growth of the Ernest Thompson Seton Reservation. First, I want to apologize for the use of the word "I" so many times, because of my close association with the camp from the selection of the site to the properties surveys and the design and supervision of the construction of the various structures.

Tom Hillegas was selected as Scout Executive in 1949 because he had experience in developing and running camps. I was appointed chairman of a committee to hunt for a suitable site. Tom Hillegas and I went to existing camps in Massachusetts to see how they were laid out and run. The council had many sites under consideration, some were as follows:

- Ten acres on the shore of Lake Zoar in Connecticut. Lake was ideal for boating and water sports, but site was considered too small.
- The Close property on the north side of John Street in Greenwich, about fifty acres with small shallow lake. Property was bounded on the west by the Audubon property. Tract was ideal except for inadequate lake and water supply.
- Large tract of high land between North Street and Water Company Reservoir in Greenwich was offered as a gift, but no water was available. The Council President at the time was urged to accept it and then sell it to use the money to buy another site, but he turned it down.
- Calves Island off Byram Shore in Greenwich was offered as a gift, but was turned down because it would require a boat to transport scouts to and from the island. This would have been bad in an emergency.
- About fifty acres was offered in Ridgefield, Connecticut. This was well wooded, but was turned down because lack of water.
- Conyers Farm on North Street in Greenwich was sold to Rosenstiel. I was making subdivision studies of some areas and suggested that an attempt be made to have the new owner give about 25 acres to the scouts. It was rugged land, well wooded, but unsuitable for development into four acre plots. It was located between Upper and Lower Cross Roads just below Conyers Lake and had a large stone building near the road that would have

been suitable for storage and administration purposes. All of our efforts of persuasion failed so back to the Water Company property again.

- The Greenwich Water Company property was originally bought by the company for the purpose of constructing a dam and reservoir for additional water supply. When the Merritt Parkway was constructed through the site, it could no longer be used for a reservoir and was for sale as a subdivision. I had worked with the Water Company making studies of the property and had all the property surveys in my office. I had suggested several times, but the size and \$360,000 price was too much.

A great many studies were made and attempts made to get a buyer for the entire property who would then sell about 75 acres to the Scouts, but to no avail. Then the great day for Scouting in Greenwich arrived when the Water Company agreed to cut the price to \$180,000.00 and the Council decided to start a drive for funds. Credit for getting the greatly reduced price goes to Robert Kaufman who was manager of the Greenwich Water Company at the time.

Prescott Bush, Jr. was appointed chairman of the drive committee and a goal of \$240,000.00 set to cover cost of land and some needed structures. Everyone worked hard, but Greenwich failed to respond. Only \$102,418.06 was pledged and I was asked to suggest a way to get the property or the project would be dropped and money collected refunded.

It so happened, at that time, that there was a shortage of gravel for use as a base for road construction in town. Since the property contained very good gravel at two possible lake sites, I recommended that bids be received from contractors for each cubic yard of gravel and topsoil excavated at the lake sites. We would not only get paid for the materials, but would be getting two valuable additions to the property.

Perna Bros. submitted the high bid and then Greenwich Trust Co. came to our rescue and agreed to furnish a mortgage with gravel and the property as collateral. The Board voted to go ahead and the deed was signed on August 28, 1958. We were in business at last.

The following will give a brief history of the growth of the camp through the years to date.

#### 1958

The contractor started excavating the first lake and, when it was completed, Tom Hillegas was honored by having the lake named after him. Excavation was slow because gravel could only be used during the construction season. The lake (still unnamed) in the conservation area of the property to the north was started when Lake Hillegas was completed. Without the lakes, the Ernest Thompson Seton Reservation would have been only a dream.

#### 1959

Mrs. Elsa Menke gave 4.589 acres of land to the Council.

### 1960

On a beautiful sun-shining day, at a site overlooking Hillegas Lake, the Ernest Thompson Seton Reservation was dedicated on October 2, 1960.

### 1961

This was a busy year at the camp. With money still coming in from the gravel, the Rangers Headquarters was constructed first. It was necessary to drill a well and construct a sewage disposal system. Original bid prices ran over the budget so some revisions in the original plans were made. Work parties of Scouters did all the landscaping around the building.

City water was available along the Round Hill Club Road and arrangements were made to tap it and lay a water main across the club property and through the swamp to reach campsites in the area east of the Parkway. Combination toilet and washstands were constructed at the end of the line. Hot water was provided with bottled gas. This building was later winterized for winter camping.

The Health Lodge was constructed this year with funds contributed by Mrs. Robert L. Peterson, the daughter of Dr. William Henry Fry. Water and electricity were run up from the Rangers Headquarters and sewage disposal provided. Heat and hot water were provided by electricity so that the building could be used in the wintertime.

### 1963

The Town of Greenwich Health Department ruled that Hillegas Lake could not be used for swimming because the flow in the lake did not meet the minimum requirement for the number of boys that would be swimming. Gravel again came to the rescue. The pool, with adjoining shower and dressing room, was constructed. Water was supplied by extending the water main from the shower building on the eastside of the Parkway.

Up until this year, wood platforms were used for tent sites. They were stored in the wintertime under the Parkway Bridge. Funds were made available to construct the storehouse, later turned into the Trading Post, for storage and distribution of food and supplies during summer camping.

### 1964

Up until now, accommodations for the scouts had been the main problem with not much attention had been given to the staff. To remedy this, an addition was added to the Trading Post to provide a wash room and toilet facilities. The water main to the swimming pool was tapped to provide water and electricity extended from the westside of the Byram River.

This was the year when another very valuable addition was made to the Reservation. The only access to the property from Riversville Road to Round Hill Club Road was over a wooded road that crossed the Fisher property. I had been advocating the acquisition of the tract from the Fisher Estate to save the expensive construction of the road through the swamp to reach the campsites on the eastside of the Parkway. Things reached a critical stage during this year when I was preparing a subdivision of the entire Fisher property. A study was

submitted to the executors of the Fisher Estate showing how a long narrow strip of Scout property along the Parkway would improve lots in the subdivision and save road construction to reach the tract crossed by the wooded road. They agreed to an exchange and, therefore, the Scouts acquired a tract of high land in exchange a tract that they could not use and, in the bargain, saved the cost of an expensive road.

#### 1965

During the fund raising drive to purchase the property, various structures needed for the proper development of the camp were listed and donors given the chance to pledge money to the project of their choice. One such structure was a chapel where services could be held by all faiths. Mr. & Mrs. Carleton Bradley and Mr. & Mrs. Willard Devaul donated funds for a chapel to be constructed at the beautiful secluded site in the woods atop a high rock cliff away from all camp noises and activity. The Round Hill Originals provided the Altar & Chapel equipment.

#### 1966

This was the year when the old bridge over the Byram River, constructed of large tree trunks, gave up and collapsed. A reinforced concrete bridge was designed to carry a 15-ton load. A considerable saving was realized by using precast

I-Beam slabs manufactured by Blakslee & Co. in New Haven. Mr. Devauls friendship with Mr. Blakslee made it possible for him to donate the slabs so that the Council only had to pay for the abutments and installing the slabs that were trucked to the site from New Haven.

#### 1967

Highlights of this year was the Schneider gift of a tract of land...

No new structures were constructed although a screened dining shelter was designed for use of the camp staff at the Trading Post, but it was never constructed. A tent has been used for this purpose.

#### 1968

Boating and more intensive use for Hillegas Lake was increased by the construction of the boat dock donated in memory of Eric Feldman, Troop 3.

Other items of improvement during the year were construction of a concrete pipe culvert east of the Parkway and the laying of an asphalt pavement on various sections of the camp roads that got the greatest amount of travel.

#### 1969

Much needed funds were obtained by the sale of four acres of land on Riversville Road not needed for camping purposes to Mr. Neuworth.

#### 1970

The area on the westside of Hillegas Lake just north of the Health Lodge was graded for the double use as a parade ground and parking lot.

### 1971-1972

This was the beginning of the acquisition of several valuable tracts of land that extended over several years. The Greenwich Council is indebted to Eli Silberfeld for his generosity in giving parts of his adjoining land to the Council so that greater access could be obtained between the camping and conservation areas.

### 1973

This was a year of great activity at the camp. Friends of Scouting were again generous in their contributions for much needed facilities.

Mrs. Carter gave money for the construction of the Activities Building.

Water line was extended from the Health Lodge to a Men and Women's Latrine near the Activities Building making it possible for the opening up of that area for troop camping.

Through the years, camping in tents was slowly changing over into permanent structures. Individuals and local Civic Organizations had been contributing the development of Seton has been made possible by large and small donations. We regret we are unable to list all of them here, included are the Greenwich Rotary Clubs, Lions Clubs, Kiwanis and many private citizens. Typical contributors are as follows:

- Apache Campsite Development including a latrine was donated by Litita & Oliver Sandreuter in memory of William Ewing Sherman an active Scouter and Town Comptroller.
- Totem poles designed and carved by James C. Reilly as his gift to Seton Scout Reservation. These poles were at the Vehicle Bridge, but dry rot took its toll.
- Winter Cabin formerly a "shower house" converted to a lodge and dedicated to Leslie T. Hand.
- Leantoos- Funds donated by Willis M. Fanning and Theodore D. Helpin.
- Byram Rotary Club donated funds for a Leantoo in memory of John C. Allen in the winter campsite.
- The Exchange Club of Greenwich donated funds for a leantoo in memory of Jay Partridge in the winter campsite. Campsite with watered Latrine donated by Old Greenwich Lions Club.

Plans were prepared and an application to the Town for a permit to excavate a lake just north of swimming pool. This project would have remedied the flooding on private property down stream and at the same time provided funds through the sale of gravel, but the Town turned down the application because the dredging would eliminate some wet areas. The Town of Greenwich IWWA committee may be willing to change their minds in the future when flood damage increases due to land development north of the Scout property and we will get our third lake.

1974

"Jev's Meadow" dedicated June 8, 1974 to Virginia Jevne.

1978

Greenwich Jr. Women's Club- funded a Leantoo in the winter campsite.

1980-1982

Roadways improved with some resurfacing. Culverts added to improve drainage. Trees planted around Conservation Lake. Systematic cutting of trees to improve property, produce timber and firewood.

1984

Six 4 acre lots along Porchuck Road were sold providing a buffer between the reservation and the public road. This decreased vandalism. A seventh lot was approved by P & Z but not sold. Temporary license for a buffer was granted to purchasers for a 75' wide strip between the purchased lot & the camp properties. This would be in effect until the seventh lot was sold which would then require a 15% set aside for the 200 acres north of the Merritt Parkway.

The cell phone tower lease was approved by the Council Executive Board and tower constructed.

1985

Seton Scout Reservation reached its 25th year. Conservation Lake was renamed Prescott S. Bush Sr. Lake and the Nature area named to honor Willard R. Devaul a key Scouter in the acquisition of Seton.

Adm/Commissary building enlarged to provide a staff kitchen and male/female shower facilities and flush toilets for the Summer Resident Camp Staff. One handicapped bathroom installed, in Ladies Area.

1986

Old Greenwich Lions Club yearly gifts, persisted in providing funds for four Leantoo's in Lions Den.

1987-1989

The Malcolm S. Pray, III building memorializing this youth who was in his teens when his life was cut short in an auto accident. Malcolm S. Pray, Jr. took on the task of raising the funds to bring it to completion. This is now the focus of Seton Scout Reservation activities.

#### 1990

Fry Lodge was modified from a single usage Health lodge to a temporary lodging for the Sr. District Executive (Exploring). Kitchen modernized and closet space added.

A Campmaster Corps was started to support Seton.

#### 1992

A steel bridge was installed across the river leading to the pool.

#### 1993

A 21.6 acre piece of property was sold west of the parkway and east of Conservation Lake bordering on Porchuck Road. It included the right to use a 50-ft strip for a mutual driveway.

A 400' deep well yielding 20 gpm was dug behind Lions Lodge with an all weather hydrant installed. This was connected into the water supply pipes to the pool and the three latrines southeast of the Merritt Parkway. This eliminated the need to purchase water which had become prohibitory expensive due to leaking pipes under swampy areas. The water meter connection was left intact in the event of potential well problems.

#### 1994

Eleanor and G. Gordon Fisher Lodge (Rangers house)- replacement of the septic system was required. Some internal modifications were made.

#### 1995

Entrance Roadway was moved southeast to provide improved site lines needed for exiting traffic safety. A request to approve the building of a parking lot was put on hold by P&Z Board of Appeals until they received a description of current camping usage at Seton. Council decided to put entrance modifications on hold until Parking Lot approval was received. Cost to build separately was the major factor for this hold.

#### 1996-1997

Entrance & Parking Lot were constructed and the roadway drainage improved. The existing road was resurfaced.

Fisher Lodge- new air conditioning and furnace installed. Some interior improvements were made.

A trail map and an orienteering map of Seton were developed from current aerial photography. This is the first mapping of Seton for usage by Scouts to enhance their training.

#### 1997-1998

Rearrange interior of Fry Lodge to provide a separate bedroom from living room area. Small room previously known as a Doctor's Office was converted into the camp Trading Post.

### 1998

The Greenwich Council voluntarily agreed to impose a Declaration of Restrictions and Preservation Easement on that Reservation lying west of the Merritt parkway (158 acres). The Restrictions prohibit any future development, other than for Scout activities and programs. The Easement is in favor of the Town of Greenwich, which therefore has the right to enforce the Restrictions. This ensures that the 158 acres will remain in essentially its natural condition in perpetuity.

Commissary-Administration Building now known as Lions Lodge, was converted into an all seasons building offering the ability to use it as a summer camp headquarters, meeting area or a sleeping facility with easily stored and assembled cots. New kitchen with interior walls & windows. A gas heating system was installed.

All trail markers were replaced with a newly designed, highly visible disc. Bridge replaced by the Order of the Arrow in the vicinity of Conservation Lake.

### 1999

New 2" water lines installed 42" deep from Lions Lodge to Akela Woods, the Winter Camp site and to the Athletic Field. Each has an all weather hydrant for year round usage and bubblers for the summer. The new pipes to the pool and the (2) latrines beyond the winter campsite were connected to existing above ground piping for summer usage. A communications line and 110-v line were installed in the same ditch. Power at sites is limited to minimal lighting.

Principal roads in camp were surfaced with asphalt road millings, providing an all weather surface. The drainage at the Pray Bldg. was corrected and we now have a dry basement. The basketball court drainage was also improved.

The concrete abutments for the former bridge behind the pool were raised by the OA approximately two feet to prevent future bridge washouts. A substantial canvas cover was installed over the wooden platform behind Lions Lodge to provide an activity area for inclement weather usage.

### 2000

A wooden bridge was constructed by the OA on the above mentioned abutments. The finished bridge was dedicated and a plaque installed naming it Stewarts Crossing in honor of the former Council Commissioner, Richard Stewart who spent many years developing activities for the youth in this area.

The Nature area was dedicated during the 25th year rededication ceremony in 1985 to honor Willard R. Devaul, the key Scouter in the acquisition of Seton. This area is now defined by the mounting of a bronze plaque in his memory.

Construction started on a maintenance building at the entrance to the parking area to house and service camp equipment.

Planning was initiated for the design of an Administration Building, Pool replacement and the rearrangement of the area in front of the Pray Building to facilitate traffic control and improve the landscape. To this end, the basketball court will be moved to the rear of the Activities Building. The Activities Building will be redesigned to add a large covered and enclosed porch overlooking the lake, as well as a possible redesign of the interior to accommodate male/female-sleeping facilities.

Second boating dock created to provide additional opportunities during summer Day Camps.