

September 26, 2019

Dear Mayor, Board and Interested Supporters,

Our little community's history has long been my focus and passion. Asked for the story behind our park's catalpa trees, I verified how they came to be here and why they remain an important part of our sustainability as a village. They really are our brand.

Carbon Hill represents one of the small coal mining camp villages in the Wilmington coal field. Our village park and our streets today hold the same footprint as they were given at inception. Our 1893 schoolhouse stands in its original location, serving as a public 501c3 not for profit museum dedicated to our immigrant coal mining ancestors. We have honored and built on our past in order to take care of our future, to teach others to love what is their own, and to enjoy the small village particularly in civic minded events in our community park. The catalpas are a symbol of all that.

Carbon Hill's unique identity has allowed the village to survive, to endure, for 126 years. Our beloved and well tended Park, given to us by the Star Coal Co in perpetuity to be used as a community center, is the heart of what provides our sustenance.

The Star Coal Mining Company of Streator IL sank a coal mine in Felix Township in 1884 and the coal camp grew as the coal was plentiful. The spot eventually was platted into a proper village with a park at its center. And in 1892 the village of Carbon Hill officially incorporated. By 1900 there was a population of approximately 2,000 with a business district to service these residents, as well as a hotel for railroad workers, salesmen, and space for the Star's office. But it was the park that provided the community its true spirit. From the beginning its bandstand, the shady catalpas, the diagonal walking paths, gathered us together.

As was common at the time, catalpa trees were the craze. Known for shade, twisted trunks and limbs, and useful as railroad ties or fence posts, they were capable of withstanding big winds while providing showy white blooms, interesting seed pods, and eery winter shapes.

When one rides through our area, catalpa trees mark our earliest places: Coal City's original high school, the Trotter farm, our Carbon Hill Park, various homesteads, entire streets. As for Carbon Hill, the coal company set the miners to work planting in straight rows across the entire park about the time of our incorporation, maples were planted only along the boundary. The maples were long gone by the time I was born in 1946, but those catalpas were still standing, completely filling the west and center of the park. The slough lagoon on the east originally held a bandstand; this was converted to a ball field after WWII. Catalpas - under or up in- were the best spots from which to watch a game! Only when it became important to make space for carnival rides or bingo, food and beer stands did some catalpas come down. It is past time to replenish the bare spots, renew our identity. The Park means homecoming for descendants, residents, visitors, guests, and our catalpas will always stand as that symbol of who we are.

For more information or documentation, please feel free to contact me any time.

Sincerely,

Michele Enrietta Micetich - President of CHHS, Curator of CHS Museum

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