

A Lake Celebrates A Birthday

Kensington Park Keeps Its Natural Touch

By TIM RICHARD

Today you shoot out 1-96 a few miles west of town) come over a hill, and suddenly it's spread out before you — Kensington Park surrounding big Kent Lake.

Sailboats, canoes, motorboats and even an old-fashioned stern-wheeler dot the waters. Two beaches sprawl along the shores. Canada geese and their newly-hatched fluffy yellow goslings find the lake a sanctuary. A dozen picnic areas are nestled in the trees. Hikers on nature trails spot birds and trees they didn't know existed.

Kensington Park is rustic, and yet in a single season it accommodates two million visitors — more than the entire population of Detroit. On a single day, it has held some 50,000 persons — equal to half the population of Livonia, more than the combined population of Farmington city and township, or two-thirds of Redford.

That the park can serve so many and retain so much natural flavor is a tribute to careful planning and sensitive management. It's a model of its kind, and its beauty is taken pretty much for granted.

It wasn't always so.

TWENTY-TWO YEARS ago, you would hardly have noticed the place. Kent Lake then was not 1,200 acres but 60 acres, and swampy.

Driving out the old Grand River road, you would have seen the Huron River flowing southward and a lot of nothing else.

But a few ardent men had a dream, a plan to which they stuck, and the ability to sell it to the voters. The story goes this way:

In 1939 the Michigan Legislature passed an enabling act for the creation of a park authority. In 1940, the voters of five counties — Wayne, Oakland, Washtenaw, Macomb and Livingston — approved the creation of the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority (HCMA) and financed it with a quarter-mill of the property tax.

HCMA set out to build a greenbelt of parks around metropolitan Detroit along the Huron and Clinton Rivers, which flow southeast and northeast, respectively, starting from northern Oakland County.

Altogether there are seven other parks in the HCMA chain: Metropolitan Beach on Lake St. Clair, Stony Creek near Rochester, Hudson Mills near Ann Arbor, Lower Huron near Belleville, Marshbank near Pontiac, and Delhi and Dexter-Huron, both also near Ann Arbor. A ninth park, Willow, near Flat Rock, will be opened to the public by 1970.

But HCMA's proudest and most heavily used achievement is Kensington.

IT WAS CALLED the "Kent Park Project" when construction began in August of 1946.

The first step was to build a 290-foot-wide dam just south of Grand River on land leased from the State Conservation Department. Thousands of trees were removed from the new, enlarged lake bottom, and it was flooded in spring of 1948.

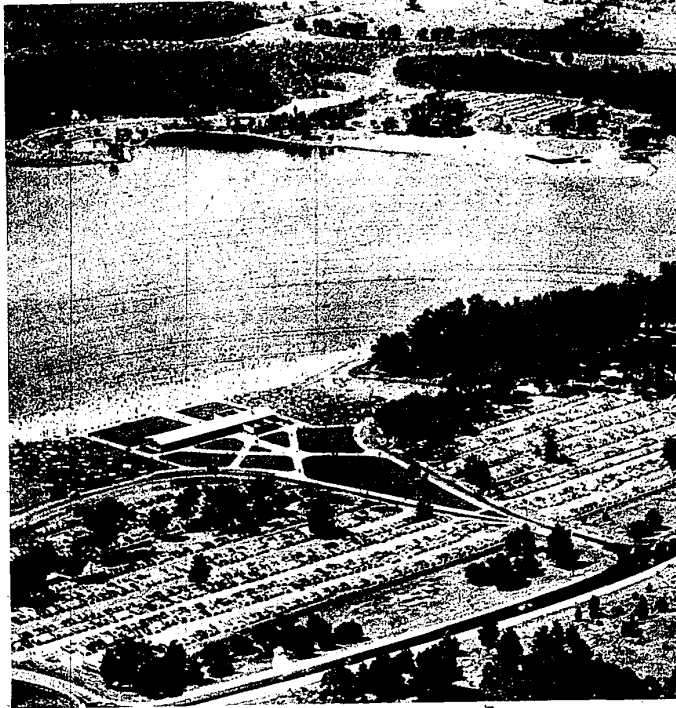
The late George W. McCordie, the engineer-director of HCMA, predicted the park would be able to accommodate 50,000 persons a day. The record, established in 1953, was 51,000. McCordie died in 1950 and was succeeded by Kenneth L. Hallenbeck.

The park was renamed Kensington in 1947 after a ghost town with a notorious wildcat bank that was started in 1832, reached a population of 300, and ceased to exist by 1850.

The quarter-mill, five-county property tax brings HCMA \$3.4 million annually. Of that amount, \$685,000 is used to operate and maintain Kensington Metropolitan Park.

Park Supt. David O. Laidlaw heads a staff of 50 year-around and 150 seasonal employees who maintain and develop the grounds.

Although it's hard to pull figures together, a HCMA spokesman estimated that Kensington has cost \$7 million to develop.



AERIAL VIEW looking northeast shows about a third of Kent Lake. In the foreground is Martin-dale Beach, and in the background is Maple Beach.

HCMA itself is governed by a seven-man board — two appointed by the governor and one selected by each of the five county boards of supervisors. Thus, HCMA is the first example of extensive regional government in southeastern Michigan. For planning purposes, it cooperates with, but is independent of, the Southeastern Michigan Council of Governments.

TWENTY YEARS AGO this weekend, Kensington Park was opened to the public.

It had just one bathing site, and its bathhouse and toilets were constructed from rough-hewn oaks removed during the lake-bottom clearing. The roads were dirt, and half the park was under preliminary construction, but that didn't keep people away.

Today the roads are blacktopped and open pretty much the year around. There is an 18-hole, par 71 golf course at the park's north end.

There is a second beach, and both have modern bathhouse facilities with free showers and dressing rooms (25 cents for a coin locker). The beaches were due to be open for this weekend.

Also scheduled to start operating again this weekend is the Island Queen, a replica of a Mississippi stern-wheeler which takes visitors on 45-minute tours from noon through 6 p.m. at charges of 50 cents for adults and 25 cents for kids.

The camera, however, can't pick up the nature trails or the winter sports area not far to the rear.

The lake is rich in a variety of fish. There are a number of rough fish, to be sure, but Kent Lake is an excellent producer of bluegills, crappies and black bass. For a number of years, it had an any-fish, any-season rule, but this year it began observing the regular state rules on fishing seasons.

The park has a boat rental station and boat launchings. But park officials have kept boat traffic and safety under control by limiting motors to 7½ horsepower and 10 miles an hour. No water skiing is permitted.

Changes are made "so gradually that few persons notice them from year to year unless a major new facility — such as a nature center, golf course or new boat rental harbor — is developed," says superintendent Laidlaw.

The next major addition will be the Mitten Bay marina, which will provide additional spaces for slip rentals, primarily used by sailboaters.

Yet while changes at Kensington Metropolitan Park are gradual, the entire project represents a profound change from the swampy, undeveloped pond of less than a quarter-century ago.



FISHING WATERS are accessible from shore, from personal or rented boats, or by wading. Despite rough fish and heavy fishing pressure, Kent Lake is a good producer of bluegills, crappies and bass.



NATURE CENTER is a beehive of activity, literally, and naturalist Lee Curtis shows visiting youngsters how bees run a colony.

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away from humans during spring nesting but are fairly bold otherwise. Goslings are bright yellow.