

HISTORY OF SMITH MEMORIAL PARK

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Contributors:

Mildred Smith

Dorothy White Morris

Robert Bale

INTRODUCTION

By Eunice H. Prospero

*This park was originally the fruit farm of Leon R. Smith.
He desired that many should enjoy this beautiful lakeside spot.
In his memory we gratefully place this plaque.*

These simple words on a stone in the foreground of the Smith Park office express the gratitude of the Town of Hector to a generous former resident and family, who provided area residents and many others, with a recreational and beautiful treasure. On April 23, 1964, final papers were signed, transferring the Leon Smith fruit farm to the Town of Hector, to be used for a park. The 92 acres of rich farmland with 2,000 feet of lake frontage could now be enjoyed by the public for fishing, swimming, camping, picnics, boating, hiking and nature study.

My husband, Lloyd, and I co-managed Smith park in the summer of 1988. We had camped at the park for several summers and it had been one of our favorite spots in Hector. After perusing several documents and various papers dealing with the history and maintenance of the park, I felt someone should record a history and brought together materials from several knowledgeable people, and to each of them I am indebted: Mildred Smith: the widow of the namesake of the park; Dorothy White Morris: a member of the Hector Town Board for almost 30 years who helped with the conversion from farm to park; and Robert Bale: one of the residents who tirelessly helped turn the farm into a park.

Mildred Smith, the widow of Leon Smith, the namesake of the park who had inherited his fruit farm in 1925 and then sold the land to the Town of Hector in 1964 upon retiring. This land became Smith Park. Mildred Smith relates the following memories in an interview from August of 1988:

The Smith family, originally fruit farmers from England, had orchards in Geneva, NY. Sometime around 1890, two brothers and two sisters from the family (Leon's great uncles and aunts), traveled by boat down the lake to find suitable orchard land to purchase for more plums, pears and peaches. They located the beach that is now Smith Park, feeling the land above would be suitable for orchards and sometime later purchased the 92 acres.

At first they used only the beach for a summer camp for the women and the children of the family. During the summers, the men built barns, storage buildings and a farmhouse as the women and children drove by horse and carriage with needed supplies from Geneva. Gradually, the men planted pear, peach and plum trees and later added vineyards. Their harvested fruit was shipped by train to Geneva and from there to other places. The men also raised fields of flowers, mostly mums and peonies, which they shipped daily by train. (The ivy which they planted to place in vases with the flowers, many still be seen growing in the woods on the banks of the stream in Smith Park.)

It is believed that Leon Smith inherited the land and farm from his family in the 1920's and continued farming it. When he retired, he had no children to inherit the farm. He remembered the beach had been a great vacation spot for family and friends, and so he and his brothers and sister agreed that their parents would have been pleased with the idea of turning the farm into a park for many to enjoy.

Dorothy White Morris swam at Leon Smith's beach throughout childhood, was a member of the Hector Town Board for almost 30 years and helped with the purchase and conversion of the property into a park. Here she relates how the farm became a park through the dissolution of the Gospel Fund.

Many years ago, before the establishment of compulsory public education, each community was required to provide a school for its children. This was accomplished usually by voluntary efforts and resources from residents along with additional money provided by the community churches – called the Gospel Fund. When the New York State Compulsory Education laws were established with regular boundary lines and funded through taxation, the Gospel Fund became a separate item in the town budget the use of these monies was determined locally. In the Town of Hector, it was used for years to loan to poor or distressed residents who paid it back as able.

However, around 1960, New York State decreed that the mix of local and religious monies must be eliminated. The Town of Hector's Gospel Fund had grown to a total of \$10,000 and the town board felt the fairest way to dispose of it was to provide something of benefit to the whole town. At the time, the state was providing 75% matching funds for parks. Hector residents were irked that the village of Watkins Glen had taken over Lakeside Park and

was charging admission (especially since the county granges had been instrumental in cleaning up and helping build Lakeside Park in earlier days). Town of Hector residents felt left out and without any free access to Seneca Lake.

Permit me to travel back in time to my childhood, growing up in Hector. Many people at that time used to camp and swim at the lovely beach of Mr. Leon Smith of Peach Orchard Point. Mr. Smith had a farm of approximately 90 acres and 2,000 feet of lake front. He was a most generous man, and though he had no children of his own, he never chased out the many children and adults who came to swim at his beach.

Robert Beattie, a devoted member of the community and on the Hector Town Board, approached Leon with the idea of allowing part of his property to become a public park. After much discussion and paperwork, Leon sold 92 acres to the Town of Hector for approximately \$40,000 (he had been offered a \$125,000 by a developer so he practically gave the land away!). \$10,000 of the payment came from the Gospel Fund and \$30,000 was provided through a grant from New York State.

The Hector Town Board didn't have much of an idea of what this would entail, but they were determined to develop the park slowly, and to operate it on a pay-as-you-go foundation, making each addition and development pay for itself. At the beginning, much volunteer help was needed. Planning and general supervision required an advisory park board (the Smith Park Committee), with the final decisions and regulations falling on the Hector Town Board.

After the property was purchased, the board members walked the property to review the territory and make plans for the future. We saw many possibilities and difficulties. The beach seemed to be the area of immediate promise and we were able to secure the service of Robert Bale to do the early evaluation, direct the clearing, build a campsite area and plan for the future development of hiking trails, etc. It has remained our overall aim to keep Smith Park a rural, rustic spot for the enjoyment of nature by locals and visitors and yet, to provide revenue enough to continue its slow but steady development.

Robert (Bob) Bale, a resident who participated in the conversion from farm to park, gave a talk to the Burdett Wednesday Afternoon Club in the fall of 1987. The following was taken from notes for that talk.

The land was covered in poison ivy – ground ivy about 1' tall, bush ivy up to 6' and climbing ivy to the tops of trees. Bob Bale and some helpers eradicated the ivy using a back sprayer and a brush killer supplied by the Town Highway Department. Plans for the roads in the park were made by Bob Bale and Bill Stevenson, Town of Hector Highway Superintendent. The town supplied the equipment and the labor. The first road curved down the steep hill from Peach Orchard Road and up the other hill into the park, then around the circle for the first camp sites. There were 8 of these sites the first year. Later other sites were laid out and developed by the Highway Department with some labor provided by campers. One camper brought a small bulldozer from Elmira to assist with building campsites.

Plans for a bathhouse and office were made by "Stretch" Riley, an engineer from Watkins Glen who had worked for the State Park. A second engineer from Tioga County developed plans for water and sewage disposal. With his two sons and his own equipment, he laid out the water lines and installed a waste disposal system approved by New York State. The water intake from the lake extended from the pump house about 150' into the lake. The end was weighted down with a heavy truck wheel which was very difficult to remove when necessary for repairs. The park purchased a 12' aluminum rowboat to handle the water intake and to place buoys for the swimming area. A picnic and parking area were developed above the bathhouse.

Robert Bale wrote a grant for funds from the State Conservation Department. About \$8,000 was received and added to the funds from the town. Area youth were hired to clean up camp sites, move heavy picnic tables, act as lifeguards and make friends with campers. Outstanding among them was Walter Nasarenko from Bennettsburg, who later became the park manager.

When the park first opened for camping, a 50¢ fee was charged for parking. Camping fees were about \$8 per week, depending on the location of the site, waterfront sites were \$2 higher. In its development, a 10 year plan was made. The third year saw the development of the South Point with a boat-launching ramp: a 20' square concrete block was pushed in the lake by a Ford tractor obtained by Robert Beattie. He also obtained a bush hog mower and trailer which became useful for handling the weed growth (from 2-5 tons at times) which occasionally washed ashore on the swimming beach.

Bob Bale headed the work of the park for 6 years, preparing the campsites by hand, clearing out the poison ivy, supervising the few young people who were available to assist. Then when the park was left in the care of Walter Nasarenko, there were 45 campsites, most of which were filled every weekend.

A funny incident from the early days occurred when a car, late at night, drove over the drinking fountain, breaking it off about 6" from the ground. Sixty pounds of water pressure gushed through the floor boards and motor. It was impossible to move the car without shutting off the water which couldn't be done until the next day. That car was well washed underneath!