

# ROCHESTER HISTORY

Edited by BLAKE MCKELVEY, *City Historian*

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## An Historical View of Rochester's Parks and Playgrounds

By BLAKE MCKELVEY

Rochester has long been justly proud of its parks. Old and young residents alike have delighted in the rolling lawns, the verdant and blooming horticultural displays, the beautiful river and sylvan vistas, the beaches and playfields, the seasonal pageantry of flora and fauna. Many events prominent on Rochester's calendar take place in the parks. It is appropriate therefore to enquire whence they came and what they signify, to examine historically and descriptively the sixty-one-year old Rochester park system—the chief reminder today of our fair title, the Flower City.

### Birthpangs of the Parks

It will surprise most present-day Rochesterians to learn that the Flower City of the seventies and eighties was extremely reluctant and backward in establishing public parks. Large expenditures on the water system, the sewers and streets, had created such a huge debt that many taxpayers opposed additional outlays. Moreover, the many tree-lined streets bordered by private lawns, a number of small neighborhood parks or squares, the easy accessibility of the shady and beautiful Mount Hope cemetery, and the facilities of several private amusement parks seemed to these folk quite sufficient for a city of 100,000 residents in 1885.

Fortunately there were other citizens who cherished loftier aspirations for Rochester's development and displayed greater

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confidence in its future. The most active protagonists of a park system in the mid-eighties were Dr. Edward Mott Moore and Councilman George W. Elliott. Dr. Moore, one of the pioneers two decades before in the development of private cottages on the lake and bay and firmly convinced of the health-giving energies to be gained from outdoor recreation, rallied the support of many humanitarian folk, including Bishop McQuaid, who advocated public facilities for the enjoyment of baseball and other sports. Councilman Elliott, a careful student of the city's finances, was the outspoken leader of a number of progressive business men who hoped to ease the city's debt burden by a vigorous development of its outskirts and the consequent enlargement of its assessments rolls.

Still a third group, the nurserymen, headed by George Ellwanger and Patrick Barry, joined the advocates of public parks in the mid-eighties. The outward pressure of an expanding city was encroaching on their nursery lands, prompting them to plant new fields further out and to develop the older sites as subdivisions. Clearly, if park lands were to be chosen, now was the time, and the sooner the better, since the location of a park in any area would stimulate the building of fine residences in that neighborhood.

A combination of these considerations inspired both D.D.S. Brown and the Ellwanger & Barry firm to offer park sites to the city in 1883. The thirty acres proffered by Brown for a Lincoln Park were situated two miles west of the central Four Corners, while the twenty-acre plot tendered by Ellwanger & Barry bordered the reservoir on the south-eastern edge of the city. The Common Council formally accepted the first gift but neglected to fulfill the requirement that its improvement be undertaken within three years, and the tract thus reverted to Brown's estate. The aldermen, unable to agree on the second offer, voted instead for a committee, headed by Elliott, to study the entire problem.

The desire for public parks had been growing in Rochester for many years. Occasional letters-to-the-editor had urged the acquisition of Falls Field, a picnic ground overlooking the Main Falls, where circuses and other entertainers had frequently erected their tents. Another favorite and appropriate tract was the east bank of the river south of the aqueduct, bordered by the canal and its feeder. These and other sites along the river had in fact served for decades as private amusement centers or as playfields for boys, and it was only in the mid-eighties that the extension of railroad lines along the

river brought industrial and commercial encroachment. If the park movement had gained force a decade earlier, these valuable tracts near the central district might have been acquired; their diversion to other uses increased the need for public parks.

Additional factors contributed to the movement. The example of other cities was persuasive, for several had begun the development of parks in the sixties or earlier and already boasted of their facilities and of the improved realty values the parks had engendered. Some taxpayers still argued, in Rochester and elsewhere, that it would be better to reduce taxes so that residents could beautify their own estates. However, few if any private estates could accommodate the new sports that were springing into popularity in post-Civil War America. Indeed the desire for outdoor recreation was perhaps most influential in overcoming the hostility to public parks. The widespread campaign for national parks and local publicity in connection with the dedication of the park around the American Falls at Niagara in 1885 helped to strengthen the movement in Rochester.

Unfortunately the most favored site in the mid-eighties—the Warner estate on Mount Hope Avenue comprising about fifty acres of rolling land, much of it wooded and affording beautiful vistas—was priced at \$120,000, a prohibitive figure in that period. Citizens in other parts of Rochester refused to support a move that promised to benefit chiefly the south-eastern quarter.

Councilman Elliott and his committee determined that the only hope for action lay in a legislative provision for a park commission with powers and functions independent of the politically instable council. A bill was accordingly introduced by the Rochester assemblyman and passed against the stiff opposition of several local papers. A move in the council to demand its withdrawal was blocked in a close vote, and in April, 1888, the bill became law, incorporating a Park Commission of twenty members, all named in the act.

The Park Commission organized formally on May 7 with the election of Dr. Moore as president. A committee was created to negotiate the \$300,000 bond issue authorized for land purchases, and a study was begun of available sites. The mayor had officially accepted Ellwanger & Barry's generous twenty-acre gift that January, but otherwise the location and character of Rochester's parks had still to be determined. The commissioners, recognizing the crucial importance of their first decisions, made an inspection tour of

Buffalo's parks, already twenty years of age. There the need for an early selection of suitable and adequate park lands was emphasized, and the commission was encouraged to seek the advice of competent landscape architects.

A heated controversy inevitably developed over the location of the parks. Many of the commissioners, sympathetic with Elliott's desire to use the parks to promote the best development of outlying real estate, favored a park boulevard 300 feet in width encircling the city with a number of small parks scattered along its route. The five experts consulted, including Frederick Law Olmsted, the leading park designer in the country, recommended that priority be given to the purchase and development of two large parks straddling the river north and south of the city. The river, they argued, was Rochester's fairest scenic asset and its natural setting should by all means be preserved. A smaller park could be developed around the reservoir beginning with the land donated by Ellwanger & Barry, but any effort to acquire land for a large park there, or at several other proposed sites, would prove too costly.

The commission accepted the judgment of its experts and commenced the delicate task of buying the desired properties. A report that the southern park would begin at Clarissa Street bridge prompted a speculative rise in land values in the area, while the commission quietly proceeded to buy in the neighborhood of the Elmwood crossing further up the river. A similar situation developed on the north side as park lands were acquired further down the river than had been anticipated.

The Common Council quickly became the sounding board for criticism of the commission. When the first map was submitted, a hostile alderman described the proposed parks as "salubrious but inaccessible." Many aldermen vowed they would not vote for improvements so distant from the center of population. The commissioners, proud of their success in acquiring nearly 400 acres with an expenditure of less than half the authorized bond issue, blamed the council's long procrastination for the city's failure to acquire sites nearer the center. The proposed park boulevard had been abandoned as too costly, the commissioners explained, but it was anticipated that the promoters of subdivisions would themselves recognize the value to their tracts of free allotments for a spacious driveway around the city.

The park sites, two and a half miles from the central Four Corners, did appear very far out. None of the horse-car lines reached so far, and it was argued that only the carriage folk would benefit. A protest meeting in the council chamber gave vent to many criticisms, but when scarcely 200 citizens attended, the commissioners resolved to proceed with their plans as announced.

### **Dr. Moore's Era: 1888-1902**

Criticisms of the parks began to subside as their development progressed. At the suggestion of Olmsted, who had been retained as consultant, a civil engineer named Calvin C. Laney was engaged to prepare contour maps on which Olmsted then worked out his landscaping plans, taking full advantage of the rolling pastoral fields of the southern park and the more rugged grandeur of the river banks north of the city. New acres were added to each of these parks and to that bordering the reservoir when opportunities to improve their approaches arose. The distinctive features of each park were fostered, and, as the facilities for reaching them improved, Rochesterians began to display their first enthusiasm over the public parks.

The changing attitude appeared in the discussion of names for the parks. The simple geographical designation of South Park and North Park was scarcely satisfactory. George H. Harris, local authority on the aborigines, favored Indian names; but his first proposals, Son-on-towane for the pinnacle hill area and Gah-sko-sah-go for the park below the falls, did not arouse enthusiasm. The suggestion was fruitful, however, in prompting a use of the more familiar Indian names, Seneca and Genesee Valley, which were applied to the north and south parks. George Ellwanger's expressed desire, that the park developing around his hilltop gift be known as Highland Park, met general favor. An observation pavilion constructed there in 1890 at Ellwanger & Barry's expense was dedicated that September to the children of Rochester—the first of a long series of popular park ceremonies.

Indeed the natural features of the parks soon proved sufficient to inspire public interest in their improvement. The rolling fields bordering the river south of Elmwood bridge required only slight landscaping to give Genesee Valley Park a pastoral atmosphere of great charm. Several thousand young trees were set out to provide masses of foliage that would accentuate folds in the terrain, supply shade for picnic groves and rambling trails, and at the same time hide

the railroad tracks that skirted two sides of the park. Farm buildings were removed or adapted to park use; roads were re-routed to serve as pleasant driveways; wheat fields were converted into spacious lawns; a herd of sheep, introduced to crop the grass, provided a picturesque feature of great interest. Within a decade, this park, originally the most harshly criticized portion of the system, became its most frequently used area.

The improvement of the more costly Seneca Park was somewhat delayed because of difficulty in acquiring some of the properties needed to make it easily accessible. Nevertheless, the replanting of portions of the steep embankments overlooking the gorge, together with the improved drainage of its tablelands, soon made it a delightful resort for those who enjoyed rugged scenery.

But it was at Highland Park that Olmsted's conception of "an idealized rural landscape" received its greatest expression. Rochesterians had been accustomed for decades to delight in the blooming fields and gardens of local nurserymen, and it seemed most fitting that this park should take over the display functions formerly served by the park's donors and other nurserymen now crowded beyond the city's borders. George Ellwanger and Patrick Barry encouraged such a development by donating generous selections of rare trees and shrubs to help make this park a horticultural preserve. Influential members of the commission contributed to this emphasis. William S. Kimball's expensive hobby, the raising of orchids, had already directed the tobacco manufacturer's interest in this direction. William C. Barry, a younger member of the nursery firm and a great lover of the out-of-doors, was destined to play an important role as chairman for many years of the Highland Park committee.

Barry and his associates shaped policy, but much of the success of the program sprang from the abilities of the men chosen to do the work. Calvin C. Laney, the first superintendent, had early demonstrated the breadth of his interest when, in the course of preparing a contour map, he made a survey of the species of trees and shrubs already growing on park land. Soon, plantings of all shrubs known to the area were being set out in Highland Park. When it was further determined, in 1890, to order additional shrubs from England and the Continent in order to make the slopes around the pavilion into a veritable arboretum, Laney recognized the need for a full-time horticulturalist. John Dunbar, a trained gardener from Long Island, was brought to Rochester in 1891 to take charge at Highland Park.

The horticultural improvement of the parks was, however, only one of the concerns of the commissioners. The grounds had of course to be landscaped, but it was recognized from the start that their use by sports enthusiasts was to be encouraged. Dr. Moore and Bishop McQuaid, champions of outdoor recreation, while accepting the arguments for a rural setting, held fast to the purpose of using the parks as recreation centers. A baseball field was laid out on the west bank of the river just within the entrance of Genesee Valley Park in 1891. One of the old farm buildings had already been moved over to the river's edge for use as a boathouse. Soon the Rochester Athletic club and several canoe clubs gained permission to erect boathouses on sites leased from the park. A refectory was opened there in 1893 to serve the increasing flow of visitors; the next year its concessionaire enlarged his lunch facilities and built a merry-go-round. A second ball field, a bicycle track, and an athletic building quickly made their appearance at Genesee Valley Park, and a third diamond was laid out as one of the first developments in Seneca Park. A spring in the latter park was dammed to form Trout Pond, which quickly became a favorite center for skating parties in winter months. A nine-hole golf course, the fourth in America maintained at public expense, and two tennis courts were provided at Genesee Valley Park in 1899, the same year that brought the announcement of a supervised swimming hole in the river near the refectory in that park.

Popular use of the parks was encouraged by improved transport facilities. The Western New York & Pennsylvania Railroad ran excursion trains from its station out on West Main Street to Genesee Valley Park every Sunday and holiday in 1891, supplementing the occasional excursions previously scheduled to this park by the Erie Railroad. The Rome, Watertown & Ogdensburg ran similar trains to Seneca Park a year later. Electrified street cars finally reached the parks at various points in 1892; indeed the company was permitted to lay its tracks into Genesee Valley Park as far as Elmwood Avenue bridge on the promise that it would undertake to satisfy the popular demand for service at charges no greater than the regular city fares.

New problems arose as the program developed. The commissioners soon discovered that several park police were required to restrain men and boys from shooting firearms, swimming in the river, clubbing and climbing the nut trees. Occasionally a carriage party had to be stopped from gathering blossoms. The purchase of bicycles for the park police greatly facilitated their work in 1897.

The Park Commission steadily increased its holdings, though not as rapidly as it desired. A plea in 1892 for authority to negotiate a second \$300,000 bond issue was rejected by the council, with the result that several properties needed to round out Seneca Park West could not be acquired and developments there were delayed for several years. The commission had meanwhile received authority over street trees in 1894 and over the small park squares a year later. The functions thus added repeatedly strained its resources. All work had to be halted on more than one occasion in the early years until the council could be persuaded to vote additional funds. An amendment to the 1888 act authorized increased appropriations, and the operating budget advanced to \$30,000 a year by the close of the first decade—a hesitant recognition of popular approval of the parks.

Rochester's delight in its parks mounted rapidly during the late nineties. A collection of upstate New York fauna began to attract attention in 1896. A pair of American elk, a white-tailed deer, a grey and a red fox, a litter of rabbits and many squirrels, several owls and hawks and a bald eagle were acquired that year, several as gifts from interested citizens. The loan of a fine black bear in 1897 gave the collection, which was located at Seneca Park, more definitely the character of a zoo; the bird cages and animal shelters provided that year immediately became a fixed attraction at this park.

Eight band concerts, paid for by the *Herald*, inaugurated a new feature in 1894. Occasional concerts were arranged in subsequent years through the generosity of George Ellwanger and other patrons, yet music did not become a regular feature until 1901 when the newly organized Dossenbach band and two other city bands provided a summer schedule of eighteen concerts sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce. When crowds of more than 5000 gathered at several of these concerts, the future of the program was assured.

The early agitation for park boulevards bore fruit in two localities. Shortly after the commission dropped its original plan for a boulevard around the city, a law was passed enlarging its power to condemn land for parkways. Land was promptly acquired under this act for Seneca Parkway on the north-western outskirts of the city. This double driveway, lined by rows of young trees, might well have been extended around the city, but the law was soon repealed, curbing the commission's powers. Only in the south-western section, where the promoters of subdivisions set aside ample grounds for Genesee Park Boulevard, did another link in this route appear. The



commission began to plant trees along that boulevard in 1899, stepping up its planting and pruning program in other parts of the city at the same time.

Of course the most intensive planting was taking place in the parks themselves. Olmsted's landscape plans had been completed after much delay, and the young trees set out in Genesee Valley Park during the late eighties were already demonstrating what a well conceived plan could do. Even Seneca Park was beginning to show the results of considerable pruning and planting, but it was in Highland Park that the major accomplishments appeared. There the prize exhibit, in the eyes of the park authorities and of visiting experts as well, was the pinetum on the north side of the hill. John Dunbar was especially proud of the 109 varieties of coniferous evergreens thriving there by 1898.

The average citizen, however, was more keenly interested in the flowering shrubs which could now be seen on the south slope. The several thousands planted in the fall of 1890, together with many additions and replacements, were then beginning to blossom. The lilacs in particular were attracting popular favor. The first published comments on these plants appeared in 1897 when 100 varieties were in bloom. Crowds began to gather the next May, and the surprised officials estimated the visitors one Sunday that year at 3000. It was a genuine tribute, for no announcement had heralded the display. The fame of the blossoms themselves, passing from lip to lip, had brought out the crowd. Laney and Dunbar and the commissioners could not help being impressed. The plan to make Highland Park a public arboretum was definitely reenforced by the popularity of the lilacs.

The fame of Highland Park extended beyond the city borders by the turn of the century. Peter Barr, a distinguished horticulturalist from London, declared after his American tour, "I would rather have missed seeing Yellowstone Park than . . . Highland Park." "It is more like a botanical garden than a park," he added. Professor Charles S. Sargent of the Arnold Arboretum was similarly impressed. He came first in 1900 to study the fifty varieties of hawthorns. Later years brought him on regular annual visits, and he soon enlisted the cooperation of Rochester's park officials in a project to locate and collect specimens of every plant growing in America. In return for field work in New York, Kentucky, Oklahoma and Texas, Rochester was assured cuttings of all new plants discovered by Sargent and his associates.

The park system's first period of growth closed with the death of Dr. Moore in 1902. His successful battle for its establishment and his leadership during the period in which strikingly beautiful sites were acquired, horticultural, scenic, and recreational facilities were projected and to some extent realized, had won him the affectionate title of Father of the Rochester Park System. A quarter-century after his death, a bronze statue donated by James G. Cutler was mounted near the east entrance of Genesee Valley Park, a fitting tribute to the commission's first president.

### The Lamberton Era: 1902-1915

The passing of Dr. Moore brought two new men into positions of leadership. William S. Riley, appointed to the vacant place on the commission, became chairman of the Genesee Valley Park committee and contributed much to the development of a more active recreational program there and throughout the park system. But it was Dr. Moore's successor as president, Alexander B. Lamberton, an active member of the board since 1894, whose enthusiastic devotion to all aspects of the park program most directly influenced the developments of the next two decades.

In some respects the Lamberton era was simply a more dramatic continuation of Dr. Moore's period. The new activity was more a reflection of the increasingly popular support of the parks than the result of new inspiration. Thus the horticultural program was continued, with increased emphasis, perhaps, on rare and unique features; the facilities for adult recreation were greatly expanded; the slight foretaste of civic pageantry developed into a major aspect of the program; and the purchase of new park lands continued at an accelerated pace. A significant new feature was the children's playground movement, but even this had been anticipated in part. Nevertheless, if the inspiration was not new, it was both genuine and vibrant with life, and the accomplishments were to be memorable.

Horticultural developments were fostered throughout these years by William C. Barry and by the close relationship maintained with the Arnold Arboretum. Professor Sargent and his able assistant, Dr. E. H. Wilson, were frequent visitors, encouraging the development here of complete collections of all known varieties of flowering shrubs acclimated to this area. The Highland collection of American hawthorns soon excelled all rivals, while the lilacs continued to

grow in numbers and maturity until they won acclaim as the finest in America, attracting a record crowd of 25,000 to view them on Lilac Sunday in 1908. The azalea, rhododendron, and peony displays, which followed the lilacs each year, kept the park alive with color. The gift of \$20,000 for a conservatory in honor of Commissioner Lambertson, a bequest by his sister-in-law, provided ideal facilities for special floral exhibits throughout the years following its opening in 1911—a new justification for the recognition of Highland Park, where the conservatory was located, as one of the outstanding arboretums in America.

Meanwhile the horticultural work progressed steadily at the other large parks and at several of the small city squares, notably Jones, Plymouth, and Anderson squares where tulip and other floral displays marked the changing seasons each year. Calvin C. Laney, who was particularly fond of large trees and as a hobby collected photographs of the largest and finest specimens of every variety to be found in the area, continued as superintendent to foster the natural beauty of the parks. John Dunbar, assistant superintendent in charge of horticulture, vigorously pressed the developments of the lilac and hawthorn collections as well as the pinetum. He carefully collected seed from the best flowers for planting, selected and nurtured the most promising seedlings, and developed by this process a number of new varieties grown first in the Rochester parks. Local as well as national figures were honored in the naming of Dunbar's lilacs, cuttings of which were in demand throughout the country. Perhaps the most outstanding of the new varieties was the "President Lincoln."

Much of the practical work of this program fell to a group of able workmen whose training on the job proved to be very thorough. Bernard H. Slavin, Dunbar's successor as foreman at Highland Park, took over the larger task of developing Seneca Park in 1903. He specialized in growing trees from seed and, following Dunbar's technique with the lilacs, produced a number of tall slender varieties of shade trees adapted to street use, notably the upright elm and the upright Norway maple. It was slow work, necessarily so, and the results scarcely appeared on the city streets until after 1915, but the influence of this work was destined to be far-reaching. Patrick Slavin, Bernard's younger brother, and Richard E. Horsey, together with several other young men, were busy at the parks in these years, mastering some of nature's secrets under Dunbar's able tutelage.

Patrick Slavin soon became the first foreman of Durand-Eastman Park while Horsey received the same appointment at Highland Park.

The continued expansion of the parks placed a heavy burden on the staff. New acres added to Highland and Genesee Valley Parks and more extensively to Seneca Park had to be landscaped in harmony with the older sections. The western part of Seneca Park was split off in 1904 when the addition of old Maple Grove prompted the separate organization of Maplewood Park. The gift (in lieu of back taxes) of the old Warner estate added forty acres to Highland Park in 1909, enabling it to develop active recreational features. The three older parks had thus grown into four, and their 631 acres of 1902 had become 1006 by 1915.

In addition, several new parks now made their appearance. The nucleus for Cobb's Hill Park was given in 1905 by George Eastman and a few other public spirited citizens. Its development in connection with the city's second reservoir at the top of that hill and Riley Lake in the old widewaters basin at the foot of the slope provided another attractive and useful park. Recurrent demands for the purchase of the pinnacle hills between Cobb's Hill and Highland Parks proved unsuccessful, but a similarly protracted agitation for the acquisition of Pike's quarry for conversion into a much-needed play area on the west side of town finally produced results at the close of the period.

Of course no other acquisition of this or any other period rivaled the munificent gift by Dr. Henry S. Durand and George Eastman of 484 acres bordering Lake Ontario. Durand-Eastman Park, as it was named in 1907, was immediately useful for its 4000-foot beach, situated only six miles northeast of the Four Corners. An extension of the Sea Breeze trolley line into the park in 1908 made it reasonably accessible. Other early improvements included an underpass beneath the single-track railroad that skirted the beach, a wooden pier to accommodate excursion boats, a refectory and several picnic grounds. The natural picturesqueness of the rolling hills and deep ravines encouraged landscaping efforts to preserve the existing slopes. Two small lakes were developed by damming up old marshes; thousands of flowering shrubs and trees were set out as well as a valley of evergreens designed in time to make this park a challenger of Highland Park for Rochester's favor.

These extensive park developments would have been impossible without increased political and popular support. Fortunately the

election of a staunch friend of the parks, James G. Cutler, as mayor in 1904 inaugurated an era of more generous appropriations. More than \$96,000 was expended for park maintenance and land acquisition that year, and subsequent appropriations recommended by Cutler and by his successor, H. H. Edgerton, were progressively increased. Clearly the Republican party, under the leadership of George Aldridge, had seen the wisdom of a generous provision for the parks.

The new policy was sustained, despite the tax burden, partly, as Elliott had predicted, by the city's rapid physical growth; but the enthusiasm with which the support was given sprang more directly from the increasingly popular character of the program. President Lamberton had indicated the trend of his thought when, as president of the Chamber of Commerce in 1901, he had raised a fund to help revive the band concerts. Beginning with eighteen concerts that year, the program increased in number and in popularity until, by 1910, the schedule called for five a week. Crowds ranging from 2000 to 10,000 attended the eighty concerts given that season from bandstands erected in these years at Maplewood, Seneca, and Genesee Valley Parks. Theodore Dossenbach's band became officially the Park Band in 1903, under a policy of public support advanced by Commissioner Frank G. Newell, and its continued popularity fully justified the board's contribution of \$8500 that year when another \$3000 was subscribed by the streetcar company.

The success of these concerts encouraged the introduction of many spectacular ceremonies. President Lamberton definitely rejected the advice of Olmsted, still the consulting architect, who warned of the damage sometimes wrought by large crowds. The parks belonged to the people, and Lamberton, supported staunchly by other city officials, welcomed every program designed to increase their popular use. Annual celebrations of May Day, Decoration Day, and Labor Day centered there. A Children's Day at Seneca Park in 1904, featuring free pony rides on 35 Shetland ponies loaned for the occasion, proved so popular that it was repeated for several years. The large success of an annual German Day, sponsored by several German singing societies, prompted the organization of a more representative music festival at the Seneca Park bandstand on August 16, 1906. Two large bands and the choirs of three churches delighted a vast throng, variously estimated at 30,000 and 50,000,

which gathered around Trout Pond shimmering in the light of 1500 Japanese lanterns.

Indian Day at Maplewood Park revived an earlier Maple Grove custom and attracted thousands of curious citizens to watch the ceremonies of the Seneca tribesmen who camped there annually for the occasion. A more elaborate Indian festival, featuring a sham battle between two parties of painted warriors, served as the opening ceremony for Durand-Eastman Park on October 10, 1909, when 12,000 attended despite inadequate transport facilities. All of these performances were overshadowed, however, by the annual Water Carnivals held at Genesee Valley Park. The greatest of these events occurred during a Shriners' convention on July 13, 1912, when an estimated 100,000 flocked to watch the boat displays and enjoy the band music and other features prepared for the occasion.

Though less spectacular, the improved facilities for everyday recreation were in the long run more important. Thus the Water Carnivals would have been impossible without the numerous boat clubs, a dozen of which had boathouses on park sites in 1908. Over 1000 canoes and small boats belonging to these clubs or available for hire supplied aquatic pageantry almost any summer day at Genesee Valley Park. A number of swan boats gave young children and their guardians three and ten cents rides around Trout Pond at Seneca Park in these years. A few yachts ventured up the river to the Seneca or Maplewood landings, but boating on the lower river was not then as pleasant as it had been in post-Civil War days and would be again when the trunk sewers were re-routed far out into the lake.

Sports enthusiasts now found accommodations at the parks for most of their games. Additional ball fields and tennis courts were provided. A bowling green appeared at Maplewood where the park system's second golf course was laid out in 1902. The Genesee Valley Golf club received permission to erect a clubhouse at the public course in that park two years later, and a cricket field soon made its appearance nearby. Swimming pools were constructed at both Seneca and Genesee Valley Parks. Extensive hiking and bicycle trails were improved, not to mention numerous picnic grounds equipped with benches, tables, swings, drinking fountains and rest rooms. Most of these summer-time facilities continued in use from May until October. Provision for winter months was not neglected, as the skating rinks at all major parks, the bobsled run at Seneca, and the toboggan slide at Highland Park demonstrated.

The Seneca Park zoo, sponsored throughout the early years by Commissioner William Bausch, was more firmly established in 1902 when permanent shelters were erected for 150 animals. The construction a few years later of a large flying cage for the 300 birds housed nearby supplied another popular feature. A rumor in 1909 that the zoo would be moved to Durand-Eastman Park aroused so many protests that the plans for a second zoo had to be clarified. Aided by gifts from Lamberton and other friends of the parks, a fine collection of upstate New York fauna was soon located in the natural setting of a wild ravine in the lake-side park, an arrangement impossible for the bears, monkeys, and other animals kept at the older zoo. A keen interest in bird life was stimulated by the weekly publication, starting in 1913, of lists of birds seen at the parks, a feature developed as a hobby by Richard Horsey and William Edson whose horticultural duties kept them in the field most of the time.

New opportunities for expansion were suddenly revealed in 1911 when the fifteen-acre site of the old State Industrial School was acquired by the city. Some of the old buildings could be converted into a permanent zoo, the mayor suggested, to be open the year around; another old building would make a fine aquarium; another an indoor skating rink; still others would serve as exhibit halls for the Rochester Industrial Exposition launched at Convention Hall three years before. The plans sounded grandiose, yet it soon became apparent that Rochester had acquired a valuable asset in Exposition Park. The aquarium never materialized, but the winter quarters for some of the zoo animals were provided here in time, and meanwhile the fourth annual Industrial Exposition opened the park in September, 1911, attracting 105,000 during the first six days. The Rochester Historical Society received permission to move its library and museum collections into one of the old buildings the next year, thus providing a nest egg for the long-desired public library and public museum which the city soon established in the same building. A playground, a swimming pool and other features made Edgerton Park, as it was eventually named, an active year-round center, though for a time the annual expositions somewhat overshadowed the other features.

Nothing could overshadow the playground movement which developed in close conjunction with the parks in these years. The campaign for children's playgrounds commenced at Brick Church Institute in May, 1902, when Commissioner Lamberton, Miss Alida

Lattimore, and a few kindred spirits organized the Children's Playground League. A fund was quickly raised to employ playground directors for play areas to be located on park lands, and Brown's Square was selected for the first playground. The opposition of some neighbors held up action that year, but the city's first supervised playground was opened there the next summer. Its successful operation prompted the commissioners to construct a wading pool and install other equipment in the spring of 1905 and to assume full responsibility for its management that fall.

Playgrounds were soon demanded by other sections of the city. The Playground League extended its work to several school grounds and, with Colonel Samuel P. Moulthrop as one of its active leaders, persuaded the Board of Education to open or enlarge school playgrounds in congested areas. The League was able to focus its attention on a new playground on Front Street in 1908, for by this time both the park and school authorities were providing the major support elsewhere. The schools took the lead in an effort to coordinate this work in 1908 when Edward J. Ward was appointed director of social centers and playgrounds. Unfortunately, the social-center movement raised explosive political issues, and in the controversy which ensued the former cooperation between the schools and the parks was disrupted.

The playgrounds were meanwhile growing both in number and popularity. The total attendance at six school playgrounds in 1909 was 255,256, and 238,974 registered at four park playgrounds. A new attempt to coordinate the work under the direction of Colonel Moulthrop in the summer of 1913 ended with his resignation that fall. Determined to give this vital activity a fair trial, Mayor Edgerton invited Rowland Haynes, secretary of the recreation committee in New York City, to make a study of Rochester's playground needs. The Haynes survey stressed the heavy concentration of Rochester's child population in several congested areas and recommended additional and larger playgrounds for their use. Generously praising the existing program as better than that of most cities, Haynes suggested that the service, which already cost \$36,000 a year, could be greatly improved without much additional outlay by unified direction. Rochester was ready for that effort as the reorganization of the park management in 1915 demonstrated.



## The Park Commissioner: 1915-1928

The considerations which prompted the sudden abolition of the twenty-man commission in 1915 and the appointment by the mayor of a single commissioner were never clearly revealed. The White Charter of 1900 had, it is true, placed most of the other municipal functions under the direction of a strong mayor, and the adoption of several amendments in 1907 had presented another occasion when the Park Commission might have been abolished, for home-rule arguments were currently popular, but so was the commission.

Perhaps the advanced age of some of the commissioners and the difficulties arising from the expanding playground program sufficed to produce the reorganization of 1915. Certainly the playground functions were the ones chiefly affected at the time, for the appointment of the two most active members of the board, Lamberton and Riley, as commissioner and deputy-commissioner respectively, indicated a determination to carry on the existing park program. The former staff heads, Laney, Dunbar, and their associates, were retained; Bernard H. Slavin was made superintendent of street trees—an important new position which promised more effective supervision. The one significant innovation, which may have been inspired by the Haynes survey, was the appointment of Robert A. Burnhard, a former West High football star who had since become coach of the Freshman team at Cornell, as superintendent of playgrounds.

Since Lamberton was already seventy-six when he became commissioner, much of the detail of the office descended to his deputy, William S. Riley, who took over as commissioner when Lamberton resigned three years later. Indeed, the younger man had played an increasingly important role in park developments during the Lamberton era and carried on now with little deviation of policy until his own retirement in 1925, when Laney became commissioner for a brief period.

Few changes in park policy occurred in these years except those brought about by the First World War. The horticultural work retained a primary position, and indeed the fame of Highland Park's lilacs and other displays made it a mecca for the new automobile enthusiasts of a widening region. Moreover, the plantings at Durand-Eastman and Cobb's Hill Parks were, in their turn, commencing to win favor by the twenties. The rose garden at Maple-

wood now became a real attraction, and the herbarium, established many years before, reported in 1925 that the number of its carefully labeled specimens of plants and trees in the parks exceeded 40,000. The Park Band continued to maintain a full summer schedule of sixty to eighty concerts. Two noteworthy spectacles known as Festivals of Song and Light were held at Highland Park in 1915 and 1916, providing unusual treats to great multitudes, but like the Water Carnivals and Indian Day they were discontinued during the war. A Victory Exposition attracted still larger crowds to Edgerton Park in 1919, which proved to be the last truly successful exposition, as interest in these and other spectacular programs declined after the war.

Recreational facilities continued to increase in number and diversity. Winter skating at Lake Riley and other park rinks, unusually popular in 1925, attracted an estimated 225,000 skaters during the season. Skiing was also popular at many points in the parks. The registrations for the use of the various playing fields demonstrated their utility; 5316 permits for the use of baseball diamonds led the team registrations, followed by 1137 basketball permits, 375 soccer, 132 indoor baseball, and 109 football permits. Golf players were accommodated on two new eighteen-hole courses, one at Genesee Valley and the other at Durand-Eastman; their total of 61,234 players in 1924 overshadowed the 2483 tennis players whose courts were not so satisfactory. A polo field at Genesee Valley Park accommodated both polo and cricket enthusiasts. A bathhouse equipped with lockers for 1000 bathers was erected at Durand-Eastman Park in 1919, and a vacation camp for boys was opened there two years later. The success of this experimental camp prompted the development of a camp area where families and others suitable groups were welcome to pitch their tents. Almost 1000 were accommodated there in 1927, while 779 groups reserved tables at the twelve picnic grounds that year; others, no doubt, failed to register.

The major new development of this period was the purchase of Ontario Beach at Charlotte. This step was earnestly pressed by Commissioner Riley who predicted that this old private amusement park, which then appeared to be on its last legs, could easily be converted into one of the most popular recreation centers in the Rochester area. Riley was promptly vindicated, for upwards of 100,000 used the old bathhouse there in 1925. Within a few years,

five of the twenty-six acres had to be set aside for parking, and the need for more extensive facilities was becoming evident.

Despite the acquisition of Charlotte beach, the area of park lands added during this period was insignificant. The total land and water area of nine large parks and ten city squares of 1928 was 1764 acres, as compared with 1644 in 1917. However, the value of the improvements on this land was mounting rapidly, as well as the budget for park maintenance, which advanced 138 per cent during the last ten years of the period, reaching \$443,702 in 1928.

An equally rapid increase was required to meet the expanded program of the bureau of playgrounds and recreation, which cost the city over \$200,000 in 1928. The playgrounds had increased in number, to 43 by 1927, when the total attendance was given as 2,903,093. When the numbers using the bathing beaches and the public dance hall, now under the care of this bureau, were added, the figure approached 3,600,000. More important than the statistical growth was the enriched character of the program which included, in addition to supervised games, some instruction in handicrafts, folk dancing, story telling and the distributions of children's books. City-wide tournaments to which the various playgrounds sent contestants included kite-flying, checker, swimming, and track meets. The full value of this program could only be secured through the development of a trained and devoted personnel, but meanwhile facilities for outdoor recreation had been greatly extended.

### **The Bureau of Parks: 1928-1948**

That much remained to be achieved was disclosed by a *Survey of Recreational Facilities in Rochester* conducted for the Bureau of Municipal Research by Charles B. Raitt in 1928. This competent survey found much worthy of praise but stressed the inadequacies. In some respects the park needs outlined by Raitt were overdrawn, for he assumed a continued population increase that did not occur. However the survey was in other respects penetrating. The lack of adequate play parks, of trained playground personnel, and skilled promotion detracted much from the effectiveness of the recreational program, the survey declared, noting also the need for parkway integration. Stephen B. Storey, the recently appointed first City Manager, welcomed the survey and named Raitt as Director of the Bureau of Parks, which the new city charter had placed under the

Commissioner of Public Safety. Unfortunately, the hope that Raitt would be able to effect the suggested reforms was blasted when an accidental drowning at the opening of the Ontario Beach season in 1929 stirred a controversy which terminated in Raitt's removal—perhaps the most regrettable episode in Rochester park history.

Raitt's program, despite endorsement given it by the Bartholomew "Report on Recreational Facilities" in 1931, was in any event doomed by the onset of the depression which seriously curtailed park and playground appropriations and forced drastic retrenchments. Patrick Slavin, the new director of the bureau, who had risen in the service from waterboy in 1891, managed to safeguard the city's valuable horticultural estate throughout the lean years and to retain many essential workers, including Chester B. Leake, playground superintendent since the early twenties, and Gertrude M. Harnett whose long service in the office helped to foster continuity of administration. Most of the new features added during this period were built by Federal relief agencies—the two new bandshells, one at Highland and one at Ontario Beach, several picnic shelters and fireplaces, and the boat livery at Genesee Valley Park among them. Many playground programs and much unskilled labor came from the same source.

If the city's growth and prosperity received a check in the early thirties, the expansion of its population and activity into the surrounding towns continued. The increased number of automobiles enabled residents to journey further afield for their family picnics and other outings. This situation had become apparent in the early twenties and had prompted the establishment of a county park system in 1926. Fortunately Ellison Park, its first acquisition received that year as a gift, was followed in rapid succession by Churchville, Mendon Ponds, Hamlin Beach and Powder Mill parks—all before the outbreak of the depression. A plan for county parkways had to be shelved, but the improvement of these parks was intermittently pressed, occasionally with the aid of Federal funds. Hamlin Beach Park was subsequently turned over to the state in exchange for Webster Beach Park, which brought the area of the county parks to 2988 acres. When the city and state park acres in the county are added, the total reaches 5675, which is well above the standard of one acre to every 100 inhabitants. A dramatic demonstration of the utility of these widely scattered parks occurred on a hot Saturday in August, 1940, when a 91-degree heat wave sent well over

200,000, or approximately half the county's populations, to the parks.

The city park leaders, thus saved from the necessity for major efforts at expansion, were able to devote an increasing portion of their resources to maintenance. When the reduced appropriations of the depression years were superseded during the forties by more adequate budgetary allotments, Patrick Slavin, Director, grasped the opportunity to undertake important phases of park work, which had necessarily been neglected during the lean years, and to embark upon some development operations designed to enhance the beauty and usefulness of the existing parks. Upon his recommendation, William Pitkin, an experienced landscape architect, was appointed superintendent of parks in 1943 with supervision over the new landscaping program.

While this program included new planting, it specifically involved careful measures of scientific thinning and pruning designed to bring the verdant growth of former years under control. Many of the early plantings had already exceeded their normal span of life; others were rapidly reaching maturity or had grown to such proportions that interesting views were obscured or marred; in addition many important horticultural specimens were becoming crowded by adjacent plants and needed to be relieved of the pressure. The program further undertook to safeguard the diversity of the plant collections by an intensified effort to propagate the many varieties of trees, shrubs, and evergreens already growing in the parks so that replacement plants would be available when required.

Thus the rich profusion of acclimated varieties, already developed under the influence of Professor Sargent and through the practical efforts of Laney, Dunbar, the Slavins and others, has been protected by a program that also serves the timely purpose of enhancing their display value. As a result of these efforts, and because of a more active promotional policy, the lilacs at Highland Park have attracted visitors from many states, swelling their Lilac Sunday crowds to 100,000 on more than one occasion in recent years. Meanwhile the younger lilac and other displays at Durand-Eastman and Cobb's Hill Parks have grown in favor and now delight park visitors throughout successive seasons.

Other phases of the park program have likewise shown the effect of renewed support. The Park Band, maintained throughout the depression, first shared its function with the Veteran's Band in 1945, and both continue to attract good crowds to numerous concerts each

season. Although most of the more elaborate civic festivals have long since been discontinued (except those of particular interest to youths, such as the kite-flying contest, the miniature yacht regatta, and the soap box derby), the heavy use of the numerous park playfields has continued, prompting the frequent restoration and enlargement of some of these facilities. A notable example is the great effort exerted each winter to keep the eight skating rinks cleared of snow, yet the enthusiastic outpouring of skaters, young and old, fully justifies the effort. The various activities of Youth Week, instituted this past August, and the remarkable success of the GAR pageant presented at the bandshell in Highland Park on June 11, 1948, before a crowd estimated at over 10,000, suggested a reviving interest in large park spectacles.

Certainly the popularity of the beaches and the zoos has never been in doubt. The construction under Patrick Slavin's leadership of a fine new zoo at Seneca Park in 1931 enabled the city to add a Bengal tiger, a leopard, a jaguar, two kangaroos, several additional monkeys and birds, and a white polar bear to its collection. The appointment a few years later of Frederic J. Strassle, a skilled animal trainer, as superintendent of the zoo soon brought the announcement of regular animal shows for children, a source of delight to thousands of youngsters over the years. The intense interest displayed for the welfare of Oscar II, a youthful polar bear acquired recently to replace his aged predecessor, has provided the high point of the season there. Of course the throngs at the beaches have been more numerous, although, in recent years the exceptionally high water level of Lake Ontario has seriously damaged the beach at Durand-Eastman Park. Fortunately the Natatorium built on South Avenue in 1938 by the WPA and the new beaches in the county parks have helped to relieve the pressure of bathers at the still inadequate Ontario Beach.

The passing years have brought changing demands on the playgrounds as well. The declining utility of some of the small playgrounds, evident in the drop in registrations during the mid-thirties and again in the early forties, reflected perhaps the competition of more adequately supervised institutional programs, such as the scout and other summer day-camps, as well as a declining child population. Interest in the playgrounds has revived in recent years, restoring the attendance at several of these centers to earlier levels. Recognizing the primary importance of good leadership to a rec-

reational program, the Playground Division has joined the Council of Social Agencies in sponsoring two recent "In-Service Training Programs" for its old and new activity leaders. On the other hand, Rochester has not as yet provided the larger neighborhood playground-parks, recommended years ago by Raitt and others, which have proved to be useful sub-community centers in several cities. Fortunately a forthcoming survey of Rochester's playground needs by the City Planning Commission suggests a reshuffling of the playground areas and the development of one playfield-park and suitable indoor facilities for each of the seven sub-communities into which Rochester has been divided.

The City Planning Commission has likewise undertaken the hitherto neglected task of charting a system of parkways. Many of the sixty-odd stretches of street parkways which the city has acquired over the years, principally as gifts from the promoters of subdivisions, have supplied attractive neighborhood features, notably the row of magnolia trees on Oxford Street, but much of their scenic value has been lost through the failure to link them together. The much more pressing need for traffic thruways, and the state's decision to push its expressways into and through the cities, will afford opportunities to develop beautiful parkways for future Rochesterians, provided the park bureau's foresters, or comparable experts, are permitted to do as good a job there as has been done on most of the outlying city streets where today more than 100,000 trees are cared for.

Rochester is no longer known throughout America principally as the Flower City; nor is it recognized today as in the vanguard of park developments, for younger and more rapidly growing cities have won that distinction; yet Rochester stands well up among the leaders in horticultural respects and even in park acreage when it is computed on a county basis; moreover it compares favorably with average city standards in the recreational facilities provided—with the important exceptions indicated above. Indeed, the city now displays its pride in its parks in realistic fashion—a budget of slightly more than \$1,000,000 annually. Thus a total of \$1,255,777 has been allotted for parks, playgrounds and cemeteries in the 1949 budget. Most citizens unhesitatingly recognize the park system as one of Rochester's greatest assets.

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