

July 04, 1998

The Alexis Caisse Park Springs (Part Three of Three)

In recent years, a community effort, organized by local attorney Dick Kelley, has been working hard to upgrade the historic Whittemore Park into one of Windham's major beauty spots. A bandstand is being constructed to the west of the pond, and it may have housed its first open-air concert by the time this is being read. If not, it will be sometime this summer. Dick Kelley has also been supervising a massive clean up of the park, and the University of Connecticut have donated a large number of plants and shrubs. The fruits of Dick's work can be seen in the new signs at the park, and in particular a remembrance plaque which reads: Alex Caisse Jr. (1905-1983) Outstanding Public Servant. Respected Civic Leader, Husband, Father and Grandfather. "We shall never weary of remembering you."

It also should be pointed out that Alex Caisse was a prime mover in getting the park opposite Park Springs built. The land that Lauter Park occupies today was donated to the city in 1954 by the Phillip Lauter Foundation, a charitable organization founded by the owners of the Electromotive Company, thanks to much lobbying from Caisse. He had long envisaged a park and swimming area for Willimantic's youth, and after the donation of the land he also convinced hesitant adjoining landowners to sell their land for the new park project so it could be properly completed. Caisse negotiated with one landowner who insisted that he couldn't sell because he needed a grazing area for his cow. Caisse promised the landowner that he'd supply free grassy fodder for the cow until it died. The deal was cut, and Lauter Park opened to the public in 1956. Caisse was certainly a parks advocate, and under his direction he developed and maintained all the town's parks. Other than Park Springs and Lauter Park, there's Young's Park, donated to the town by Charles Young in 1916, and the Soldier and Sailor's Field, more commonly known today as Memorial Park, donated to the town by the Quidnick-Windham Manufacturing Company (located in the Bridge street mills) in 1928. Caisse ensured that these parks were maintained for the enjoyment of the public.

Alex Caisse retired in February 1972. He was honored by a lavish testimonial dinner at the Willimantic Elks Club, attended by more than 400 people. He was presented with a honorary life-long membership of the Connecticut Association of Street and Highway Officials (CASHO), an organization which he had helped to organize to funnel state funds into municipal road programs. He was the organization's president in 1958. Shortly after his retirement, Caisse became the commissioner of the Willimantic Housing Authority and was a central figure in the construction of the John J. Ashton Towers elderly housing project at the west end of Valley Street.

Alexis Caisse Jr. died in the Windham Community Memorial Hospital on February 17, 1983, following a heart attack. Like many of the city's large historic French Canadian contingent, Caisse left an important legacy behind him. He had been a trustee of St. Mary's Church since 1942, a member of the local branch of the St. Jean Baptiste Society,

a member of the League of the Sacred Heart, a Past Exalted Ruler of the BPOE (Elks), and a past president of the Franco-American Club. He had also been a vice-president of the Willimantic Savings Institute, a past president of the American Public Works Association and a member of the Connecticut Society of Civil Engineers.

His large funeral took place from the Bacon Funeral Home, and he was interred in St. Joseph's Cemetery. The Alex Caisse Park Springs are well named. Give Alex Caisse Jr. a thought the next time you pick up your supply of spring water at his Park Springs.