

By FRED B. ABELE

McKown's Grove

Some recent interest and inquiry about the origin and history of that former well-known McKownville landmark, "McKown's Grove," led me to research a few facts. Closed in 1973 and demolition completed in 1975, there is little vestige left to indicate where it was. The grove covered several acres off McKown Road along the Krum Kill and was known for clambakes, steak roasts, swimming and picnics for nearly 80 years.

The grove was opened in 1896 by William McKown (1842-1924). William, called "Squire" McKown, was the son of James French McKown and Sarah Ann White McKown. He was the great grandson of William (Billy) McKown (1763-1843).

Squire McKown also built in 1887 the white Victorian farmhouse at 1 McKown Road (behind the Price Chopper gas station). The house originally faced Western Ave. but was moved to make way for the gas station.

The land on which McKown's Grove stood was originally a part of the vast parcel, reputed to exceed 600 acres, acquired by William Van Baal Patent, an isolated island in the midst of the Van Rensselaer holdings. Being excluded from Van Rensselaer's lands, the parcel acquired by Billy McKown was conveyed with clear title rather than by lease as was the case in the Van Rensselaer holdings.

The tavern stand of McKown's Tavern, whose site is (January 1982) occupied by King's Service Station, was a portion of the 600-acre tract. Another portion was conveyed to John A. McKown (1787-1870), comprising land adjacent to present McKown Road. John (son of Billy) built a large Georgian house about 1815 on this land, south of Short St. near the bend in McKown Road which was originally a private road to reach this house. The house was demolished in 1970. The property on which the grove was situated was part of this parcel.

After the death of John McKown, his son, Squire William McKown, acquired the property. Upon his retirement from business he built 1 McKown Road and the grove. After Squire McKown's death in 1924, ownership of the land and the grove and the Georgian house passed to William J. Knowles, son of one of the tollgate keepers on the Great Western Turnpike.

After the death of William Knowles, his wife, Margaret, disposed of the grove but retained the swimming facilities and the old Georgian house south of Short St. The grove was subsequently acquired by Alphonse Fischer who operated it for many years.

My first memories of the grove are in the mid 1920s when my father and I attended a clambake there. Mrs. Abele remembers coming out on the bus for frequent swims at the pool. For many years the one-lane dirt McKown Road, at its intersection with Western Ave., passed through an ornamental iron arch, supported by stone masonry pillars with letters on the arch reading "McKowns Grove." Let us pass through the arch on a nostalgic trip to the past.

We pass along McKown Road, beyond present Williams Court and just short of the dip to the Krum Kill turn right on a dirt lane. The swimming pool is on our left with a beach on both sides and picnic tables and swings on the far side. Ahead is a crude one-lane timber bridge over the Krum Kill which we cross, entering a grove of tall pines and other trees, cool and inviting.

On our left is a long open-sided pavilion containing tables and benches where the clambakes were served. Beyond this to the south were the pits for cooking the bakes or steaks.

On the right on a knoll overlooking the Krum Kill was a square, open-sided pavilion with a wood floor for dancing. It was reached by a couple of steps and had benches around its perimeter.

Beyond the Grove the land gave way to sand dunes where the Quadrini development was built later (Highland Drive, etc.). In later years a block walk-in cooler was added just beyond the dance hall or pavilion, where beer and clams were served.

By the 1930s a dance hall had been built on the north corner of the intersection of the grove driveway and McKown Road. It was called for a time "The Goblet." It had closed sides, a large open dance floor and a beautiful, huge, stone masonry fireplace. There was a kitchen and bar. It had a gable roof and false ceiling.

William (Billy) McKown dammed the Krum Kill in at least seven places to provide water for his hotel and outbuildings which it reached through hollow log water pipes. Two of the dams were on the area of the grove, one at the bridge and the other parallel to McKown Road. The swimming pool was between these. The original bathhouses were at the south end of the dam.

In later years, due to silting in of the stream, the pool was excavated and lined with concrete block. A new bathhouse was erected on the north side and a bypass pipe carried the Krum Kill overflow under the pool. Water for the pool was fed through filters and chlorinators. Pollution from sewerage and construction finally made operation of the swimming pool impossible.

Mr. Fischer opened a second grove on the north side of the stream presently occupied by the 21 Point Racquet Ball Club, and a new ballfield.

The grove closed in 1973. The idle buildings were vandalized and finally demolished in 1975. The big dance hall was damaged in a series of fires in 1972 and 1973, the last of which necessitated demolition of the buildings. There are only happy memories left of memorable occasions spent there, including for me the annual fire department picnics and of member Bill Hein, who operated the grove portion in its final years.