

Friends of Spy Pond Park Newsletter

Winter 2009

Out On the Ice

By Betsy Leondar Wright



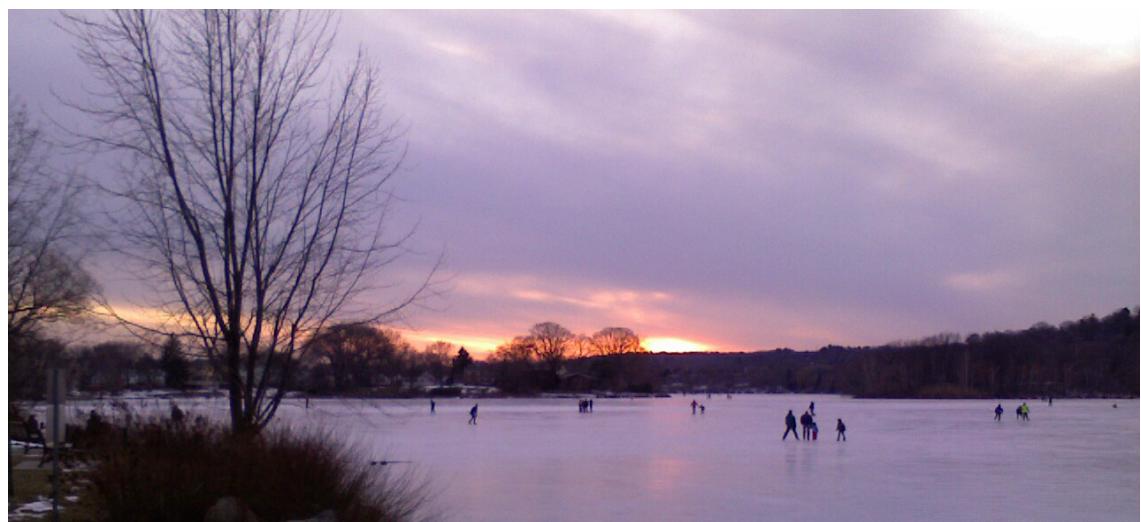
"Winter Landscape" (1565) by Pieter Bruegel

Before climate change started, until the 80s and early 90s, Spy Pond tended to have thick ice 4 out of 5 winters, usually for a month or more. Now we get maybe one frozen weekend every other year, sometimes less. Saturday January 10 was probably our one day this winter, and I saw about 25 people skating and sliding far on the pond – but by Sunday the ice was covered by snow. Long-term ice is rare now. Good thing no one is counting on harvesting the ice for his/her livelihood now!

The most important thing to remember about ice on Spy Pond is that it's irregular, thinner where there's a spring or a drainpipe, so always watch out. Only when the main ice is a foot thick or thicker is can you count on those thinner areas to support you. Never go out at night or alone; always carry a broom or hockey stick. If you do fall in, Eva Balazs's advice (based on her son's experience of falling through the ice as a teenager) is to float on your back and spread your arms and push your back gradually up onto the ice, keeping your weight spread out. And then get to a hot shower immediately! It's a risky business, not to be taken lightly. But keeping those caveats in mind, a frozen pond is a wonderful thing.

Whenever the ice is thick enough to be safe and smooth, without snow on top, the pond is transformed into a winter playground. It looks like the Pieter Bruegel painting "Winter Landscape," with a hundred figures scattered over a wide area. Hockey teams practice, parents pull little kids on sleds, children with slippery boots skid across the ice, and skaters do lovely spins and turns. Even watching from the shore, it's delightful. Once my friends and I played broom hockey with a crushed tomato can for a puck for an entire afternoon. Another time my nephew and I walked on black ice, marveling at the cracks, bubbles and leaves we could see deep within the ice.

The most exhilarating 2 minutes of my entire life was 10 years ago when Chris Brown (a former Belknap Street resident) let me sail his homemade ice sailboat across the frozen pond, from the park to the island. He put a helmet on me, and I sat down on the very low seat and studied the controls. My sailing experience was essential; it had a sheet to control the sail and a tiller to control the angle of the runners, just like a sailboat. The wind was brisk, so as soon as I pulled up the sheet tight to the wind, I started to skitter across the ice. I gained speed until the ice boat was flying extremely fast, straight for the island. The vibration from the rough ice shook me like an earthquake as I sped forward. Very soon I saw the island looming before me, so I turned the tiller hard and let the sail go loose, which turned me sideways to the shore. Coming back was less exciting; because the wind wasn't pushing me that way, I had to do lots of short tacks back and forth, towards the Boys and Girls Club, then toward the condos, repeating until I reached the park and it was someone else's turn. I never got to do it again before Chris moved away. But I hope I live long enough to have another chance to ice-sail across Spy Pond!



Skaters on Spy Pond (2008)

Spring Memories: A Thespian for All Seasons

By Eva Balasz

There is a small island in the middle of Spy Pond. Crows are roosting there, living comfortable, safe lives. They are smart and brave, crows are. They are known to organize themselves to hassle away enemies and defend their nesting grounds communally. That is what happened one day.

It was late April. The stately maple tree in my backyard was still bare. Writing at my desk behind the picture window—glancing toward Spy Pond now and then—I anticipated a productive, tranquil morning.

Well ... about 10 o'clock a flock of crows appeared—big black birds, maybe eight or ten of them—cawing fiercely. They started wheeling around the old maple. Through my binoculars I discovered that there was a racoon in the main fork of the tree. He didn't move. Head tucked into his chest, he looked dead.

The agitated, frightful cawing continued for more than an hour. Some birds kept circulating above the tree while others—feathers ruffled, beaks open for ceaseless cawing—swooped down to sit on the branches. Three of the biggest crows were hopping about, getting closer and closer to the racoon, making pecking movements towards him and cawing harshly. It was a fantastic commotion. The racoon did not stir.

What had happened?

No way of knowing, but I suspect the racoon had raided a crow's nest and was caught in the act. There are racoons living along the shore, we know that. They are occasionally spotted in the neighborhood. What happened, perhaps, was that our racoon swam out to the island looking for, and helping himself to, a great delicacy: fresh-laid eggs.

He raided a nest and was caught on the spot, was chased away by the enraged community and was pursued as he swam back to the mainland, all the way till he reached the fork of my

maple tree. The racoon played dead. That was the only option he had—to pretend he was beyond punishment.

By noontime most of the birds left, except for some sentries. They continued with the same racket. By mid-afternoon the sentries left too, but some of the birds kept coming back at regular intervals to check on the racoon. He did not stir.

Only with the approaching darkness did the crows stop coming. At the last ray of daylight I took a farewell look at the "actor". He was there all right—dead still.

Next morning the racoon was gone.

Electronic-only Newsletters

by Eric Berger

If you have been receiving the FSPP electronic newsletters, we hope you've noticed the wonderful appearance of the color pictures and photos in the online versions. If you haven't been receiving emails from FSPP, we don't have your email address. *FSPP newsletters and meeting notices are automatically sent by email only.* Therefore, it is necessary for you to send us your email address now. For those of you who don't have access to email, please call Karen Grossman at 781-646-5990 a.s.a.p. Let us know so we can make alternative arrangements for you. You can also go to our website: www.friendsofspypondpark.org where all the FSPP meeting minutes and newsletters are posted on the NEWS page. These actions save money and help the environment by leaving less of a paper trail. We hope by making the FSPP more visible online we will increase peoples' awareness, interest, and involvement in what we do.



"Spy Pond, Arlington" (2007) by Eva Balasz

FSPP Accomplishments 2008

(not in order of importance):

- Another successful participation in Town Day.
- Four issues of the newsletter (Eric Berger and Jamie Ciocco); many compliments received. Future newsletters will be e-mailed only.
- Library display in the spring (Ellen, Elizabeth, Karen, & Fred).
- Eric Baatz's work as treasurer.
- Fred Moses' work on the website; posting newsletters and minutes.
- Support of Anne Ellinger's project to get a Spy Pond mural painted on the back of her garage.
- Participation in the Friends of Parks (Karen).
- Bulletin board erected in playground (needs some finishing touches).

Park maintenance:

- Walk-through with Kate Thompson to identify good plants vs. weeds to be pulled.
- Several weeding projects, led by Uta Low and Ilse.
- Mulchings (spreading loads of mulch supplied by DPW), led by Agnes O'Donnell.
- Prunings, led by Bill Eykamp and assisted by some Boy Scouts.
- Cleanups, led by Eric Berger.
- Karen met with Mike Rademacher, Town Engineer, on problems with path maintenance and with the Conservation Commission about the muddy beach at Linwood.
- We got the Town to find and fix an irrigation leak that caused a permanent puddle.
- We have some tools, bought with the first NEGEF grant, in Anne Ellinger's garage.

Outreach:

- Uta made phone calls, Karen sent e-mails, e.g. to recruit people to work in the Park.
- FSPP tent in Park on canoe/kayak rental days.
- T-shirt sales of \$244.
- Betsy Leondar-Wright and others moved "Marilyn" the coyote until she was vandalized.

Goals for 2009

(also not in order of importance)

- Complete the bulletin board.
- Additional fund raising / grant writing (NEGEF).
- Continue support for mural project.
- Establish file of back newsletters (see below); continue to keep it up to date.
- Continue park maintenance (weeding, pruning, cleanups, etc.), monthly in season.
- Use updated software for database management.
- Three or four issues of newsletter.
- Support effort to change playground surface.
- Continue liaison with Town Departments; with police to deter vandals; with Friends of Parks.
- Continue recruitment of members and for leadership positions.
- Participation in Town Day (Doris and Ilse will coordinate).
- Enhancement of database of members.
- Continue outreach efforts; use canoe/kayak days if any.
- Purchase more tools as needed (Doris).
- Reserve Library display space for 2010 (Ellen).
- Dues/membership/donation solicitation in the spring.
- Investigate cleaning of filtration system.
- Park activities.

Note from the Editor

by Eric Berger

Anne Ellinger conceived of the wonderful project to have a beautiful mural depicting Spy Pond Park appear off to the left as shoppers entered the Walgreens store on Mass Ave right near Linwood Street in Arlington. However, at first, she did not know this project needed town approval. I have been the liaison from the FSPP to Anne as she sought to navigate town approval. She and I have come to the conclusion that the cost and difficulty of the Zoning Board process, coupled with the bleak economy make it far harder to fundraise. We think that it's no longer practical to pursue the mural project at this time. Perhaps some year in the future, the lovely mural will become a reality. On behalf of the FSPP, I thank Anne for her heroic efforts and for her vision. Anne in turn thanks the FSPP for its support and encouragement of her mural project idea.

Spring's Coming: Changing the World One Smile at a Time

by Anne Ellinger

Sometimes I think helping to renovate Spy Pond Park is the best thing I've done in my life. It's certainly the most concrete and satisfying. I walk at sunset along the winding path and see people of all ages and races delighting in the beauty. "I get spiritually renewed by Spy Pond," says a father from India. "There's really something special about this pond." "I come here every day," says a young man from Mexico, "The pond heals my troubles." Walking along, I hear French, Greek, Russian... and everyone is smiling.

Most of my adulthood I've worked on big visionary goals: prevent nuclear war... reduce the gap between rich and poor... ridiculously large goals that, if humanity ever achieves them, will likely take generations of effort by millions of people. But our beloved Spy Pond Park was transformed from a pit to its current glory by a mere decade (or so) of work by a few dozen people! Here is a very condensed version of the steps as I remember them:

1985 – My family and friends move to Arlington. Spy Pond Park is beautiful: lush grass, wall-to-wall sunbathers in the summer... but the geese are moving in....

1993 – The grass has nearly disappeared, replaced by goose poop- no sunbathers. The path is washed-out dirt with many tree roots exposed along the shore from erosion.

1997 – My husband and I start Friends of Spy Pond Park as a way to bring people together to improve the park. (An earlier version of the Friends had stopped a planned parking lot, upgraded the playground and the Pond Lane end of the Park; we built on their work.) We lead it only for the first few years – blessings on the others who have done it ever since!

1997-2002 – We (the Friends of Spy Pond Park) raise public awareness about the Park's needs. We bring state and town officials to see the deterioration first hand; create an outdoor play that includes a giant puppet of the Spirit of Spy Pond, as well as a musical revue with Spy Pond songs, and perform them many times every summer; get the town to pass an ordinance against feeding the geese and work to educate park-goers; collaborate with Vision 2020 Spy Pond Committee to improve water quality. The Park keeps going downhill.

2002-2005 – We succeed in getting town, state, and federal money for improvements and go through the many stages of public planning: a feasibility study, Conservation Commission assessments, Community Development Block Grant. In 2004 (just before the town's fiscal crunch hit!) the town approves almost \$1 million for 2 years for Park improvement. Friends of Spy Pond Park's work accelerates: helping to choose the designer and developer; giving input on design;

monitoring the construction work; communicating about progress and issues with FSPP members.

2006 – The new Park is unveiled! Hundreds of people attend Friends of Spy Pond Park's opening celebration on a gorgeous day in April.

Now YOU have a chance to have the same sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. We're all needed to help the Park maintain its present beauty: to weed, prune, plant, mulch and pick up litter and goose poop so the Park never erodes again into the mess it was in the 1990's. Just sign up for one or more of the community work days that Friends of Spy Pond Park will organize this spring and summer. Then, when your "real job" seems endless and thankless, you too can walk along Spy Pond Park at sunset and say to yourself, "I did this. I'm part of this beauty." And take some credit for the smiles of everyone around you.

Leslie Mayer: Chairperson of the Park and Recreation Commission

by Eric Berger

Leslie Mayer, Chairperson of the Park and Recreation Commission and featured speaker at the FSPP annual meeting on January 4, 2009, gave a clear and comprehensive overview of the important work of the Commission.

The Commission, comprised of five volunteers appointed by the Town Manager and approved by the Selectmen, oversees and sets policy for the parks, playgrounds and playing fields other than those on school property. Its meetings, open to the public, occur on the second Tuesday of the month at 7 pm in the Senior Center. The Commission works closely with Joe Connally, the Director of Parks and Recreation, has liaison with field user groups and is represented on the Open Space Committee by Leslie. User fees help maintain the playing fields, but without such fees for the parks, there is minimal money and staff for the DPW to provide park maintenance, a commitment therefore limited to emptying trash barrels, mowing, removing dead branches and repairing equipment.

The Commission develops a ten year capital projects plan. Each project, developed with public input from individuals and groups like FSPP and approved where necessary by the Conservation Commission, is voted upon at the Town Meeting. This year the Commission will present a modest proposal for funding "in between" projects, not qualifying as capital projects, that go beyond routine maintenance. One example shines light on the glaring need to replace the playground surface in SPP. This surface annually attracts swarms of sand wasps, causing the playground to be shut down for weeks each summer instead of remaining open to serve so many children and their families with needed enjoyable recreation.

Geese Stories

By Ilse Oliveira

Last week, when I was walking on the Bike Path, a Canadian Goose flew over me. It looked and sounded lonely and forlorn. It must have lost its mate.

That made me remember other goose stories, like when I visited my daughter in San Francisco this past Christmas and made her a Christmas goose. It's a tradition from my childhood growing up in Austria. Geese for roasting are domestic geese with white feathers and only dark meat.

Then there is another memory from my early childhood. We had very little food and we started to raise our own chickens and one goose. This goose was destined for our Christmas meal and a few weeks before the Fest my mother force-fed the poor creature with corn so it would become fatter. Needless to say, it tasted delicious.

Another childhood memory is, while growing up in this little farming village where there was a brook, the farmers raised geese for making down and roasting for Christmas. When there were goslings in the spring, I was chased by a gander because he was furious that I had gotten too close to the goslings. He almost got me, but I was faster.

Making down was another memory. The farmers' wives would call the women of the village together in the cold winter months. Big mountains of feathers were piled on the middle of a huge farmer's table. The women sat around the table and pulled the down from the feathers and sang and told stories. These down were used for making featherbeds and pillows for the brides' doweries.

This week two geese flew over my head and landed on the snow on Spy Pond. They must have been cold and wondering why they didn't fly south. At least there were two of them to keep each other company while thinking and chatting about spring.

President's Letter

Dear Friends,

We were happy that so many people attended the Friends of Spy Pond Park Annual Meeting and potluck dinner in January. Many thanks to Leslie Mayer, Park Commission Chairperson, for the informative presentation she gave that evening. We are also grateful to the members who contributed time and energy to write several articles for this newsletter. If you have some insights about Spy Pond or the Park, we encourage you to get in touch with Eric Berger at berkshire2@aol.com so that he can arrange for you to submit an article, too.

This issue of the Friends of Spy Pond Park (FSPP) newsletter is the first to be sent out by email only. This "green" approach to disseminating information about our organization's endeavors saves us much time, effort, and money. If you know anyone who does not have email and wants a hard copy of the newsletter, please contact me to obtain one. The newsletters will also be available at the Robbins Library.

Please consider attending our next meeting to help plan for Park maintenance and offer your ideas during the discussion. We need you to get involved so that the FSPP will continue to be a strong advocate for the Park and Pond. Thanks, as always, for your interest. While we protect ourselves from the cold of winter, we dream about spring and the renewal of Spy Pond Park. Share the dream with us!

Sincerely,
Karen L. Grossman
President
Friends of Spy Pond Park



PHOTO BY JAMIE CIOCCO

Friends of Spy Pond Park next meeting at Karen Grossman's Sunday, March 1, 2009 7:00 p.m. **32 Hamilton Road #402**

RSVP (optional) to 781-646-5990
email karen@klgwoman.com

Park on Linwood Street off Mass. Ave. or on Lakehill off Lake St. at the far end of the complex.

To join Friends of Spy Pond Park...

Send your annual dues (\$15 individual, \$25 household, \$5 low-income) to:

FSPP, P.O. Box 1051
Arlington, MA 02474-0021

For more information, call a Friends officer.

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