

# Stratford's Parks System



For well over a century, Stratford has been known for its parks. Long before the Stratford Festival was established, groups would come on train excursions from London and other towns in southwestern Ontario to enjoy a day in the parks. Since 1904 formation of the Parks Board, the city has taken seriously the development and maintenance of a complete parks system.

By 1870, the need for a major park for the growing town became linked with the need for a town cemetery. A large piece of land at the west end, constituting the new Avondale Cemetery northwest of the Avon and the T. J. Dolan Natural Area (formerly The Old Grove) southeast of the Avon, was purchased by the town. Although disrupted recently for installing underground services, the natural area has been replanted.

A few years later, in 1877, Queen's Park was obtained at the opposite (east) end of the town. Redesigned by Canada's leading landscape architect, Frederick G. Todd, about 1905, the upper park with its pavilion became the most scenic and popular park. Todd's pattern of diagonal, treed lanes was first disturbed by the building of the Normal School at its southwest corner in 1908 and can only be recognized in a few places today. However, it remains the most popular park today with the concerts at the bandshell, the outdoor picnic facilities, and the large children's playground, not to mention the main Stratford Festival theatre.

It soon became a vision of some that these two parks should be connected by a continuous park along the river. A number of hurdles had to be overcome to do this. The first of these was for the town to purchase Lake Victoria (actually a mill pond) from its owners, popularly called the "Dam Syndicate". They owned the dam as well, but the name seems to have been used as a play on its pejorative homonym, a not wholly unfair use, considering the absolute control the syndicate exercised over boating and skating on the river. Eventually, the syndicate relented, and the lake became a public area.

The next step was to clear the riversides of a number of lumber yards and sawmills. This became one of the main missions of the Parks Board in its earliest years. Within about a decade, the Parks Board had gained control of most of the south bank of the river. But during that time it also had to lead a long campaign against a railway line proposed by the Canadian Pacific Railway.

The CPR came with three different proposals between 1904 and 1912. Each proposal involved the railway running along a bank of the Avon River and destroying the parks system. In 1905, Todd had already laid out the riverside park behind the old post office where the War Memorial now stands. There was a boat house adjacent, as it still is today, and a bathing house across the river. Regattas on the river had become popular in summer with many spectators standing along the shores. And in winter, skating on the river was a favourite activity.

TOP: BOATING REGATTA, CIRCA 1912.

ABOVE RIGHT: LADY ALEXANDER AND MAYOR MAURICE KING FOLLOWED BY R. THOMAS ORR AND GOVERNOR GENERAL VISCOUNT ALEXANDER OF TUNIS IN THE SHAKESPEAREAN GARDENS, 1947.

RIGHT: BOATERS NEAR ROMEO STREET, CIRCA 1915.

FAR RIGHT: FORMAL PARK DESIGNED BY F.G. TODD (THIS PHOTO WAS USED ON A POSTER AS PART OF THE "SAVE THE PARK" CAMPAIGN OF 1913).



The successful campaign poster emphasized how people would lose access to their river, and in a referendum, the citizens voted a clear majority against the CPR.

The last of the parks system along the river to be developed was the former Dufton Woollen Mill site. Only the 65 foot chimney survived the final fire. Work started on cleaning the site for parkland in 1926. But the dream of R. Thomas Orr, who was instrumental in the development of the parks system and the Parks Board, was to have Shakespearean Gardens here. He personally did research and travelled to England to investigate the proper varieties of plants that are mentioned in Shakespeare. Landscape architect, H.B. Dunnington Grubb, who is famous for his design of the Niagara Parks system, was hired to lay out the design of the Shakespearean Gardens. The Gardens were officially opened by Governor-General Lord Tweedsmuir on May 28, 1936. Queen Mary donated roses in 1938, as she had done for the garden in England. In 1949, a bust of Shakespeare was sponsored for the garden by the Sons of England Benefit Society and created by Canadian sculptor Cleve Horne. Over the years the gardens have had to be renovated a couple of times, most recently in 1980. At that time Lieutenant-Governor Pauline McGibbon reopened the Gardens.

In preparation for the 1932 centennial celebrations, the city opened Lakeside Drive along the south bank of the river. This made access to the park and the lake in the new motor age much easier. In 1929, R. Thomas Orr had already convinced city council to replace the old bandstand with a new style bandshell, one of the earliest in Canada and probably the oldest still standing. He soon proposed that Shakespearean plays be performed at the bandshell with its natural amphitheatre in the adjacent park. The depression of the 1930s put an end to this idea, but it was among the suggestions put forward by Tom Patterson in 1952 when planning the Stratford Shakespearean Festival.

Director Tyrone Guthrie soon ruled it out as too small and had his eye on a location at the edge of upper Queen's Park.

It was Guthrie who credited the existing Parks system as the essential setting for the Stratford Festival. The theatre could draw people, but it was the parks that made them want to stay. Today, Stratford continues to maintain and improve its wonderful parkland.

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