

Parks and Golf Courses in Winnipeg - Historical Highlights

Boom town Winnipeg in the 1890's had very few parks and green spaces. The parks fell into two categories: vacant spaces or parks operated by commercial operators.

The previous 30 years prior to 1890 had seen an enlightened movement, called the "City Beautiful Movement", whereby altruistic citizens of means and ordinary citizens advocated for public parks to be provided by city, municipal governments and supported by taxpayers' dollars. This proposition was quite widespread in Europe and in some American cities. Minneapolis was notably one of the cities that moved forward with this new idea for park development. This inspired civic leaders in always competitive Winnipeg to adopt a similar system, for 1892 was a watershed year for park development in Winnipeg. The Manitoba government passed the Manitoba Public Parks Act which allowed the establishment of a public park board. In 1893 the Winnipeg Public Parks Board was established.

Even in those days one can imagine that parks were not created for public good alone. Real estate developers were quite happy to donate some land for parks in order to gain access and profit from the sale of the surrounding lands. Along with this thinking was an alternate belief that parks and green spaces were the "lungs of the city."

The first parks established in 1893 were Assiniboine Park (later renamed Fort Rouge Park in 1905), Central Park, St. John's Park, and Victoria Gardens, later renamed Victoria Park in 1894. Suburban Park, later renamed Assiniboine Park, was established in 1904 alongside the Assiniboine River, and was known as the "Outside Park." Nine neighbourhood parks: St. John's, Fort Rouge, Central, Victoria, Dufferin, Selkirk, Notre Dame, St. James, and Upper Fort Garry, with a total of 33 acres, became the central hub of the Winnipeg public park system. From 1893-1903 the park board and staff worked on design, landscaping, boulevard development and financing for these urban spaces.

The creation of Kildonan Park alongside the Red River in 1909/1910 saw the second, large urban park, established in a very rural landscape quite north of the city proper. Under the stewardship of parks superintendent George Champion Kildonan Park became a reality. Sargent Park followed in 1911. Winnipeg's first municipal golf course, Kildonan Golf Course, opened in 1921, and it was our first recreational service provided by the City of Winnipeg. Windsor Park Golf Course was created on the banks of the Seine River in 1924, after the city of Winnipeg purchased the land from the municipality of St. Vital. These two golf courses came on the heels of the end of the Great War, the Spanish Flu Epidemic, and during the years of the so-called "Roaring Twenties."

The intervening years of the collapse of the banking system of 1929, the Dirty Thirties, the Second World War, and the 1950's saw some improvements in our parks, but it was not until the 1960's that the Metro Parks and Protection Department could move forward with more public parks and public golf courses. The Tuxedo Golf Course was an exception. It was established in 1933.

Crescent Drive Golf Course was created in 1966 after the city had taken over Crescent Drive Park and

had established a 9-hole golf course within its boundaries. The city also established La Barriere Park, along the picturesque La Salle River in this same year.

The North-east quadrant of the city did not have recreational or park facilities until the Kil-Cona Park development was undertaken. The Harbour View Recreation Complex was developed in the late 70's, and the Harbour View Golf Course became a reality in 1982. With 411 acres Kil-Cona Park is the largest park in the Winnipeg parks system. It must be kept in mind that this park, built on a former garbage refuse dump, was completely changed with the foresight of city planners. The aesthetics of this entire area was beautified with the development of this expansive park.

John Blumberg Golf Course, a prairie recreational park and golf course, was established in principle in 1966 by the Metro Parks and Protection Division, who had purchased the land for the development of this urban space. The golf course opened in 1967.

In 2002 spirited community efforts to preserve the Bois-des-esprits, the forest that surrounds the Seine River in suburban Royalwood, resulted in 117 of a proposed development's 305 acres, almost all of the trees in the river-bottom forest and its surrounding uplands, being protected as City parkland. The City of Winnipeg, the Province of Manitoba and generous citizens pooled funds to purchase the second largest forest in Winnipeg from the developers. The popular active transportation trail that was created now winds its way through invaluable wildlife habitat.

A 6.7-kilometre stretch of unused railway, the CPR Raleigh-Gateway trail line (AKA the Marconi Line) was purchased by Winnipeg business owner John Buhler in 2006. His generosity, along with funding from the City of Winnipeg and the Province of Manitoba, transformed historic land use, a railway allowance used to entice early railroad barons to come to Winnipeg, into an active transportation corridor in the north-east quadrant of Winnipeg. The 21st Century finds Winnipeggers valuing our new trails as a good use of our reclaimed parkland.

This short historical synopsis does not include the many years of discussion, negotiation, and decision making of the many city councillors, mayors, city staff, parks and recreation staff and the many volunteers working behind the scenes to promote playgrounds, and community centers, swimming pools, and urban spaces, etc. It does, however, provide a brief historical overview of the years 1892 to the present, where we now find ourselves having to defend a park system that took 120 years to build. The seven golf courses are public domains. Public consultation must prevail. After all, the seven golf courses have been paid by us, the citizens of Winnipeg who have come before us, and those who will come after us. In reality, they belong to all Winnipeggers.

Referenced from: A City at Leisure, An Illustrated History of Parks and Recreation Services in Winnipeg, by Catherine Macdonald, 1995.

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