

The early days of the Branford Community Council

The 40th anniversary of the grand opening of the Branford Community House on Church Street will be celebrated Feb. 3, 2003. This article chronicles the early years of the establishment of a community recreation department.

At the beginning of the 20th century sports in Branford were not organized in any cohesive way. Teams were often organized by neighborhoods and sponsored by a local businessman. Uniforms were obtained if money allowed and ball fields were empty

lots and the Green. After World War I, there was a national movement largely through the Y. M. C. A. to formalize recreation activities. A group of concerned citizens organized the Branford Community Council on Oct. 13, 1920 rather than be restricted by the rules of the Y. M. C. A. The chairman was J. B. Thwing of New Haven and Pine Orchard, Warren E. Mumford was secretary



PICTURES OF THE PAST

Jane Bouley

and the council consisted of 30 members. The Council was a private organization, not sponsored by the town, with 500 members paying yearly dues of one dollar. Funds were raised by a door-to-door campaign, business sponsors and other fund raising events.

The mission of the Council was three phases of community life: cooperation with the home, cooperation with the schools and recreation. In 1921 the Community Council leased the Henry Harrison House at 960 Main Street as a Community House for five years at a cost of \$500 per year. The space was used by the Visiting Nurse Association, the Gaylord Health Association and for a kindergarten. An emphasis was placed on the teaching of cooking, sewing, health and activities for mothers and children.

Miss Cronin directed the activities at the Community House, which included a well-equipped kitchen for classes. Ruth Stannard and many volunteers taught kindergarten on the first floor. A health

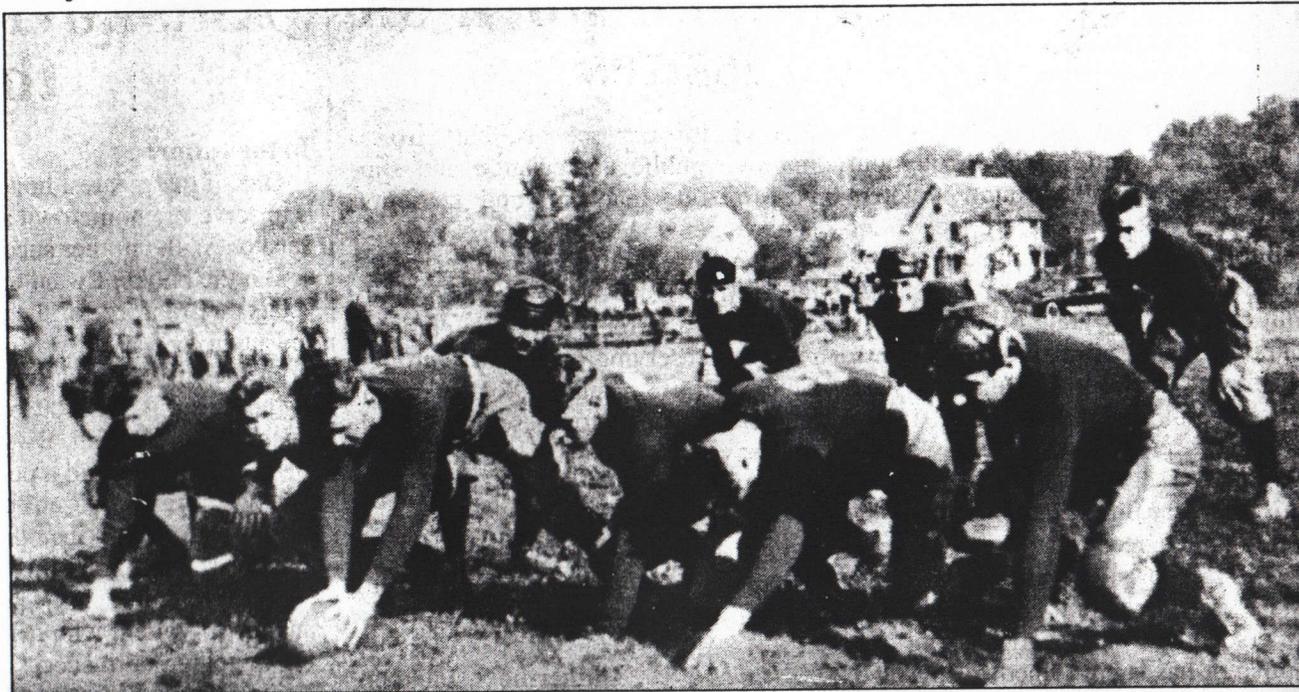


Photo courtesy of the Branford Historical Society

In the early 1900s ball teams were not well organized and played on empty lots on the Green.

center in memory of Dr. Charles W. Gaylord was operated by the Visiting Nurse Association. On the upper floor was a sewing room and game room. The Community Council also erected a bandstand on the Green.

The Hammer family, the owners of the Malleable Iron Fittings Company (MIF), took a great interest in community activities including the Community Council. In 1916 MIF began filling in land on Meadow Street and graded it for a ball field for use by the town and the Community Council. At that time it was considered the best outdoor facility in the state and in 1932 Hammer Field was deeded to the Town of Branford.

Henry Parsons was named the first recreation director in 1924 and the Hammer family underwrote

his yearly salary of \$1,800. Parsons organized youth activities, especially baseball. Two subsequent directors, Paul Rhodes and Dave Kilgore, organized youth basketball and football. They both encouraged adult leagues such as the Branford Townies and Laurels and coached Branford High School teams.

Funding for the Community Council became difficult during the late 1920s and the Town of Branford began supplementing the recreation budget. The lease on the Harrison House/Community House was not renewed. The Community Council remained a private organization until a Recreation Advisory Board was appointed. The Board recommended that the town finance and name a separate department appointed by the selectman and the new Recreation Department was put in place in 1950.