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Building a Legacy -- History of the Ohio State Parks, 1949 to 1999

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Our modern state park system shares its birthday, and its roots, with our state's modern natural resources agency.

In the early 1900s, U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt inspired the nation with his love of the outdoors and creation of a new national park system. Ohioans jumped on the bandwagon with their own conservation movement, passing laws, creating agencies and buying land to protect forests, fish and game. After World War II, state lawmakers saw the need to consolidate the jumbled assortment of state lands and provide for consistency in their management and administration. Senate Bill 13 of the 98th General Assembly, effective October 7, 1949, created the Division of Parks within the new Ohio Department of Natural Resources.

The diversity of today's Ohio State Park system reflects the diversity of its origins. Immediately after it was created, the new Division of Parks inherited 24 state-owned forest parks, 10 recreation reserves, 18 lake reserves, two canalways and five highway wayside parks. Long before that, a number of these areas were in use as public parks or recreation areas. Ohio's canal system, built in the mid 1800s and abandoned a generation later, left a lasting legacy of water supply lakes. The abandoned canal reservoirs, with such familiar names as Indian Lake, Lake Loramie, Grand Lake St. Marys, Buckeye Lake and Portage Lakes, were dedicated as public parks in 1894-1898 under the jurisdiction of the Department of Public Works.



Even without a parking lot or launch ramp in the early years, Pymatuning Lake was popular with boaters.

By the late 1800s, efforts were underway to begin replacing the alarming amount of Ohio's original forests cleared to make way for agriculture, urban development and industry. During the 1920s, 60,000 acres of Ohio's rural woodlands were set aside as state forests or forest-parks, including Shawnee, Pike (Lake), Scioto Trail, Nelson Ledges, John Bryan, Hocking Hills and Mohican. The state forest-parks protected undeveloped areas, usually with interesting geologic features, by placing them in public ownership for preservation and public use. Additional forest-parks established during this era included Strouds Run, Beaver

- Canal Lands Program
- Nature Preserves
- Ohio Trails Program
- Other Resources



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Creek and Hueston Woods.

Through the 1930s and 1940s, the Department of Agriculture's Division of Conservation and Natural Resources was busy building dams around the state to create lakes for fishing. The construction was financed with funds from the sale of hunting and fishing licenses. The public recreation facilities (if there were any) were strictly no-frills, and few provisions were made for pleasure boaters, swimmers or picnickers. Harrison Lake, Jackson Lake, Kiser Lake, Lake White, Madison Lake and the lakes at Van Buren and Mt. Gilead were created as a result of these efforts, and Guilford Lake, a former canal reservoir, was improved for recreation purposes. The Division of Conservation also set its sights on developing a recreation area on the Lake Erie shore at East Harbor.



Early campsites entailed pulling the car onto the grass and setting up one's tent.

Ironically, we have the Great Depression of the 1930s to thank for some of the facilities we enjoy at our leisure in more prosperous times. Two federal programs, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA), created jobs in public parks for staggering numbers of young people who were living on the road as their families struggled through the Depression. From 1933 to 1935, a total of 14 CCC camps employing 200 men each were established on Ohio's state forests and forest-parks. These hardworking youth cut trails, erected fire towers, built roads, dug lake beds and built rustic day lodges and shelterhouses. Today, these buildings are recognized by their charming looks and sturdy construction of stone and timbers. Tree planting and development projects accomplished by the Works Progress Administration revitalized lands set aside at Tar Hollow, Blue Rock and Lake Hope under the federal Land Utilization Program.



CCC corpsmen constructing trails in the Hocking Hills.

Park managers were hired to handle day-to-day operations at individual parks. In its first year, the fledgling state park system hosted 3.5 million visitors. It was immediately obvious that the existing parks and their facilities fell short of meeting the recreational needs of a public ready to relax and enjoy its free time. The first order of business in achieving the Division of Parks' legislative mandate to "create, supervise, operate, protect and maintain a system of state parks and to promote their use by the public" was to improve existing facilities and begin adding new ones. Plans were hatched for construction of vacation facilities at Pymatuning, along with remodeling of the Punderson's dining lodge to

provide overnight accommodations.

With so much demand for park facilities, creative solutions were needed to meet the challenge of providing affordable labor. Prison honor camps were set up in 1950 at Hueston Woods, Lake Hope and Hocking Hills to provide a source of labor for park construction projects, as well as relieve overcrowding at the Ohio Penitentiary. This mutually beneficial partnership provided an additional bonus in helping prisoners through the transition from prison to parole.

By its fifth birthday, Ohio State Parks boasted nearly 1.5 miles of beach constructed, 162 boat docks, 16 boat ramps, 70 housekeeping cottages, 20 concession stands offering refreshments or boat rentals, parking spaces for 5,500 cars, 73 latrines, 9 campgrounds, 1 lodge and 2,954 picnic tables. Total visitation was 9.6 million, including 60,000 campers. A naturalist program was initiated at Lake Hope in 1954 to help park visitors appreciate the unique natural history of the area. The park system continued to grow at a steady pace with the acquisition of the Lake Erie Island parks, Forked Run, Rocky Fork and Burr Oak.



Rustic day lodges and concession stands like this one at Pike Forest soon became old-fashioned.

In the early 1960s, financial and labor resources were concentrated in a few parks in each geographic region of the state. As a result, facilities and recreational

opportunities were clustered in a handful of parks, inviting maximum use. A welfare/work program was established, enabling men receiving general relief benefits to work off the value of their welfare checks by helping to build state park facilities.



*Room at Hueston Woods
Lodge*

In 1963, the name of the division was officially changed to put the "recreation" in the ODNR Division of Parks and Recreation. In 1964, the Division of Parks and Recreation adopted the nation's first recreation plan for a state park system, making it eligible to receive federal funding for more outdoor recreation facilities. With the passage of two state bond issues in 1963 and 1965, providing a significant and reliable pool of funding, along with the newly available federal money, long range planning for development began in earnest. Plans were drawn up for 12 new state parks, 10 new beaches, 6,000 campsites, 27 marinas, 8 lakes, a 60-room resort lodge at Burr Oak, and a 94-room resort lodge at Hueston Woods. Fees for lodge rooms, cottages, camping and concessions began to provide operating money, although a pledge was made, and has been kept to this day that admission and day-use activities would remain free.

The popularity of camping at Ohio State Parks continued to soar, with more than one million campers during the 1964 camping season. Summer naturalist programs had become a favorite among campers, and were offered at a total of 13 parks. The first annual Hocking Hills Winter Hike was held in 1966, kicking off the special events bonanza that delights so many park visitors today. By 1969, annual visitation to Ohio State Parks had grown to 30 million, ten times the annual visitation twenty years earlier.

Ohio State Parks started the 1970s with 57 parks in 50 counties, totaling 136,000 acres. It was during this decade that Ohio State Parks began to make real strides in transforming the eclectic collection of parks into multiple-use facilities, and truly embrace the notion of providing something for everyone. Spurred by the gasoline crisis, Ohioans looked for affordable vacation destinations closer to home. Ohio State Parks responded with more overnight facilities, opening resort lodges at Salt Fork, Shawnee and Mohican.



Marina

If the original state parks could be characterized as a mismatched assortment of lands managed for a variety of purposes including recreation, the new park purchases in the 1970s could be viewed as a collection of prime recreation areas, deliberately selected to reflect planning for specific goals. Many of the new park facilities developed at this time were built around large flood control lakes created by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, including Alum Creek, Buck Creek, Caesar Creek, Deer Creek, Dillon, East Fork, Paint Creek and Salt Fork. As these lakes were acquired, opportunities for boating greatly expanded,

and boating became a major recreation activity at Ohio State Parks. To maximize the use of these lakes, launch ramps were built, docks were installed, full service marinas were set up, and swimming beaches were developed, complete with changing rooms and beach concessions.

With more than 2 million campers crowding existing campgrounds, a priority in the development surrounding the new lakes was the establishment of large, modern campgrounds able to accommodate the growing numbers of trailers and recreational vehicles, as well as tents. The Rent-A-Camp program was initiated in 1973 to introduce a new audience to the fun of camping. The idea was to allow a person to experience camping without the expense and hassle of supplying the necessary equipment. The five parks that first offered the program provided a lodge style tent, already set up at a campsite and equipped with basic camping gear, for a fee of \$6 per night.

With environmental issues suddenly becoming part of the national consciousness, demand for naturalist and interpretive programs blossomed in the 1970s. The quality and popularity of the programs, themselves, contributed to the need for

expanding the programs to more parks, and developing nature centers and self-guided nature trails. In addition to the ranks of park naturalists, roving recreation specialists took the nature programs out of the parks and into local schools, hospitals, nursing homes and civic organizations as a community service.



Rent-A-Camp takes the hassle out of packing for a family camping trip.



The Fishmobile brought city folks to the parks for fun and great fishing.

The People-to-the-Parks program provided free transportation for participants living in the midst of cities to their rural state parks for special recreation programs and a welcome getaway. Inner city children were invited to enjoy hiking, swimming, fishing, boating and naturalist programs during the summer months, along with occasional campouts. During the winter, Saturday outings emphasized winter sports. Senior citizens rode the Fishmobile to the parks for weekly fishing excursions, and in the spring and fall, enjoyed one-day park tours and special events. Special facilities and programs were offered at select state parks to provide recreation and outdoor adventure for

persons with disabilities. A federal grant awarded in 1972-73 made People-to-the Parks possible.

In the summers of 1973 and 1974, park visitors were invited to savor Arts-in-the-Parks. This popular program, funded through the Ohio Arts Council, brought outdoor presentations of the "Appalachian Green Parks Project" to eighteen state park venues. Seasoned performers with the Ohio Valley Summer Theater along with student performers from Ohio University brought Ohio's heritage to life with authentic period music, dramatized stories and traditional dance. In its two-year life, 21,000 folks came to their parks to enjoy this entertaining and socially significant program, which received a Governors Award for Community Action in 1974.



Arts-in-the-Parks

With the addition of Quail Hollow and Malabar Farm, Ohio State Parks took an active role in protecting chunks of Ohio history and broadening opportunities for visitors to explore Ohio's rich heritage. Over the years, these parks'along with Maumee Bay, Hocking Hills, Hueston Woods, Lake Hope and Caesar Creek have become the cornerstone of Ohio State Parks' interpretive program, with a variety of special events and naturalist programs offered year-round.

The explosive growth of



Naturalist Program in the 1970s

Ohio State Parks in the 1970s mellowed in the 1980s as successful programs were fine-tuned, and new development and recreation offerings were honed to fill a particular niche. Likewise, the relationship between state parks and their visitors evolved from simply providing the place for folks to kick back and relax, to working in partnership with the community for mutual benefit. Corporate partnerships and grants were sought out to help provide the extras sponsoring informative publications, underwriting educational programs, and donating dollars and materials to make facilities more user friendly. Community-driven lake management associations were initiated at several parks to address development and water quality issues of mutual concern.



Remember when "Chicken Flying" was a popular park event?

State parks became a favorite place to participate in and benefit from the American tradition of community service. What better way to improve the quality of life in the community than to improve the local state park? Scouting organizations and service clubs began initiating projects for the public good. What better place to celebrate Earth Day than in a state park? Park clean-up days became a popular way for groups and individuals to do something "green" to celebrate. With so much interest demonstrated by the public, the time had come to lend some structure to these efforts and help recruit more volunteers.



Naturalist with a red-tailed hawk

As a complement to the popular nature and interpretive programming, environmental education and awareness programs were developed especially for young audiences from urban as well as rural areas. The School Days program was initiated to introduce elementary school students to their local state parks and educate them about a number of environmental and natural resources topics through day-long outdoor programs. The PortaPark kit and complementary teachers workshops were developed to assist teachers in teaching environmental awareness and instill a sense of

responsibility for the environment. The natural combination of boy scouts and campouts were blended with the establishment of the eagerly anticipated annual Scouting Outing at Burr Oak.

The Volunteers-in-Parks program was established in 1982 to enhance the park visitor experience, as well as give folks the satisfaction of sharing their knowledge, skills and experience. Since then, volunteers have assisted park staff with interpretive programs, trail maintenance and park beautification projects, historic and natural science research projects, along with special event planning and general office functions. Volunteers also serve in the unique role of resident camper host, greeting campers and offering assistance. By the end of the decade, more than 1,000 people were volunteering in 43 parks.



Volunteer Camper Hosts

Lake Erie became the focus of park improvements in the 1980s. At South Bass Island, overnight facilities were expanded to include innovative cabents, combining the sturdy frame of a cottage with the airy canvas roof of a tent. In addition, a major renovation project was undertaken to modernize the old primitive campground and improve the facilities for boaters and fishermen. At Geneva State Park on Lake Erie's eastern shore, a new campground opened in 1981 and a marina was added in



Cleveland Lakefront State Park

1989. In an effort to create one of the finest urban waterfronts in the country, an ambitious master plan was developed for the newly acquired lakefront areas

comprising Cleveland Lakefront State Park. The five rundown park areas were spruced up with shoreline protection, the addition of several new concession operations and a new park office, along with beach improvements and picnic facilities at Euclid Beach, expansion of the existing East 55th Street Marina and renovation of the historic pavilion at Edgewater. Plans were developed to transform a quiet new park in northwest Ohio near Toledo into a major recreation area, and in 1988, ground was broken for construction of Ohio's premier state park facility, the Maumee Bay Resort Lodge.

The projects at Maumee Bay and Cleveland Lakefront were part of a larger effort to bring visitors in from metropolitan areas and better serve these areas of dense population. A beach and marina were developed at Alum Creek, near Columbus, and picnic facilities and a swimming beach were added at East Fork, outside the Cincinnati area. To complement the popular swimming beach and boating facilities, 26 vacation cottages, a modern campground and a full-service marina were built at Buck Creek, a stone's throw from Springfield and about 25 miles from Dayton. A contemporary resort lodge and 18-hole golf course were added in the locale of U. S. President Warren G. Harding's favorite retreat, now known as Deer Creek.



Conceptual plan for Maumee Bay State Park

The first forty years gave us a treasury of beautiful natural areas and facilities. In the fifth decade, we are continuing to build on our traditions of community involvement, partnerships and outstanding interpretive and educational programs, and are poised to go a step farther.

Ohio State Parks ushered in the 1990s with the mission to produce the service of an outdoor recreational experience for customers that meets or exceeds expectations. The focus of virtually all administrative decisions, each new program, and every park employee's daily activities can be summed up in two words: "customer service."



State Park Officer



We started asking those customers what they want from their state parks. The "Write Right to the Chief" customer satisfaction survey was introduced in 1992 as a tool to get customer feedback and suggestions for improvement. As a direct result of comments received through the Write Right surveys, operational changes have been made such as adjusting restroom cleaning schedules at times of peak use, and setting longer operating hours for some camp stores and commissaries. From year to year, the survey has shown a steady increase in customer satisfaction, with 87 % of park visitors rating their overall experience as "good" or "excellent" in 1992, and 93% giving an overall rating of good or excellent in 1998.

Once again, Ohio voters cast their vote in favor of park improvements with the passage of 1993's State Issue 1, the Ohio Parks and Natural Resources Bond Issue. Since 1995, the NatureWorks Program has provided for modernization of overnight facilities, including lodge and cottage renovations and electrification of campsites. Other high priority projects have included needed dam and spillway rehabilitation projects, and water and



School Days Program

wastewater treatment plant upgrades and improvements.



*Nature Center at
Maumee Bay*

Partnerships have remained an important tool for providing the extras that make state parks special. A corporate sponsor provided the technology to bring the outdoor experience indoors for visitors to Maumee Bay's state-of-the-art nature center. Quail Hollow's extraordinary volunteer association made the dream of an accessible and multi-sensory "Nature for All" trail a reality. The Ohio Arts Council brought a renowned artist to Cedar Falls at Hocking Hills to design and build the "Democracy Steps."

In cooperation with the ODNR Division of Natural Areas and Preserves, a boardwalk trail has been constructed through the North Pond estuary on Kelleys Island. Volunteer timber framers left their mark on one of this century's largest traditional barn raisings at Malabar Farm. From square dance pavilions, to nature centers, to cross-country skiing and mountain biking trails, hundreds of friends of Ohio State Parks have lent their time and treasure to build a legacy for others to enjoy.



Rent-A-Tepee

Innovative programs have been initiated and new services provided to add value for Ohio State Parks customers. The basic Rent-A-Camp program has been updated and expanded through the 1990s with novel and popular camping options including Rent-A-RV, Rent-A-Yurt, Rent-A-Tepee and Houseboat Rental. For the convenience of campers, camp offices began accepting credit card payment of fees in 1993, and campground offerings have expanded to include camp stores, ice and firewood sales, bicycle rental, theme campouts, and sports equipment for loan. To provide more things to do, a majority of parks have developed new infrastructure, including basketball courts, volleyball

courts, shuffleboard courts, horseshoe pits, putter golf courses, mountain bike trails and more.

In November 1997, the Ohio State Parks system was recognized as the nation's finest, as winner of the first ever National Gold Medal Award for state parks and recreation excellence. The award was given by the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) and the National Sporting Goods Association (NSGA). Judging criteria included customer service, facilities and recreational offerings, innovations, management and relations with the community.



In June 1998, historic Marblehead Lighthouse was added to the roster of Ohio State Parks, bringing the total to 73 wonderful and diverse areas in 60 counties. With the ever increasing demands of our complex and fast paced society, leisure time grows more and more precious and relaxation in state parks becomes a more and more valuable commodity. For 50 years, Ohio State Parks have been, and will remain, just a vacation away.