

Rogers Playground

A Neighborhood History by Jules James

September 2001 seems an appropriate moment to look back. Rogers Playground has changed more during the last three years than since the original park improvements of 1908-1910. Two new entrances, lowered and removed perimeter fences, a new baseball backstop, re-surfaced tennis courts, a 92-year-old oak removed, the complete replacement of topsoil and grass, new irrigation and drainage. . . and new play equipment pending.

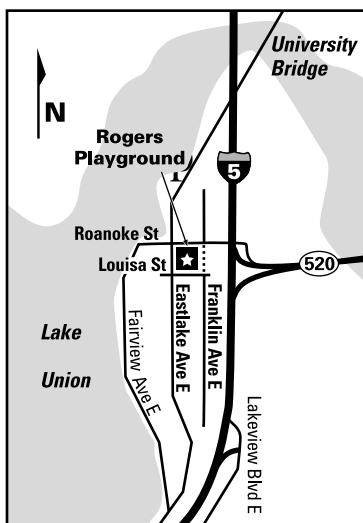
But this isn't a story about concrete pours, plastic piping and cyclone fencing. Playgrounds are personal.

In the late 1980s, Norm Campbell was a school crossing guard on the corner of Eastlake and Louisa. Each morning and afternoon before the school bell rang, Norm looked across some 200 feet and some 30 years' distance to visions of his daughter growing up at Rogers Playground. And sometimes that sentimental old gaze covered 60 years to the infield where he spent so many afternoons playing ball at Rogers. There is an emotional warmth to looking back on the old stomping grounds from childhood and parenthood.

In contrast to Mr. Campbell's cherished memories, playground namesake Governor John R. Rogers (1897-1901) may have unknowingly glanced over the vacant block eventually named in his honor. Stump-strewn meadows were more common than houses in Eastlake prior to 1900, so it is unlikely anyone ever pointed out the 235' x 355' undeveloped playfield to the governor.



OLD WOODY, 1925. The Parks Department and the Seattle Times sponsored competitions featuring Old Woodenface – a wooden strike zone target – between 1919 and 1968. Pictured at Rogers Playfield with Old Woody and the kids is Ben Evans, the City's Director of Playgrounds. Evans Pool at Green Lake is honored with his name.



Sean Donovan Design

Up From the Stumps

Halfway along the trolley line between Seattle's waterfront and the state university campus, the one-room Denny-Fuhrman School was built in 1895. Between the school and the trolley line was the Denny-Fuhrman Playfield.

As a teenager, David T. Denny (1832 - 1903) helped found Seattle. By the 1890s, he and Louisa (as in Louisa Street)

Clerk of Seattle Photo Archives

resided on the Northeast corner of Eastlake and Hamlin. Henry Fuhrman, a real estate developer, lived in a mansion at the Northeast corner of Boylston and Edgar. The two men drew up for development the north half of Eastlake as the "Denny-Fuhrman Addition" in 1890.

The Panic of 1893 devastated the national economy and local real estate values. Almost overnight, David Denny lost the real estate, trolley car and timber portfolio he had built over 40 years. The city of Seattle purchased the land for the Denny-Fuhrman Playfield from Mr. Denny via Sheriff's sale in 1896, but until 1908 the playfield remained undeveloped.

Economic difficulties, however, can change quickly. The Yukon Gold Rush of 1897 inspired, well, a gold rush. America acquired the Philippines for its fledgling empire following the Spanish-American War of 1898. The focus of the nation came upon the Pacific Ocean as a highway rather than a barrier. Seattle responded with the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition of 1909 (Exposition hereinafter), held on the campus of the state university. The Exposition sent to the nation the civic statement that our frontier bumpkin days were indeed history; that we were now a city of international consequence.

During the period of 1896-1908, America also redefined its way of thinking about public recreation. Coming into the 1890s, parks were generally pastoral places to stroll, to have a family picnic, to appreciate the beauty of a tended formal garden, or to have a romantic paddle on a placid lake. During the first decade of the 20th Century, a frenzy of fitness came across the land. For a visual image: picture Teddy Roosevelt. In fact, it was Teddy who called together the first White House Conference on Playgrounds in 1906; Boy Scouts, Boys Clubs, Campfire Girls and Girl Scouts all were established between 1906 and 1912.

The Olmsted concept of passive beauty continued (Seattle's overall park scheme evolved from an Olmsted plan adopted in 1903), but the public desire to be vigorous, hard-bodied young empire-builders quickly grew to be both a companion and a competing interest for public funding. Seattle was at the forefront with \$6 million appropriated for recreation, boasting a rank of third nationally for playground facilities, and boasting the best recreation facilities west of Chicago.

In December 1903, at the undeveloped Denny-Fuhrman Playfield, 8-year-old Denny-Fuhrman Schoolkid Phil Johnson and his friends were chasing wind gusts in their imaginary cloth-winged biplanes powered by pusher propellers, one kid as Orville and another as Wilber Wright. Mr. Johnson grew up to become President of Boeing (c.1925-1933 and 1940-1944).

Museum of History and Industry, Seattle



ROGERS PLAYFIELD, 1909. The Parks Department Annual Report of 1909 featured this photo. The text includes: "Though a small tract of slightly over an acre, this...is a well equipped small playground. A small but neat modern Shelter House of a standard design... has been built, swings teeters and amusements for small children have been provided, while the ball field is the center of attraction for the larger boys."

✧ The Glory Days ✧

In 1905, the Denny-Fuhrman School was lifted up and moved south by 50 or so feet. In its place a modern eight-classroom school was built. The School District intended to name it for the frontier

missionary Marcus Whitman, but a groundswell of neighborhood opposition changed the name to Seward School. William Henry Seward (1801-1872) was a man who never saw Seattle, but was important as the visionary embodiment of the upcoming Exposition. As a Senator from New York in the 1850s, he had been a vocal proponent of Pacific expansion. As Secretary of State in 1867, he negotiated the purchase of Alaska from Russia.

In 1909, the adjacent Denny-Fuhrman Playfield was re-named for Governor Rogers. The 1909 Parks Department Annual Report states: "The tract was re-named recently in honor of the late John R. Rogers, former governor, author of the famous "barefoot school boy" law by which free text books are furnished in the public schools of the State of Washington." The citation reads nicely, but hardly can be the whole name-sake story.

As governor, John Rogers led the state during both the Yukon gold rush and the Spanish-American War. When the 1st Washington Volunteers were training in Tacoma before departing for the Philippine theater of the Spanish-American War, their temporary home was "Camp Rogers." After the war, Fort Lawton (now Discovery Park) was named for the general who led the 1st Washington Volunteers; City Park on Capitol Hill was re-named Volunteer Park to honor the war's soldiers.

The Barefoot Schoolboy law was passed when Mr. Rogers served as a legislator from Puyallup, not as governor. Unless Mr. Rogers represented the Eastlake neighborhood as a legislator, it seems highly improbable for an Eastlake public playfield to honor his legislative accomplishments.

In the 1909 Exposition year, Governor Roger's Yukon and Pacific involvement most certainly counted for more than his legislative record in the naming of the City's premier playfield along the trolley line to the Exposition. Whatever the primary naming inspiration, John Rogers wasn't around to bask in the honor. He caught a cold in the first year of his second term, it turned into pneumonia and he died in office, December 27, 1901.

In 1909, new cedar steps led down the hill from Seward School. A shelter house and an elaborate set of wooden fitness apparatus were installed in Rogers Playfield. The equipment proved a false start. The next year, all but the wood-sided sandbox were replaced with metal equipment - swings, teeter-totters, slides, rings, chin-up bars and ladders.

These were the youthful glory days of promise for Rogers Playfield. It was one of the first four public parks the city outfitted with play equipment and supervised with fitness instructors. Seattle's first Boy Scout troop was formed in 1910 at



TENNIS, 1910. (Photo #20645 in the Seattle Municipal Archives) Barely discernable within are two women in long skirts playing tennis on a court without a perimeter fence.

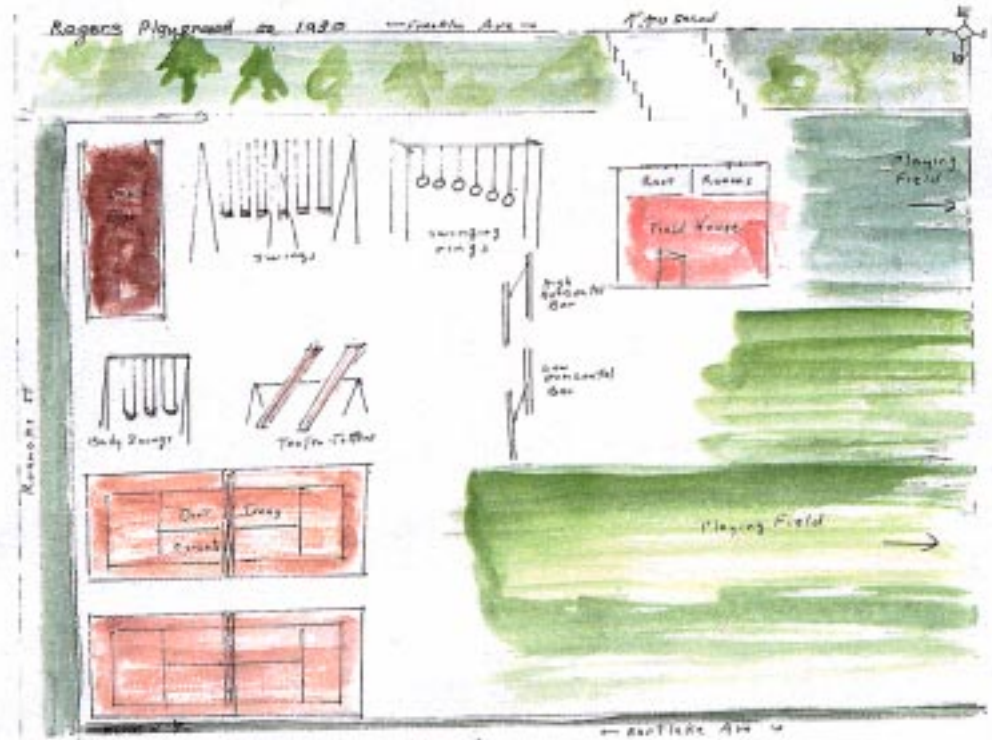
Clerk of Seattle Photo Archives

PLAYFIELD or PLAYGROUND?

According to Parks Department terminology specialists, a "playground" is smaller than a "playfield". Playfields are regional draws, have scheduled athletic fields and maybe a community center or other facilities. Playgrounds are more neighborhood-oriented.

Rogers. In 1912, the Seward boys baseball team won the city championship with Rogers as their home field. In 1924, in an experiment with City Light, Rogers was illuminated. Those "experimental" lights remained until 1951.

Muriel Weissberg, who lived on Franklin Ave, remembers from the late 1920s, "We spent a lot of time at the playground, starting with the big sandbox in the corner near our house, graduating up to the swings, rings, horizontal bar and finally the tennis courts. On sunny mornings in the summer we would look out our mother's bedroom window through a crack between the two apartment houses and check out the tennis courts. If no one seemed to be using it, we would grab our rackets and ball and run over for a quick game before breakfast."



Muriel's Memories: Muriel Weissberg now lives in California. But she grew up in the Eastlake neighborhood during the 1920s and 1930s. From memories 70 to 80 years old, she created this scene for her family members now residing in Eastlake.

Seward/Rogers neighborhood kid Pearl Wanamaker grew up to be Superintendent of Public Instruction for Washington state from 1941 to 1957. Rogers/Seward kid Don Hillman became an ace P-47 fighter pilot during World War II, and made the cover of *Life Magazine* (December 8, 1946). David Storm, a 1940s Rogers/Seward schoolkid, grew up to be a Episcopal priest who still lives in the Roanoke Park house of his youth.

✧ The Decline ✧

Freeways tend to make bad neighbors. Our freeway (Interstate-5), built in the late 1950s and early 1960s, paved over hundreds of houses once brimming with school-aged children. When completed, it created a noisy, dirty, dangerous, hostile chasm where a thriving community existed before. With the North Capitol Hill kid count devastated, the Seattle School District regularly recommended closing Seward School for the next 25 years.

In 1965, the Parks Department gave Rogers Playground a minor make-over. The baseball diamond was upgraded to Little League standards (gearing toward more regional play). The shelter house was demolished. A new bathroom (half the size of the original shelter house with none of the pleasant exterior aesthetics), was built near the tennis courts and the remaining playscape equipment.

In 1975, neighbors and school parents installed new play equipment on Franklin Avenue between Rogers Playground and Seward School. Only the swings and the preschoolers' sandbox remained in the northeast corner of Rogers. (The mid-1970s days were those of Rogers/Seward kid Stone Gossard, now a guitarist for Pearl Jam, running wild at Rogers Playground.)

As an Eastlake resident and businessperson, I've been around Rogers Playground most every day for nearly 20 years. I remember community softball games in the mid-1980s. We'd play all ages, all genders, all abilities. Over the fence was (and still is) an out. Starting in those years, I kept an informal list of activities seen in Rogers: kite-flying, golf, football (touch, flag, Nerf, tackle), kickball, lacrosse, boomerang, soccer, tai chi, sunbathing, flyfishing, baseball (hardball, softball, t-ball), volleyball, fencing, snowballing, plane flying (balsa, paper, radio-controlled), dog romping, cross-country skiing, windsprints, jogging, croquet, cricket, badminton, tag, jump-roping, shot-put, tree photography, metal detecting, 8 mm movie making and pony riding. Someone's sentimentals freshly-made most every day.



Recovered Treasures. The Rogers Irrigation and Drainage Project of 2001 created a rare opportunity for metal detecting hobbyists. Recovered and pictured here: a 1892 Liberty Head dime, 1898 Liberty Head quarter, 1939 Mercury Head dime and a 1909 Alaska-Yukon Pacific Exposition Chief Seattle Medallion.

Stevan Morgain

The School District finally succeeded in closing Seward School in 1990. Ironically, this action marked the beginning of the re-building of the school, the neighborhood and Rogers Playground. The displaced Colman School was housed at Seward for two years (1990 and 1991), then the alternative K-8 TOPS (The Option Program at Stevens) moved into Seward in 1992.

✧ The Re-Building ✧

Among those who care, there is a perpetual discussion about the essential components of a neighborhood. A proprietor-run grocery store? A coffee house? A good public school? People outside tending their flowers and dogs? A tavern where everyone knows your name? Clear boundaries and official city recognition? Or is it more - pure and simple - just people who care?

Who Owns Rogers?

Rogers Playground and Seward School are often mistaken to be a single property. The confusion is understandable anytime a public park is adjacent to a public school, but is further blurred by the traffic restrictions on Franklin Avenue between the school and park. Seward School belongs to the Seattle School District. Rogers Playground belongs to the Seattle Parks Department. And Franklin Avenue is a public street controlled by the Seattle Transportation Department.

The 2500 block of Franklin Avenue has been pedestrian-only dating back to 1918. At first, temporary chains stretched across the Franklin roadway at both ends of the block to allow kids safe access during school hours from school to park. The chains were replaced with immovable metal posts by the Parks Department from 1950 through 1975. Then, after 22 years of highway guardrails spanning the Franklin roadway, removable wooden bollards were installed in 1998.

Since 1998, the 2500 block of Franklin Avenue has been designated by City Council as a "Green Street, Type 4." Motorized traffic is restricted to emergency vehicles. The school community, Parks Department and the Eastlake neighborhood jointly maintain the Franklin Avenue Green Street.

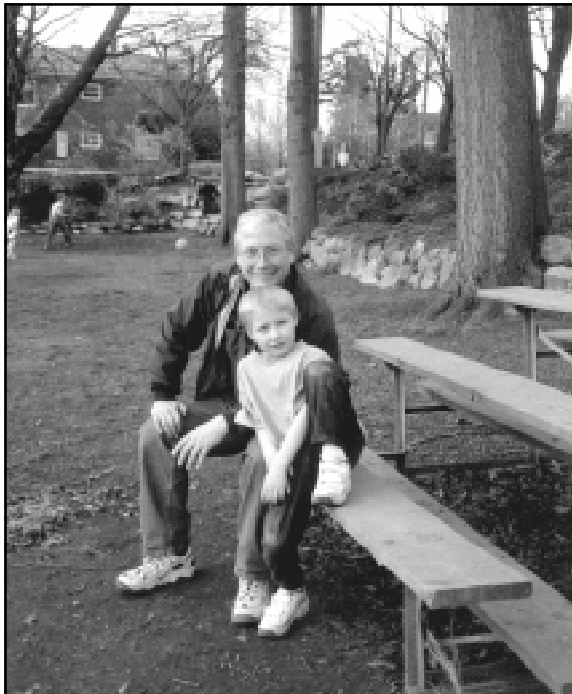
Whatever the essential components, kids, and pre-schoolers most particularly, are the glue of residential neighborhoods. Without pre-schoolers, we tend to recreate regionally, not locally. Our pre-schoolers bring us out to the lawns, onto the sidewalks, and down to the playground. That is where we share with strangers our kids at play and our stories of parenting. And strangers become acquaintances, friends – neighbors.

In 1992, the Eastlake Community Council and TOPS/Seward School teamed up to replace the 1975 equipment at the Franklin Avenue playscape. A year or so later, the School District committed to a multi-million dollar remodel of the school.

In May 1998, as part of the Seward School renovation project, the Franklin Avenue playscape was demolished. Plans called for a temporary playscape to be installed in the Northeast corner of Rogers during the remodel, followed by a new school and community playscape located on school property. From the day it was installed until the day it was removed, the Rogers temporary playscape was swarmed with kids. But the permanent playscape outside the kindergarten classrooms, which opened in September 1999, turned out to be too sophisticated for pre-schoolers to use safely. Neighborhood children were once again without play equipment.

✎ Restoring Play Equipment to Rogers ✎

I remember my son Alexander riding a pony in Rogers Playground. It was after dusk, but the neighbor-kids were there. All but the newest kid – and that was the reason for the pony in Eastlake. It was August 1998. Fletcher had been born with the will to live, but not the lungs. Nearing the end of his 23 days in the hospital, the neighbor girls brought in their pony for Fletcher's brother to ride. It was a distraction which helped us all tremendously.



Kyle Kurokawa

ALEX JAMES and DAD, Spring 2001. We are seated approximately at the new entrance to the pre-school play equipment. The three large trees along the eastern perimeter of the project are red oaks. The large tree along the project's northern border is a Plane tree. These trees were saplings in 1909.

A year later, when the kindergarten playscape proved a pre-school failure, Fletcher's parents Laurie and KC wanted to build something in his name. They were thinking maybe \$5,000 and a weekend's community work project to fill the play equipment void left at Rogers Playground. But other needs surfaced (and \$5,000 buys not much in public playground equipment). TOPS/Seward needed play equipment for the 7- to 13-year-old kids. The Parks Department needed wheelchair access to the tennis courts and bathrooms. And the Department of Neighborhoods required a public process to insure the proposal was truly the community's desire, not just the unsupported crusade of a few.

Small grew big. Friends of Rogers Playground, with Laurie Stusser-McNeil's leadership, swelled into a two-year, \$300,000 project. Hundreds of glass leaves imbedded in the play area will carry messages from family, friends, neighbors, businesses, charitable foundations, Seward alum, TOPS/Seward parents and those who have lost children. The fundraising goals have been met. Sometime in November 2001, play equipment returns to where it began in Rogers, 1909.

Special thanks to G&H Printing and Lake Union Mail.