

In 1857, Carl Gustaf Johnson, a recent Swedish immigrant to the White Lake area purchased 63 acres near Whitehall and built a homestead that still exists at the corner of Lake and Main in Whitehall. The property eventually became the Johnson Addition to the city, still often referred to as Sweden Town.

When the White Lake area became known, particularly in the Chicago area, for its beauty, clean water and cool summers, the resort business took off. The Johnsons began Johnson's Resort that eventually became the White Lake Villa Resort in the same family.

During the peak of resort business around the lake, local residents needed places to enjoy the water as well as resort guests. The mixing of local residents and guests at the Villa beach created confusion and problems. The Svenssons' logical solution to the situation was to do something constructive. In 1951, they donated a portion of their lakeshore property to the City of Whitehall for a community beach. Their donation was combined with a Tannery parcel to provide a substantial four acre park. The only condition for the gift of property was the requirement that the city develop a beach, which with the ideal lake levels during the resort era would have been a simple matter.

The newspaper account at the time reported: "Over a period of years it is planned that a parking area can be put in, awnings and other playground equipment added, a bathhouse built and a picnic area developed, together with the beach."

Unfortunately decades passed and none of this happened. Not only was there no picnic area, nor other amenities, there was no beach.

In 1969, eighteen years after the gift of property to the City, with no evidence of improvements, the family requested that the property be returned to them based on the agreement. The response by the city was to deliver a dump truck load of sand to



The Whitehall Forum

When you look at increased summer business, remember the Civic Fund!

SEVENTY-NINTH YEAR

WHITEHALL, MICHIGAN, THURSDAY JULY 26, 1934

NEW SERIES, VOL. XVI, NO. 21

Plan Beautiful Whitehall Bathing Beach

Svensson gift opens way for development of park and beach on White Lake

Dream of many years, the development of a bathing beach and parkway which will give the people of Whitehall access to White Lake the Beautiful, was brought close this week by the offer of Mr. and Mrs. Charles A. Svensson to deed 100 feet of lake shore property to the city of Whitehall.

The property is at the north end of their holding, is 190 feet long and nearly 500 feet wide. In return, the city will give to the Svensons the 50 foot stretch of beach adjoining their property on the south. This area has been used as a city beach for years, but has been regarded as extremely dangerous because it is so narrow and fronts on the Seaside Drive. So dangerous was it deemed that the city did not let it out as a public beach this year, hoping that the new arrangement could be worked out in time.

By City Manager Howard Gwin-up, the General Shoe corporation will be asked to donate 200 feet additional of their property to make an area of 300 feet of beach. The site is regarded as potentially one of the finest beaches on the lake.

At a recent meeting it was planned that a parking area be put in, swings and other playground equipment added, a bathhouse built, and a picnic area developed, together with the beach.

Whitehall residents, when the offer of the Svenssons is accepted, will have three areas available to them. Through the generosity of the Covell family, a beautiful parkside approach to Whitehall is being created south of White

The Trailer park is a beautiful picnic area which provides dock space for boats, but is a dangerous swimming area because of the deep water and the piling. The new beach will be a picnic area on the shores of the

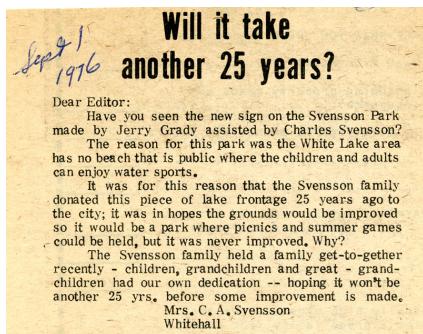
Tannery officials have indicated that unless conservation department officials frown upon the location, they will probably be anxious to cooperate in every

the property as evidence of intentions to develop it. The City Manager sent a letter to the family that stated in reference to the fill: "I am sure you will find the park [it was only vacant land at this time] used considerably more this year, and I know you will be pleased with its development."



In 1971 Chuck Svensson was managing a popular campground at Windy Cove and requested that the city consider leasing the neighboring donated land to expand it. The response stated that the deed prohibited the land's use for anything but a park or beach or it would revert to the family.

In 1976 a letter to the editor was published in the Whitehall Forum stating that it had been 25 years since the donation of the property. The family had built and installed a Svensson Park sign and conducted their own, private dedication of the park on the stark, vacant property.



In attendance was Nora Svensson, the originator of the letter and the source of the gift of property to the city. Her daughter Eleanor Carlson and son Chuck Svensson and their families attended.

It would be another decade before the city began to plan seriously about developing the park. In 1990 they managed to get a grant from the MDNR for State funding. Finally, on Arbor Day of 1992, 41 years after the donation of the property, a developed park was dedicated. It included a paved parking lot and paved boat ramp, a wooden bridge, two volleyball courts, a swinging bench, two stationary benches for viewing the lake and a play structure, but no beach. Because of changing water levels, the shoreline was guarded by a wall of large rock rip-rap.



The park was used for several years but about the turn of the century it began to decline in use. The volleyball courts were grassed-over, the view of the lake was obstructed by out-of-control brush and invasive cattails and the boat ramp went unused due to overgrowth. The lack of view of White Lake was brought to the attention of this writer by Chuck Svensson during a walk-through of the declining park.

Not long after that conversation, the family was contacted by the Muskegon County Conservation District (MCD) and the City of Whitehall concerning available grant funds for the White Lake shoreline habitat restoration. They offered to update the park using federal funds. It seemed the ideal opportunity to restore the park.

During a later tour of the park in 2010, Chuck, representing the family, was asked what aspects he would like included in the redesign. Realizing that a beach would come and go with varying water levels, he requested a soft boat ramp for non-motorized water craft. He also stated that the park should have a view maintained of the lake, and something for kids to play on.



During the remediation of the tannery site, it was suggested that Svensson Park might be used as a location for storing polluted dredgings to dry before transferring them to a disposal site. It was also mentioned that the park might be converted into marsh, in order to make the development even larger. These were of course, objected to by the Svensson family.

The re-landscaping proceeded in 2011 with varied elevations and native species, and the view of the lake restored by using lower vegetation along the shore. It was a huge improvement over what remained of the

1992 development. The remaining two requests; playground equipment and the soft boat ramp had yet to be included.

In 2015 Chuck Svensson passed away without having seen his three requests fulfilled and in the same year there was clear evidence that once again, the park was in decline, but for a different reason this time.

This time it was due to a lack of on-going professional oversight. Such diversity in a small space cannot be left to a normal park maintenance program alone without specialized input. You can't install a complex mix of native plants, toss the keys to DPW, Park



The view of the lake after the 1992 development

Maintenance and walk away expecting the installation to maintain a balance on its own. During the walk-through of the park in 2010 with the representatives managing the restoration, the family had anticipated this and asked the question: "Who's going to maintain this?" The response was "We will."



Invasive plants overwhelming the habitat restoration

By 2016 the view of the lake was gone again, and a native mix of wildflowers had been replaced by aggressive goldenrod. Exotic, invasive plants like Japanese honeysuckle, olive shrubs and others were rampant throughout. The design and intent of the park was disappearing and any

positive examples of using native plantings in landscaping was gone.

The city of Whitehall was contacted and responded with considerable interest and participation. After some delay to apply for additional state funds that were eventually turned down, funds were allocated to rescue the park.



With a great deal of help from Howmet employees, the Boy Scouts, volunteers and city council members, about thirty people gathered to remove a huge amount of invasive plants. The Muskegon Conservation District was engaged to re-open the view of the lake and a large swing set was installed by the city along with a wooden musical activity for the kids that was suggested by a city council member. An accessible picnic site, and a bike rack were included. Enough of the funds were left to re-plant over 400 wildflower plugs under the guidance of the MCD.



As the cherry on the top of the new park look: In 2018 a massive, wooden pergola in the spirit of the park, was designed and built by volunteer city employees from the DPW and police. It has become an iconic landmark on the shore of White Lake. We can't thank them enough.



How will another decline in the park be avoided? It will require some form of informed oversight by those who care for natural surroundings in White Lake area and are willing to invest time and money in its protection. As far as the the current battle goes, my wife Jan (Svensson) Grady and I regularly perform the maintenance and invasive plant control that we are able to, that is beyond the scope of typical city park maintenance. We will no doubt, be asking for an additional volunteer or two before very long.

Svensson Park is intentionally not a traditional city park, which makes it a unique setting in natural surroundings. It brings visitors closer to nature and its inherent benefits, as opposed to colorful playgrounds, expansive open areas and noise. Ideally, a future trust to provide continuing, supplemental maintenance of the park along with volunteer participation would be an ideal legacy for the community and for a White Lake Area founding family.

See Svensson Park on Facebook