

Solid as a rock

In 100 years, Metroparks will still reflect same natural lure

By Tim Richard
Staff writer

A century from now, David O. Laidlaw won't be around, but he has no doubt what the 14 metroparks will be like then. They'll be much the same as they were in the 1940s when the first ones were opened, he says.

"Basically, metroparks don't change dramatically. They're a collection of resources," said Laidlaw, who retired at 65 on Feb. 1 as director of the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority (HCMA).

How does he know?
"We have pictures of Belle Isle," answered Laidlaw, who is a student of park history as well as a recreation professional. "Belle Isle is damn near the same today as it was 100 years ago. People went there to walk, ride, canoe, fish. Today the activities are the same. It's basic. And it's gonna be the same 100 years from now. Oh, they may fly there with a jet backpack. But people want to get back to nature, to touch the ground and feel it and smell it."

THIS SUMMER Laidlaw, a Milford resident, will enjoy a normal vacation for the first time since he went to work for HCMA in 1947 as a college intern. Because of the nature of the metroparks — day use, for urban residents of the five-county southeastern Michigan region — he has had to take his vacations at other times of the year.

"I decided when I was 14 or 15 that park management was my thing," said Laidlaw, who grew up in the village of Tecumseh. "I was in Boy Scouts and a guide at Fort Mackinac. I wanted to be a National Park ranger." Naturally, he earned a bachelor of science degree in parks and municipal forestry at Michigan State University.

But a National Parks career would have required moving around to different posts. A stint in the U.S. Army convinced Laidlaw that "I really wasn't in-

terested in a service that moved you every two years."

Studying for a master's degree in public administration at the University of Michigan, Laidlaw decided to write a term paper for Poli. Sci. 308 about a fledgling agency formed in 1940 by a few dreamers who planned to build a series of parks connected by parkways along the Huron and Clinton rivers.

IT WAS THE Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority, an official sounding name which polls showed turned off people. The leadership now refers to the agency "Metroparks," because it conjures up images of Kensington, Stony Creek, Metro Beach, Lower Huron and the other fun places folks enjoy.

There are one-county parks agencies around the country that grew into two-county agencies, but nothing like HCMA, which was created whole by five counties. Laidlaw's student paper is the basis of the agency's official history today.

Laidlaw met the founders of HCMA and went to work as a student intern — assistant to the controller. "There were no other accountants — not in," it was a helluva good background. I handled the inventory and work orders."

In February of 1948, HCMA assigned Laidlaw to Kensington, a 4,300-acre metropark formed on partly natural, partly artificial Kent Lake on the Oak-Land-Livingston border. It opened in May of that year. He was Kensington's superintendent until moving to the central staff in 1959.

The 21 years at Kensington are Laidlaw's fondest memories — shaping an undeveloped tract into a park that draws as many people on a single day as Tiger Stadium.

THOSE WERE the glory days of parks management. "The Michigan Legislature wound up with a surplus after World War II," Laidlaw recalled,



David O. Laidlaw
parks are basic

"and appropriated \$1 million for land acquisition."

P.J. Hoffmaster, director of what was then the Michigan Conservation Department, and HCMA chiefs sat down over a map and decided which agency would do what — "some cooperative thinking," Laidlaw called it.

HCMA would develop metroparks of 1,000 acres or more designed for intensive day use. The state would develop parks for less intensive use — some camping but no golf.

Along the way, HCMA dropped the notion of connecting its metroparks with a parkway because of the high cost of highway construction. "There was a recognition that a parkway was recreation," Laidlaw said. "And the interstates (freeways) made that idea outmoded."

HCMA has stuck to its basic plan, adjusting with the times by adding bicycle trails. He was astounded by the popularity of Kent Lake with sail-boaters.

Metroparks don't cater to snowmobilers — "they tear hell out of whatever they go" — and impose a 10 mph speed limit on boats, assuring peace, quiet and good fishing conditions. Kent Lake is the second most-heavily fished lake in Michigan and is ranked in the state's directory of the 50 best fishing lakes. Laidlaw said Stony Creek Lake, northeast of Rochester, is a "tremendous" resource that anglers haven't entirely discovered.

LAIDLAW BECAME director of the system in 1969, overseeing the more recent acquisitions and scheduling the development of a system that will probably stop at 14 metroparks.

"My biggest disappointment was the failure of the millage increase referendum in 1972," said Laidlaw, recalling the effort to persuade voters in five counties to double the property tax from a quarter-mill (25 cents per \$1,000 of state equalized valuation) to a half-mill.

"We were frankly shocked," he said, "and we never felt the climate was right to do the millage again."

"The board still had its expansion plan and said 'let's do it slowly.' We added Lake Erie (Wayne County), Woburn Mills (Macomb) and Huron Meadows (Livingston)."

To help cover operating costs, HCMA in the mid-1970s followed the state's lead in charging vehicle admission fees (\$7 a year). It also looked for revenues from food service, boat rentals, golf courses and the forthcoming wave-action pool at Lake Erie. A \$17 million budget draws \$12 million from property taxes, about \$4 million from revenues and \$1 million from interest earnings.

In retirement, the Laidlows are touring the southern states, starting with skiing and trail riding in the Smoky Mountains. Said Laidlaw: "I naturally go to parks."

Grand Valley is recruiting

Grand Valley State College will hold an informal "get acquainted" reception for new students and community college students as well as others interested in learning more about the college. The reception will be 7-9 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 14 in the Troy Hilton Hotel, 1485 Stephenson Highway, Troy.



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Metroparks' key to success

Why have the Huron-Clinton Metroparks been such a success? Retiring director David O. Laidlaw gives three reasons:
• The agency was founded at the right time in history (1940) with a single purpose — providing regional parks. Parks don't have to compete with transportation, welfare and roads in the budgeting process.

• Funding is continuous, through a quarter-mill property tax approved by voters. "The success has largely kept pace with costs."
• The governing commission of eight members has been steady, independent, understanding and has stuck to the single purpose, has provided wise direction and without a professional staff.

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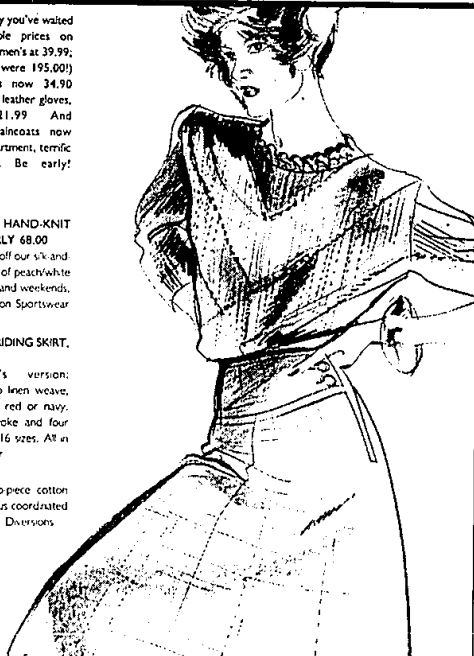
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