“A Healthy and Contented Band”: The Gyro Club and Playgrounds in Edmonton Urban Reform, 1921-1944

Paulina Cecilia Retamales and PearlAnn Reichwein
University of Alberta

A legacy of the international Gyro Club can still be found in municipal playgrounds in Edmonton’s inner city. Gyro playgrounds formed the backbone of Edmonton’s early playground system in the 1920s and persist as latter-day public parks with “Green Shack” summer playground programs open free of charge to all children. The Gyro Club was an active leader in the playground movement here. It initiated a precedent for the first supervised neighborhood playgrounds and summer play programs that became an urban institution for children and families. Gyro playgrounds were intended to enrich urban childhood and build neighborly communities. New equipment has replaced older swings and slides, but inner-city parks, outlined by mature elm trees, endure as outdoor spaces linked to ideas from an earlier era of civic reform through play.

Edmonton’s Gyro Club playground work is a distinctive case important for understanding the roles of men and the voluntary sector in children’s play and playground advocacy. The Gyro Club took a lead role in urban social reform in the interests of improving children’s services much as it asserted a place for men in the day-to-day lives of children. Ideals of modern citizenship and civic life were constructed and controlled through children’s playgrounds, and, at the same time, promoted a distinctive Gyro culture of creative holistic outdoor play for children shared by the public. Edmonton’s Gyro Club men reproduced their own middle-class values through social relations, but also generated play spaces and practices as shared social and cultural capital generated and invested to achieve their ideal of a better city and contribute to modern social reform through the lives of children.

Edmonton was a young city in western Canada with rapid urban settlement and infrastructure development in the early 1900s. Community demand for public recreation and petitions for healthy “open air space” for children rose with urban population growth. Initiatives emerged driven by voluntary groups and associations. Summer and winter sports programs in many neighborhoods were organized and provided for local residents by the local Community League movement that

Paulina Cecilia Retamales and PearlAnn Reichwein is with the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Address author correspondence to Paulina Cecilia Retamales at retamale@ualberta.ca.
took root from a civic model originating in Rochester, New York. Several athletic associations were established in the city by 1913, eager for space to play sports and for children’s playgrounds. The City of Edmonton owned twenty-two public parks prior to the First World War. Only two had playground equipment: one on an old school ground and one on old hospital grounds. Overall, Edmonton faced inadequate provision of public parks geared to children’s play, further compounded by postwar growth in the early 1920s.

Before the local Gyro Club appeared, supervised playgrounds in Edmonton were practically unheard of and children usually played unsupervised in the streets and outdoors. Broader in focus, the National Council of Women (NCW) generated child-saving efforts across Canada to advocate for safe, supervised playgrounds and “vacation schools.” Locally, Councils of Women formed playground committees to raise awareness. They also established some local playgrounds in school grounds during summer months and hired staff—usually local female school teachers—to supervise children. Edmonton’s Local Council of Women was formed in 1894; it was addressed by the NCW’s national president, the Countess of Aberdeen, a year later. Its second Local Council was organized in 1908 and committed its considerable efforts to legislative reform causes—such as federal divorce law, property rights, parental rights, and widow’s pension—with leadership from Judge Emily Murphy, well known as the first female magistrate in the British Empire, and other significant women reformers. Although it was a vocal catalyst for children’s welfare among various diverse citizen groups, the attention of women in Edmonton’s Local Council was not focused on children’s play at the implementation and operations level. Church-based women’s societies worked toward poor relief for adults and children in Edmonton’s early years, also bearing on welfare needs and children’s services. Here the local Gyro Club entered the scene as socially minded men who committed to children and civic reform through a new organization.

Many voluntary sector organizations promoted charitable projects and programs in early Edmonton. Different civic agencies for children’s services—local community leagues, YWCA, YMCA, Kinsman, Kiwanis, and others—developed philanthropic programs to improve community life. Among them, the Gyro Club emerged as a longstanding group that repositioned middle-class men as active agents in children’s play in the interest of child welfare reform though community service. Gyro Clubs in the United States and Canada supported projects to promote civic and cultural life. Varsity friends in Cleveland, Ohio, formed the original Gyro Club as a men’s civic group in 1912; it soon spread to other cities in North America. Local Gyros aimed to be good citizens and supported various causes, valuing duty to neighbors among the responsibilities of citizenship. The fifth Gyro Club, and the first in Canada, formed in Toronto. The fifteenth was Edmonton’s Gyro Club, formed by local men on July 29, 1921. Edmonton Gyros were typically educated English-speaking urban businessmen and professionals. Some were newcomers to the city, and, although professed to ideals of friendship, the club was nonetheless an exclusive men’s group that required certain social status and internal social screening. Club members were mostly men of British ancestries who could afford membership fees, pro bono time for community work, and dedication to participate in a club.

The local club’s emergent focus was playground building in response to pressing local needs among children and families. It funded and opened the