

YESTERYEAR'S FOURTH OF JULY

Each year for Children's Day, the Flagpole Green in Forest Hills Gardens is transformed into a mini-Disneyland. Amidst inflatable slides and moonbouncers, red, white and blue decorations, tunes of John Philip Sousa, hot dogs, sodas, games, cotton candy, a raffle and face painting, residents of The Gardens congregate at Flagpole Green to celebrate Children's Day. The festivities take place the first weekend after Memorial Day weekend. But way back when, before there were refrigerators, TVs and skateboards, when young men wore knickers and older men wore straw hats, when folks "motored" to Long Island, Forest Hills didn't have a Children's Day Celebration. Instead, they celebrated the Fourth of July. It was a day-long extravaganza that took place throughout the neighborhood. Residents on vacation often made a special trip to come back home so they could take part in the festivities. The Greenway Terraces were closed off and decorated with red, white and blue banners and lights, or as they were called back then, "illuminations". The day included parades, games, dancing, musicals, and even a circus. The festivities started at 9 am with flag raising exercises and ended with dancing in Station Square until everyone got tired. Only those with Forest Hills Gardens badges and their guests were admitted.

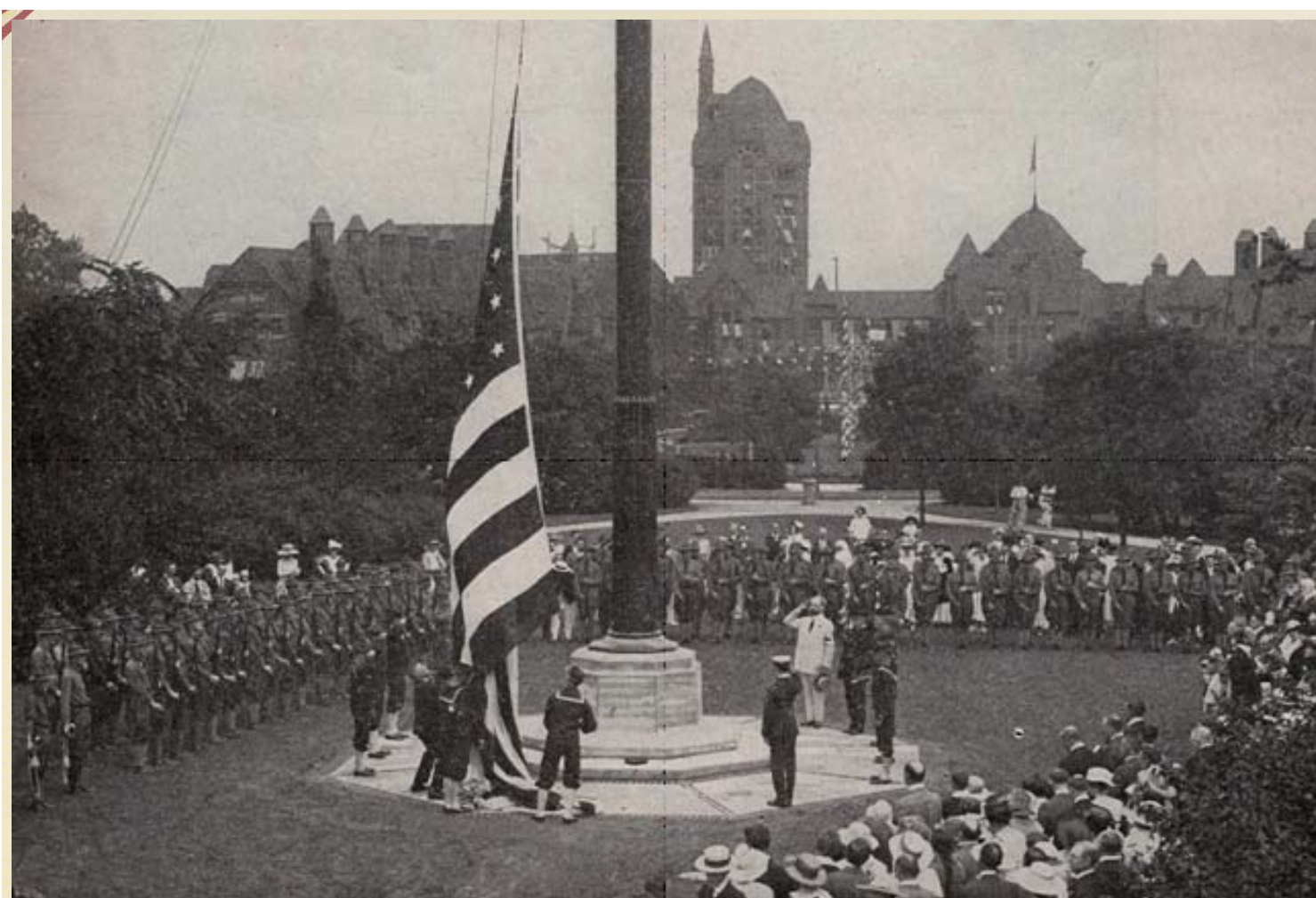
During the early hours of the day, a town crier walked through the Gardens announcing the day's forthcoming activities. In early years, Edward S. Swazey often volunteered to coordinate the criers. I wonder if he lost his voice after a morning of shouting, especially since he was a writer by trade. He was noted for documenting the building of the Shandaken Tunnel, which still supplies fresh water to New York City from the Catskill Mountains.

The flag exercises took place on The Green, or what we now call today Flagpole Green. Included in the ceremony were church leaders, members of the celebration committee, and a thirty-piece band that accompanied the Forest Hills Choral Club in the singing of patriotic songs. The flag raising exercise

in 1916 was of particular interest since a new flagpole of noteworthy origins, was recently erected. Once used as the boom on the Columbia, the yacht that won the American Racing Cup in 1899 and 1901, it was officially presented as a Flagpole to the Garden residents by William L. Harriss, a cotton and ship broker and owner of the North American Steamship Company. On a side note, The Leslie Apartments, later built near the flagpole, were named after Mr. Harriss using his middle name. This is the same flagpole that has adorned The Terraces all these years yet has recently been lying on its side due to pending refurbishing. It has been out of commission since last October. But take heart, our Flagpole will rise again just in time for the annual Flag Day celebration scheduled for June 16th this year.

Other morning activities included tennis games between the Inns and the Outs. The Inns being residents of the Forest Hills Inn and the Outs being, well you guessed it, anyone not living at The Inn. The matches were played at The Gardens Club, a building that no longer exists today but was once located where Metropolitan Avenue intersects with Union Turnpike. In later years baseball games were sometimes played instead of tennis. 800 square yards of canvas was laid over the cobblestoned surface of Station Square for children's games. Clown stunts were performed by the local Boy Scout troops. Fathers and sons and mothers and daughters had their relay races. Tug of war contests, whip tag, bronco ball, rope-skipping, grand-tilting and wheel barrow races were among the planned activities. It was noted that during the 1916 ceremony, the baby-carriage race was very amusing, as also were the ladies who wore playing hoops.

Afterwards, a children's party was often held in the Tea Garden, the area behind The Inn with its entrance on the Terraces, across from The Flower Shop. Both the Tea Garden and The Flower Shop still exist today, but only as shells of their past grandeur.



Around 5 pm, a theatrical and dance performance took place in Olivia Park, or what we now call Deepdene. The park was originally named after Margaret Olivia Slocum Sage, better known as Mrs. Russell Sage whose foundation financed the planning and development of Forest Hills Gardens. The plays were short and written by residents. Back then, The Gardens was a haven of professional writers and actors who contributed their talents towards community affairs. One such writer was Ralph E. Renaud, who at the time was the editor of the New York Evening Post. He is also remembered for writing several stories for Hollywood silent movies, the most famous being *Eden* and *Return*, the 1921 comedy starring Emmett King. At the 1916 celebration, his play, *The Happy Stranger*, written with Harold Conway, was performed. It is an allegory about a traveling stranger carrying heavy luggage who is looking for:

“Some spot where Nature, Man and Art have bravely taken counsel, here I still may wake to hear the morning whip-poor-will, my neighbor trees I cannot live without, where I may count each habitant my friend and Peace shall bless my roof-tree till the end.”

He arrives in Station Square where he meets up with several muses; played by “a bevy of attractive young women who personify the material and spiritual features of this community, namely: Station Square, The Inn, Roadways, Birds, Sunshine, People and lastly, Independence Day, who changes the Stranger’s heavy luggage into garlands of flowers from magical bowers”.

Local dancers added to the entertainment as they demonstrated interpretative and aesthetic dancing they learned as pupils while attending The Chalif Normal School of Dancing. In 1916, professional dancers from the Strand Theater performed under the direction of B.A. Rolfe, who later went on to become one of the famous silent film

producers of his time.

The celebration continued as committeemen, their wives and other residents paraded around Greenway Terrace wearing Pierrot or clown costumes. One of the big hits was the chorus of some thirty or more Yama Yama ladies dressed in traditional Japanese garb. Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, a “Hobo Band” the Seventh Regiment Band, circus performers with wagons, sideshows and freaks also joined in the fun. In later years, a Vehicle Parade was planned in which any kind of vehicle – automobiles, carriages, carts, baby carriages, bicycles, in fact, anything that ran on wheels, could participate. During World War I, soldiers were more visible, playing an active part in the flag raising exercises and the parades.

As twilight descended, Station Square became what folks described a “fairyland at night when young and old danced to their hearts’ content”. Costumes supplied by A. W. Tams of 1600 Broadway were rented for \$2.00 a piece. Unfortunately, it was like pulling teeth to get a few people to return their costumes. Music was often supplied by the military. Dancing usually ended at 1 am as the band played the “Home Sweet Home Waltz”

Forest Hills’ Fourth of July Celebration changed as the world changed. Eventually, it transformed into the Children’s Day celebrated today. While there are no more evening dances, or refreshments provided by the Red Cross, we still have our decorations, music, and games. Some of the rides provided have changed throughout the years, but the pony ride and Half Moon are still constants. Children’s Day is just as much a tradition as the Fourth of July festivities once were. The celebration may have changed but in name only. Forest Hills Gardens still maintains a traditional holiday in which patriotism and neighborhood are its top priorities. ■