

# For 35 years, Shea cared for Crocker Field

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FITCHBURG -- As a Fitchburg High School student, Thomas Shea never played on Crocker Field.

But Shea, now 62, ended up spending more time than almost anyone on the grounds of the historic facility.

"It seemed like destiny was written for me," Shea said. "This was my job."

After 35 years of cutting the grass, drawing the lines and performing countless other tasks to maintain Crocker Field, Shea will officially retire from his caretaker position this month.

Following high school, the lifelong Fitchburg resident bounced from factory job to factory job as many of the paper mills in the region closed. He made some money on the side as a part-time landscaper, but initially didn't expect to work outdoors full time.

"As I worked outside more and more I could never see myself going back into a building," he said.

In July 1982, he landed the maintenance job through Fitchburg Public Schools, joining only a handful of people who have cared for the 99-year-old field.

"As far as anybody knows there have only been three people who actually took care of the place," he said.

Since Shea started, he said the field has seen many changes, mostly for the better.

"I just like to see the improvement year after year," he said.

The press box has been rebuilt, the clubhouse now has tile floors, the scoreboard has been replaced twice, the cinder track has been resurfaced, outdoor lights were installed 29 years ago and the portable bleachers, first purchased in 1924, are gone.

Maintenance didn't always go smoothly.

When a microburst hit the city in 1989, downing 60 trees around the field and twisting the scoreboard, Shea and others hurried to prepare the facility for graduation the following afternoon.

"It was a mess, but we came in, we cleaned up and we had a graduation," he said.

Mid-August was the busiest time of year for Shea as he prepped Crocker Field and several other school fields he helped maintain.

As the first one on and the last one off the field every game, Shea said he saw a lot of "classic football."

He remembers the hype before the Fitchburg-Leominster football game in 1984, where Fitchburg -- coming off a 12-year string of losses -- hoped to win once again.

"It was the first and only time I saw the wave at Crocker Field," he said, referring to the popular stadium-wide cheer.

Fitchburg was victorious.

Shea also remembers the 2000 season when the Fitchburg football team went undefeated. His three sons -- Jonathan, Nathan and Ethan Shea -- were all part of the team that year.

"The string of good football teams Fitchburg had through the '90s and 2000s, it was exciting," he said.

In the last several years, Shea has also watched as the sons of players he remembers from early in his career join Fitchburg teams.

Though attending the football games will no longer be his job, Shea has no intention of skipping the upcoming season.

He will be there, "Guaranteed."

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