

111 Mountain Memories column

MOUNT HAMILTON'S OLDEST PARK

By Robert Williamson

At the turn of the century, Tom Morris, a city councillor, prodded his fellow councillors to set aside funds to help beautify the escarpment edge overlooking the city from the Albion Ravine in the east to Chedoke Falls in the west. By the early 1900s, this natural asset with its breathtaking views had been devastated by rock quarries to provide developers with building stone and lime for cement, while the burgeoning steam railway system denuded the forest for firewood. By 1912 Morris' efforts produced a plan for a Mountain Face Park at a cost of \$130,000.00. It became one of the largest and oldest city parks, prompting Hamilton's famous MPP and Minister of Highways, T.B. McQuesten, to dub Tom Morris as the "Father of the Mountain".

What is left of that grand scheme today is Mountain Drive Park on Concession Street, the subject of Mark Newman's column in the December 15, 2022 Mountain News describing the redevelopment of the park and demolition of the washroom / picnic pavilion. It is the last structure remaining in the park that was once very popular for its large dance pavilion with Jimmy McVinnie's seven piece orchestra. The dance pavilion was next to the "City View" snack bar with its second floor dining room overlooking the city. A short distance away was a large wooden bridge leading to a romantic viewpoint where the moon rose over Lake Ontario.



Dance Pavilion left background and City View Snack Bar prior to addition of 2nd floor dining room in 1931 as seen from escarpment edge, Photo courtesy Bobby Almas (HMHS)



Photo courtesy Bernice Cline (HMHS Archive)

In addition to the park structures, there were facilities for a fairground, picnic grounds, display areas for public events and even a campground for long term activities. The park offered novel experiences. One of the earliest was a presentation by the Hamilton Camera Club, the first in Canada to set up outdoor lantern shows of pictures in a large black lined tent. Easy and exciting access to the site was provided by the Wentworth Street Incline Railway.



Hamilton Camera Club 1905. Photo by F. H. Sharpe (HMHS)

Glenn Simpson who lived near the park in 1945 remembers attending evening "Summer Sunday Sing-a-longs" and other light entertainment around a stage. His interest was collecting empty pop bottles worth two cents each and returning them to the snack bar. Perhaps one of the largest single events was the retirement party held for Miss Blossom Patton in 1963, a favorite Inverness School teacher who taught for 44 years. The gathering of well wishers was so large it had to be held in the park display area. Other people may remember the regular "Canada Day Celebrations" sponsored by MP Chris Charlton for many years in the park adjoining the Washroom / Picnic Pavilion which in the winter would serve as a base for the outdoor skating rink.

The Washroom / Picnic Pavilion is slated for replacement with a new \$700,000.00 facility. Extensive future redevelopment of the park will cost \$2-million. Let us hope that the former attributes of Mountain Drive Park will reflect successfully on its planned development.

Mountain Memories by award winning writer Robert Williamson of the Hamilton Mountain Heritage Society appears monthly to preserve Hamilton's Mountain Heritage.