WAS THERE EVER A RIVER?

The certainly was a river in the River Yard. It was a formal, cement river-bed, complete with a system of locks and a reservoir to provide water. Constructed in 1921, the year C&C moved into the 12th and 13th Street buildings, it apparently was used extensively by seven-year-olds, and sometimes six-year-olds. The eights were called in as helping consultants when needed, until the fall of 1925, when it was apparently razed and a flat surface for games for those younger groups was installed.

Morris Meister, who was then the Science teacher and who later worked with New York City's Bureau of Curriculum Development and went on to become the principal of Bronx High School of Science, apparently planned and laid out the "river" with the children. Our archives give us this account of the period (no evidence of the writer):

"In a discussion with Mr. Meister the fourth week of school plans for the city were quite well settled upon. Mr. Meister told them (after hearing about the bridge, boats, harbor, docks, etc. that the children wanted) that workmen were going to lay the cement for a river bed and make a large tank, from which the water could be drawn into the river. Then he drew on the board the plan he had made with the workmen for the river, which was to include waterfalls and locks, explaining how they could operate their boats in the locks. The river could be only 15 inches wide so scales for boats were worked out. 4 x 10 inches was decided on to allow boats to turn around in the river and pass each other. The river was to widen at the harbor to allow for ferries and docks. It was decided to put the railroad in much as the New York Central comes in along the Hudson River and to call one side of the river the Jersey side and the other the New York side. Sidewalks, subways, docks, telegraph poles, ferryboats and bridges were planned for. Several children had already begun on different kinds of boats in the shop. Charles starting one on the order of the Leviathan in which he had crossed this summer. Phillip starting a little tug. The question came up, "How are you going to prevent boats from tipping?" So Mr. Meister told the group to turn the faucets on to fill the water tanks in the science laboratory. Then he put a boat he had made into the tank and it floated. He put another in with a heavy top and it tipped. The children said, "It's the top that makes it tip. If you put a top on the other boat it will tip too." They laid a piece of wood on top of the other boat and it tipped over. Then everybody tried experiments with bottles, trying to make them float with and without water, with a stopper and without, and trying them with different amounts of water. They found that when the bottle had a certain amount of water in the bottom, it floated easily but that if the water came up to the top, it sank, or if the stopper were left in the bottle it tipped. Some one said, "You see, if it's light at the bottom and heavy at the top (as an empty bottle with a glass stopper) the light part keeps trying to float and the top part to sink, so it tips."

The conclusion was, "so the way to make our boats is to make them heavy at the bottom and lighter at the top to keep them from tipping."

Many boats were made, that year and for the next and the next. Many needed funnels changed and other adjustments until they finally floated. Another lesson, after some

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discussion as to how the tank in the yard would supply water to the river bed, consisted of experiments in air pressure and water to see how tubing to supply the water would work. Once the river was flowing well, the decision was made to pipe water to the buildings children were making in shop to line the river. One child concluded, "We will have to pump it if it goes to the second story, or have a tank on top...We must dig a little bed for the pipe to keep it warm. If the blanket isn't heavy enough the water will freeze."

As work progressed, committees were appointed for pipe laying and for making a bridge with "meccano". Banks, theaters, hotels, market, a house with a dress-making shop, a garage, an apartment house, Post Office, the Police Station, and a farm were all carefully constructed in shop and carried out each day for work on the City in the Yard. Water was piped into the buildings with glass and rubber tubing, glass used under ground since it was cheaper. Then electricity was planned for and the Eights were consulted for their superior knowledge of electricity. They eagerly came out to arrange for the wiring, and found that they had to find out about conduction under all kinds of conditions. In the end they knew a great deal about short circuits, fusing of wires under adverse conditions such as persisted in the "River Yard", and other uses of electricity for electromagnets and telegraphing. The buildings were wired, for lights, doorbells, etc., but near the end of the year the Eight-year-olds' enthusiasm in digging holes for new telegraph poles resulted in the crushing of the glass "water mains" whose location had not been mapped underground (a difficulty we understand Ma Bell and Con Ed still run into under modern streets)!

The water-piping for that year could not be repaired, but the wiring proceeded:

"When the ditch was dug for the electric wires which were enclosed in glass tubing, grave concern was expressed by different children during the digging, that water might seep in through the ends of the glass tubing on account of a hydrant in the yard that was apt to leak. They avoided this by taping and covering the ends with rubber tubing. At intervals of four feet along the ground connections were made by each child for the (building). This was done with great care...Mr. Meister showed the class how to make switches. They...spent several play periods attaching wires from the ones laid in the ground to the large ones on the wall connected with the battery. Sockets and tiny electric bulbs were put in all the houses by their owners, but when the current was turned on the lights did not burn. Mr. Meister, after investigation, said that a bad connection must have been made somewhere by one of the children, or else that a ground in the neighborhood had reflected the current. We decided to light the houses through wires attached to poles on top of the ground. Poles were quickly made out of dowels with little cross-pieces, the wires attached to these, new connections made with the houses and the lights turned on successfully."

The Class Records of 1921-1924 indicate that the River Yard river was used extensively, especially by the seven-year-olds, for all of those years in much the manner indicated above. Morris Meister was no longer the Science teacher, and Lulu Wright, who may have authored the records cited above, was no longer the seven's teacher. The records do not indicate any specific decisions, or reasons, as to what should happen to the River Yard. There is a small quote from a typescript labeled "Group VII, E. L. Catlin, October and November 1925" that may provide a clue:

"As soon as the River Yard was ready, baseball was played, David, Eddie and Margaret being most constant at it. Games of tag and hide and seek are occasionally played. "Red Light" was a favorite game for a short period; everyone plays on the apparatus with great ease, swinging from the horizontal ladder by the knees..."

So the River Yard lost its River. But not A river! We all know that after every good or even medium rain storm, there is a new river in the River Yard! Until this year it provided many 5, 6 and 7-year-olds with days of adventurous water exploration before finally drying up. This year that yard has been used exclusively by the Two's—whose capacity for dealing with standing water in their only outdoor play space is somewhat different than that of older children.

Whether the drainage situation comes from clay soil, rock underlay, or the oft-hidden-at-groundwater water route of old Minnetta Brook somewhere under the property is a moot point. The 1609 map of Manhattan shows Minnetta Brook meandering somewhere nearby, to be sure.

Or perhaps it comes from the ruins, long covered up, of a cement water tank, locks, waterfalls, and, of course, a RIVER, long-forgotten deep under today's dirt surface. A few years ago a class of modern seven-year-olds conducted a "dig" on the site, amassed an impressive collection of artifacts and displayed them for all to see in their room. They had to stop digging when they reached what appeared to be cement foundations...had they found THE River? Are the ghosts of seven-year-olds working there still?

Mary Hansen

Excerpts from The New York Times, December 22, 1983

City and Country in the Eighties

While her class of 3-year-olds snacked on pineapple juice and fruit bars, Shirley Lasser, a teacher at the City and Country School in Greenwich Village, read aloud from a book about a trip on the trolley. As she held up the page picturing a trolley, a gage-haired girl interrupted. "This juice has pineapple in it," she observed.

"Yes," said Mrs. Lasser, laying the book aside. "Pineapple juice comes from pineapples. Where does apple juice come from?"

"Apples," said the girl.

"And where do you think orange juice comes from?" Mrs. Lasser asked the group.

"Grapefruit," a boy shot back.

"We drink juice in a cup," Mrs. Lasser corrected. Then she returned to the story.

For the parent who is shopping for a preschool, that brief exchange could answer an important question about City and Country's brand of education...

In recent years, parents and educators alike have debated the function of preschool. Should it primarily teach children to relate to their peers or to recite their A B C's? According to Dr. Sylvia Provenz, professor of pediatrics at the Yale Child Study Center in New Haven, it should emphasize neither, and instead offer programs "in which the child's socialization, emotional and intellectual development are intertwined." She went on to explain: "For instance, the fact that a child had a fight with his older brother before coming to school may determine how well he uses a motor-skills activity that day. If the teacher doesn't pay attention to all of him, he won't get the best education..."

At City and Country on West 12th Street, the 3-year-old's classroom is dominated by a large, central, empty space. Lining one wall are shelves offering a neat assortment of unclothed dolls, kitchen utensils, balls of soap, small washcloths and rows of blocks. Against another wall are an easel, a table holding bowls of water and a small clotheline; in a corner is a table where children work with clay. "The room speaks to the child," Mrs. Lasser explained, "and our room says, 'Use these materials to express your ideas.' The important thing for us is the child's translation of his knowledge of the world and his imagination into his work. The large space and open-ended materials encourage the children to build whatever they need and to flow from one activity to another. Re-creating their world leads them to ask questions about it, and we help them to find the answers."

The children's day begins at 9 A.M. with a half hour of outdoor play on the school's roof. The children return to the classroom for a snack and story and an hour to an hour and a half of work with the clay, paints, blocks and water. Afterward, the children put away the materials, have lunch and participate in a group activity of their choice: puzzles, painting, math games or crayoning. Half-day students leave between 12:30 and 1 P.M., while the others remain until 3 to hear another story, rest, have a snack and play.

During the work period on a brisk autumn morning, the children were building towers and bridges, bathing dolls and dunking the washcloths in water, and "hanging laundry." One boy built an ironing board of blocks, pressed a wet cloth with a toy iron and wrapped a doll in it. "Are you going to feed her?" Mrs. Lasser asked.

"I'll feed her when I get home," he replied. "She's crying."

"Maybe she'll stop if you hug her," the teacher suggested. He held the doll close and patted her head.

The walls in Mrs. Lasser's room are covered with an eclectic collection of splodge, splattered, random paintings by the children. "We want them to work from their inner resources," she said. "So we don't play teachers-made art or simple pictures that would encourage a child to copy them..."