

Seay Park's caretaker hands over her shovel



Ten years ago Wava Allen began transforming the old Seay property on South Main Street into a park. Before she finished, the area became a focal point for the community and one that even its critics have come to enjoy.

Town Council had bought the property in an effort to halt commercial growth into the area. The land had been owned by a supermarket chain, and a fast food franchise had eyed it as a possible location. When town officials agreed to pay \$60,000 for the property they took a tongue lashing from some taxpayers and there was heated debate as a special council meeting.

Toady there is no debate. When Mrs. Allen asked for permission to develop the area into a park, she received immediate response from council and from th Chamber of Commerce. The rest is history, except only Mrs. Allen knows how much time and energy she has spent turning the area into a place of beauty.

This spring is Mrs. Allen's last as caretaker of the park. She is stepping back and passing the hoe and the shovel to another caretaker. "I want time to tend my own garden now," she said.

Mrs. Allen has also retired from her job at WBBC radio station, where she has spent 17 years, the last five as manager. But of all her endeavors in life, being caretaker of Seay Park has been the most rewarding, she said.

In the beginning, she was alone with the vacant lot She had wanted a park, now she would have to build it. Fortunately, she was given complete freedom and support from the town and the Chamber of Commerce.

"I'd like to put a gazebo in the park," she remembers asking May Marvin Inge, with a voice full of apprehension that the request might be denied.

"Just point to a spot on the ground and you'll have one there," the mayor replied, surprising her with the sureness of his support. And the gazebo was built. Designed by Charles Orange, built by the Exchange Club with lumber donated by Southeastern Lumber Co., the gazebo was the heart that pumped inspiration into the rest of the park.

With the gazebo set firmly in the center, the landscaping expanded out from it like ripples when a rock is dropped in a pond. As a finishing touch, the quaint dollhouses were bought to house Santa and his helpers. Every Christmas the town's children knew where they would find Santa. Children would peer in through the child-high windows while those on his knee were getting their pictures taken.

Alone, Mrs. Allen hauled wheelbarrows full of fertilizer and weeded on her knees. "I began to feel like it was my own yard," she said, her eyes close to watering. In face she learned all about gardening and landscaping from the park. "It was a good teacher," she said.

She also learned how thrilling it was to watch a seed take root and grow into something unexpectedly beautiful. People would stop at the park while she was working and ask about it. Soon the whole town was coming out in support. Even people who didn't live in Blackstone sent money.

From the original idea of just having a place of leisure, the park soon became many things for the people. Every Christmas it was home for Santa and the children who came to see him. The trees were decorated with hundreds of white lights, which when turned on were the town's signal to begin the holiday season.

All summer the gazebo was transformed into stages for different events. One Sunday it would be a wedding altar. At Easter the sun rose to find the churches conducting sunrise services there and later that day children would come to find Waster eggs hidden in the grass.

On hot afternoons, passersby would cool in the shade of the trees and young people would throw Frisbees across the grass. It was a place for lovers, joggers, dog walkers, readers, a haven from rainstorms, and a children's play ground.

The park also became a sacred place where the war dead were remembered and trees were planted in memory of departed loved one. Fashion shows converted the gazebo into a stage and choirs found an ideal theater in the round there. And when the park rested from these labors there was always time for individuals to roam through its peaceful spaces and find pleasure in them selves there.

But most unexpected of all, Mrs. Allen said, was the parks growth into a symbol of the town's pride and unity. Now the gazebo calls attention to the town on handouts nd

brochures. It speaks of what can be done when you take an idea and apply it with attention to detail, dedication, an eye for beauty and order, and a willingness to sacrifice time and energy.