

*A Place of Peace, Play, and Learning: the Genesee County Park and Forest*

by

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The origins of the beautiful Genesee County Park and Forest illuminates the idea that “history,” as the famous American historian from Buffalo, Richard Hofstadter, once put it, “is irony.” The beginning of what eventually became the Genesee County Park and Forest is rooted in something not nearly as pleasant and uplifting as the park we find ourselves in today. Instead, its birth is found in the history of the Genesee County Poor House, which was established in December of 1826 by the County Board of Supervisors, and which opened its doors to the first residents on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1827.

The early residents were identified by terms that would sound harsh to many of us today. Those we would say today are stricken with mental illness were then called “lunatics.” Those less fortunate in an economic sense were termed “paupers” – or those without income. “Paupers” who were also elderly or suffering from a disability were “state paupers.” “Paupers” and “lunatics” were all too often viewed as people who had induced their own misfortune – so while receiving assistance at the County Home they were nonetheless viewed as morally suspect. The County Home, then, was a place exuding a dark quality and sadness not connected to what would later be the Genesee County Park and Forest.

But social perceptions aside, numerous practical issues eventually came to the forefront – how could the residents of the County Home best have their *physical* needs met? One of those needs was warmth in the often unforgiving western New York winter. Warmth in much of the nineteenth century meant fires, and fires in a building meant a need for firewood. Therefore, by 1882 the County Board of Supervisors authorized the purchase of a wood lot – eight acres of woods and fourteen acres of cleared land lying adjacent to the County Farm (as early as 1840 the Genesee County Farm raised and sold crops, e.g. vegetables and

tobacco) which both provided food for residents and crops that were sold to help support the institution.

The woodlot of course furnished firewood needed at the County Home. In 1915 the forest was started, and is recognized to this day as New York State's first County Forest. After World War One state authorities facilitated a process that was largely the result of work undertaken by a long-time County Home Superintendent, George A. Fleming. Despite the terrible effects of the Great Depression, 169,500 trees had been planted by 1935. These efforts also led to plantings designed to form a watershed, which in time helped alleviate the worse of the water-related problems faced by the County Home. New York State supplied many of these trees – along with the labor necessary to plant them.

By 1976, this delightful Bethany forest included 423 acres. When the County Home was sold, a number of these acres were also disposed of. The Genesee County Legislature has long acknowledged the inherent worth of this area. Accordingly, in 1966, responsibility for the Park was assigned to the Committee on Public Welfare. From this moment on funds were made available and development plans were implemented in order to promote a wider recreational use of this wonderful resource. By 1966 forest management procedures, such as thinning and pruning, were initiated.

By 1972 a full time forester, Rick Branton, was appointed Park Manager. He was instrumental in advancing the program of forest management. Government financial assistance proved to be critical in the forms of allocations from the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Outdoor Recreation and New York State's Forest Practice Act. The Boy Scouts and the conservation class of BOCES (Boards of Cooperative Educational Services) played an important part in planting trees during this period, and other groups as well, such as 4-H, the Jaycees, the Lions, Sertoma, and the Vietnam Veterans, all worked to help provide the forest we enjoy today.

In 1996 the effort to develop an Interpretive Center was undertaken under the leadership of the Genesee County Park and Forestry Department. The Interpretive Center opened for visitors on the 18<sup>th</sup> of July, 1998, after two years of work

embarked upon by volunteers. These volunteers included people from the Genesee County Highway Department, the Navy Sea Bees, the Iroquois Job Corps, and Park employees. The Interpretive Center's displays regarding wildlife and the natural world in general are in keeping with the traditional role that parks have played in modern American life.

The Genesee County Park and Forest is a place that embodies what the founders of the "the park movement" had in mind in the nineteenth century. Referring to the parks emerging in the United States before the Civil War, such people as Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux spoke of providing "a specimen of God's handiwork" to all those desiring to forge a relationship with the workings of the natural world. Such early proponents of parks saw them not as a luxury but instead as a necessary component in the lives of Americans. Why were parks necessary? For them – and for succeeding generations of park advocates – these areas provide recreational opportunities that otherwise may not be available. Just as importantly, they offer relief from the all too common hectic and pressured modern world. In other words, they are a place to reconnect to other, often overlooked aspects of our humanity; a humanity that takes us beyond concrete, shopping excursions, and the quest for material success. They inspire us to pay attention to the sound of the trees and the movement of the many animals that live alongside of us. Not incidentally, in a society already characterized by a sedentary nature largely absent before the modern period, the parks encourage the importance of exercise – however minimal that might be.

Interestingly, the importance of parks in another sense was not lost on the early proponents of "the park movement." Even in the nineteenth century it was recognized that parks had the effect of increasing nearby property values. This has a ripple effect throughout the economy, as increased property values translates into higher property taxes which, in turn, tends to improve the lives of all of those in society. Along these lines, the higher property taxes are enough to pay for the debt charges on bonds that may have helped to finance a park's development. In effect, the parks pay for themselves while simultaneously benefitting growing numbers of people in the community.

While all of this is important, it may be fitting to conclude that the intangible benefits of the park are what in the end give people ultimate satisfaction. Look at the surroundings here. Like other parks, how does one not have a feeling of serenity and peacefulness not always found in our fast-paced world? Such an emotional state works to decrease anxiety, fears, and even anger at the multitude of realities we otherwise confront in the world. Parks promote a community's health – both physical and mental. The Genesee County Park and Forest therefore stands in a proud and noble tradition of what is best in American life.