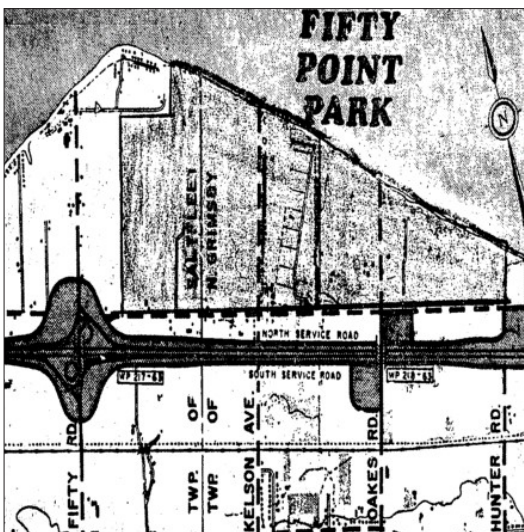


Fifty Point Park - The Idea

by BRUCE MACKENZIE

IN 1958, ROBERT HEWSON started to envision a 500 acre lakeshore park along the south shore of Lake Ontario on the Winona and Grimsby borders. He called it Fifty Point Park. For six years he planned and explored the idea and became a Councillor with the Town of Stoney Creek and a member of the Niagara Region Development Association (NRDA). He also took on the role of Chair of NRDA's Fifty Point Park Committee. In 1963 formal discussions started between the NRDA and the Province of Ontario in attempts to persuade the province to purchase the land. Discussions at local and provincial levels continued throughout the 1960s as the lands were considered as a site for a Provincial Park. Today we are enjoying the results of Robert's vision, even though a little different from the original concept. Now we can look at how things came to be and at the state of the lands today.



NRDA Original Plan for Fifty Point Park from the 1960s. Small squares in the middle is the rifle range.

The NRDA's role was to review planning and opportunities in Wentworth County, Hamilton and Niagara. The province created Development Associations and it could be said that they were precursors to the Regions we have today.

Of the 500 acres Robert Hewson and the NRDA proposed for the park we find that 400 acres still exist as greenspace along the Lake Ontario shoreline in one continuous piece but with six different landowners.

As we move along with this story of these lands that I call the Fifty Point Land Complex, we will examine how this 400 acres makes up the largest green space on the south shore of Lake Ontario in Ontario. Even though there are six different landowners the ecology of the area does not care as long as this greenspace continues in time.

On these lands today, we see various forms of recreation, a

military training area, cash cropping, natural areas, restoration areas, trails and commercial communication towers.

Looking back to the late 1930's we start to see the lands swing from tender fruit farming to other land uses. The opening of the Queen Elizabeth Way (QEW) in 1939 brought competing interests for the tender fruit lands.

Around this time the Department of National Defence (DND) acquired 90 acres on the east side of Kelson Rd for the new Winona Rifle Range.



Author Bruce Mackenzie at Sauble River - June 2021.



The Point – this aerial view shows clearly how the Fifty Point area protrudes dramatically out into Lake Ontario -photo from 1940 to 1960 supplied by Hamilton Conservation Authority.

In 1960 the Town of North Grimsby acquired part of the Biggar Farm, about 30 acres, for the Biggar Sewage lagoon facility. Also, in the 1960s about 90 acres on the east side of Fifty Rd was purchased by land speculators. In the late 1970s Rogers Radio acquired 90 acres for radio transmission towers. From our rich agricultural heritage in one of Canada's most precious farming areas we saw the tables turning here to the end of fruit farming.

Reviewing the news clippings of the 1960s we see strong mention of the need for public ownership of Lake Ontario shoreline areas and the need for people to find areas with fresh air and places to get out of the urban and industrial areas for rest and recreation. The Fifty Point area fit the bill and was seen as available and close. The race was on.

The Road Map To

Fifty Creek or Fifty Mile Creek takes its name like other creeks

along the south shore of Lake Ontario as having been named by the British military in the 1700s identifying creeks by their approximate distance west of Fort George in Niagara-on-the-Lake. On the north shore, creeks were named by the approximate distance west of Fort York in Toronto.

When one looks at how the lakeshore almost touches the QEW at Lewis Rd in Winona and at Casablanca Blvd in Grimsby, we can easily see how large the entire Fifty Point area is, extending well into the lake for up to 1.6 km.

Today, most of us think of Fifty Point as being the Fifty Point Conservation Area (FPCA) owned by the Hamilton Conservation Authority (HCA). The NRDA's vision was for a larger park. The land is still there of course but the FPCA today is approximately 200 acres in size. What happened?

Today the Fifty Point Land Complex is composed of about 420 acres with 310 in public ownership between the FPCA (200 acres), DND (90 acres) and Niagara Region (20 acres) being the site of the Grimsby Wetlands. There are approximately 110 acres of private lands including 20 acres of agricultural lands on the west side of Kelson Rd and 90 acres owned by Rogers Radio with their communication towers at the east end of the complex. The Town of Grimsby's Waterfront Trail runs beside Winston Rd and leads into the Grimsby Wetlands.

The different properties that make up the Fifty Point Land Complex are all somewhat different but each one is critical as a component of the whole ecological potential of this critically important lakeshore greenspace.

The Sale

By the late 1960s the NRDA's plan for land acquisition became narrowed down to acquiring the Carpenter Farm known as the Ingledale Stock Farm, of approximately 142 acres.



Fifty Point Pond 1971. Waiting for rain water to continue filling it up - photo from Hamilton Conservation Authority.

Finally in 1969 the Carpenter Farm was sold, not to the Province, but to speculators who immediately became entwined with Peel Construction. Peel Construction had been awarded the contract for building the local overpasses over

the QEW and the service roads. Peel dug out the pond at Fifty Point to generate approximately 1,000,000 cubic yards of fill. The 15 acre hour glass-shaped pond that we enjoy today has a water depth of up to 30 feet and in places the total excavation is close to 45 feet down from the original grade.



The Pond today, Fifty Creek corridor to the left - photo Hamilton Conservation Authority.

Fortunately, the HCA, with all of the ongoing public discussions, became interested in the Carpenter Farm property, and after Peel Construction finished their work, the property was for sale again and the HCA quickly purchased it. The HCA was able to follow the watershed boundaries of Fifty Creek which extended into North Grimsby and buy the whole, formerly, Carpenter Farm property.



Mouth of the Fifty Creek in 1900. Some of the pines are likely still alive on shore - photo Carpenter family.

The Carpenter Farm was very important in that it involved lands in both Winona and North Grimsby. When Robert Hewson and the NRDA looked at the vision of the Fifty Point Park they viewed the property from a high altitude and did not let artificial municipal boundaries blur their vision. They looked at the landscape as a whole. Today about half of the conservation area lies in each municipality.

Land values in the area saw increases from \$2,500 per acre in 1964 to \$8,600 per acre in 1971 when the HCA purchased the property for \$937,000.

During the 1960s the province continually stated the land

was too expensive and it backed away from the purchase for a potential Provincial Park. It is ironic that when the HCA did purchase the land it was with a grant of 50% from the Province. In the 1960s and 70s the Province normally provided Conservation Authorities 50% of land purchase costs and 75% grants if the lands were Niagara Escarpment lands. This is very much in contrast to the policies of today with zero contribution from the Province.

By 1983 the conservation area had grown in size to approximately 200 acres as neighbouring lands were acquired by the HCA. This acquisition in the eastern end of the HCA watershed was significant for until this time the HCA had acquired few lands east of Mount Albion on the Hamilton Mountain. Fifty Point established the HCA in the east. In 1983 the FPCA was one of the most rural of the HCA's conservation areas. Today it is one of the most urban and development around it will continue.



Modern Land Complex. Looking from west to east, the entire land complex is seen. Note the number of new water bodies compared to pre 1960 photo - photo by Hamilton Conservation Authority.

It is quickly becoming more and more an "Island of Green". When the Province of Ontario established the *Conservation Authorities Act* in 1946, they created a platform for globally unique water management agencies for the jurisdictional boundaries of conservation authorities follow watershed boundaries and not political boundaries. As an example there are 14 municipalities in the watershed of the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority including a good part of Hamilton and Haldimand.

In is interesting to note that even though about half of the FPCA is in Grimsby, the Town of Grimsby and Niagara Region have not had to pay towards the acquisition, development or maintenance of the conservation area for it is in the HCA's watershed and its funding comes from the HCA's budget and Hamilton's.

Today's Lands

The shoreline of Fifty Point has changed dramatically along the 1.5 km in front of all the different properties as can be

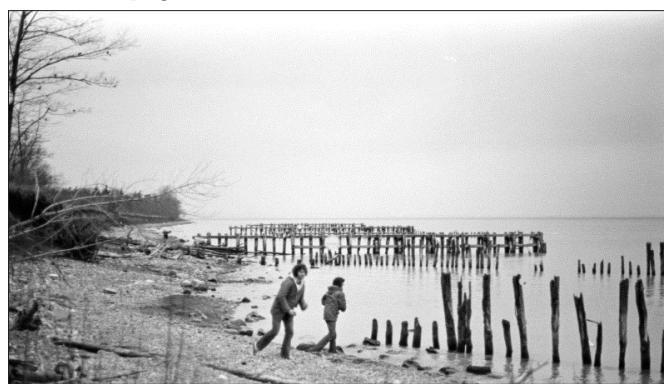
seen in the photos. Almost all of the shore has now been protected with an armour rock wall except for the large beach in the conservation area. Prior to the shore protection works almost all of the shoreline had a very narrow beach with an eroding bank of clay about three metres high behind the beach. During high water and/or onshore waves, the thin beach was submerged.



Beach and bluff 1975 - photo supplied by George Coker Jr.

In the conservation area a large marina, campground and day use areas have been developed. These serve the public well. The official opening of the conservation area was in 1984.

An interesting sight along the lakeshore in front of the rifle range property was a massive number of wooden pilings that were placed into the lake bottom by the military in the late 1930s. They were to be part of an early erosion control project. The pilings likely failed in that regard but they certainly added to the mystique of the shore and have provide photographers with unique lakescapes for almost a century. The record high waters of 2017 to 2019 with their violent storms and thick ice removed almost all evidence of the pilings. A few stubs remain (see page 50).



Rifle Range Piers 1975. Strong construction showing little effects of water action after 35 years - photo supplied by George Coker Jr.

The HCA, after purchasing the property, began building a land spit into Lake Ontario to curb erosion. By the early 1980s the landform was complete. A large beach has formed on the east side of the land spit.

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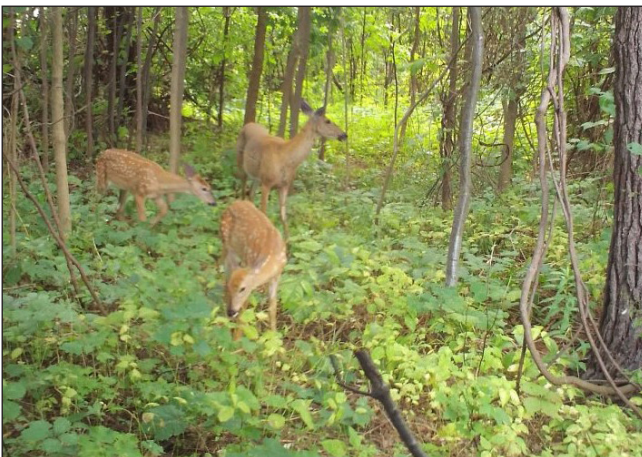


Summer day swimmers at Fifty Point.

Prior to 1984 there were just few isolated treed areas in the entire Land Complex. There was a woodlot to the west of the mouth of Fifty Creek, large willows along Fifty Creek, a significant woodlot at the northeast corner of the rifle range property and a stand of large White Pines on the Biggar Farm where the farmhouse once stood. Today much of the land appears different from the lands when they were first purchased by the HCA for a major naturalization programme. That program actively began in the mid 1980s in some parts of the conservation area while natural succession has occurred in other parts and young forests have replaced fields and abandoned agricultural areas.

A major tree planting in 2000 connects the woodlot in the Conservation Area to the woodlot on the DND property creating a wildlife corridor. These woodlots, with their original soils still being intact, are representative of the original forests of the Lake Ontario Plain.

The forests along the floodplains have seen major changes. The large stands of willow have succumbed to age and have been replaced with ash, Manitoba Maple and Silver Maple. As a result of Emerald Ash Borer beetles, we see tall skeletons of the dead ash that are still standing.



White-tailed Deer doe with fawns at the Legacy Project site at the Grimsby Wetlands - photo Bruce Mackenzie.

But as we have lost the willows and ash trees we have gained an important new element. In the last two decades beavers

have inhabited the Fifty Point pond and the flood plains along Fifty Creek in the conservation area. Their activities with four dams along the creek in the conservation area have created about four acres of marsh lands alongside Fifty Creek. Where Fifty Creek almost always ran dry each summer the beaver dams now keep the creek bed in water throughout the year. This allows many aquatic life forms like fish, Muskrats, Wood Ducks, frogs, aquatic insects, marsh plants and other animals that you expect to find in flooded swamps to flourish now at Fifty Point.



Beaver Dam, one of four on Fifty Creek, providing year-round aquatic environments in the creek - photo Bruce Mackenzie.

There is no evidence of beavers moving along the creek south of Winston Rd. Fifty Creek flows from the Niagara Escarpment to the lake and its path provides a wildlife corridor connecting the lands south of the QEW to the Fifty Point Land Complex. A wildlife camera has documented large mammals travelling back and forth through the Fifty Creek culverts under the QEW and the Service Roads. Mammals have no other way to move from escarpment lands to the lakeshore except by these culverts. Major developments are proposed for either side of Fifty Creek on the south side of the QEW. These will, if they proceed without proper consideration for the importance of this wildlife corridor, greatly hamper the connectivity of the mammal populations.



White-tailed Deer at the South Service Rd Culvert. The culverts under the QEW provide travel ways for Deer, coyote, fox, raccoons and various other mammals.

The Fifty Point area has been noted for its bird life and is one of the birding hotspots in Southern Ontario. The variety of habitats are very attractive to a large number of breeding birds and migrants. A good number of species like Caspian Tern and Common Terns breed nearby in Hamilton but the feeding areas around Fifty Point are critical to their nesting success.

The Fifty Point shores are in the midst of the Western Lake Ontario Important Bird Area (IBA). This IBA is significant for the large numbers of wintering ducks such as scoters,



Long-tailed Duck. The north-east storms always bring a sampling of the life in and on Lake Ontario - photo Bruce Mackenzie.

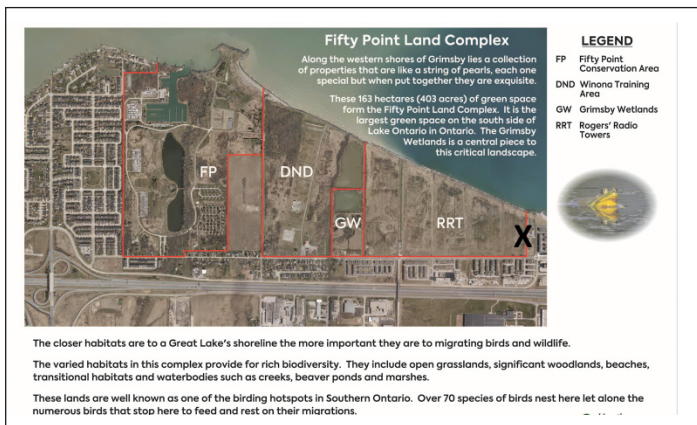
Red-breasted Mergansers, Long-tailed Ducks, scaup and other overwintering waterfowl.

With the shores of Fifty Point being far out in the lake, this provides for great bird watching opportunities. Birds that may normally be found well offshore can now be found close to shore or even overhead. Along with the birds the lake waters here are filled with fish.

At the conservation area there is a large marina which may not be considered important ecologically but the marina provides large sheltered waters that are rare along this end of Lake Ontario. It acts as a breeding area and nursery for a number of fish species and many birds use it for feeding and loafing.

The 15 acre pond in the conservation area in the 1980s and 90s was very productive and lush with aquatic vegetation. The vegetation is scant today. The pond has changed dramatically. Is the presence of Carp and their feeding behaviour of plowing up the bottom the reason for the degradation of the aquatic habitat?

The pond was manmade, designed essentially to provide fill for roadways. It has steep sides, a clay bottom and provides little in the way of a littoral zone. Starting in 2024, the HCA will be building new constructed wetlands to the west of the pond that will drain into it. Time will tell how these wetlands may alter what is available to wildlife and possibly change the nature of the pond.



Scientists have found that migrating birds rely heavily on habitats along the shores of the Great Lakes. Suitable habitats for feeding and resting are now rare along Lake Ontario. The Fifty Point Land Complex provides for almost two kilometers

of shoreline with such habitats. This makes the protection of these habitats and their critical mass incredibly important to birds that visit from far and wide.

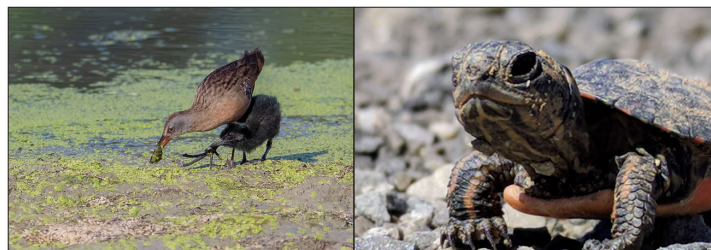
Many forms of wildlife have adjusted quite well to the opportunities provided at the Fifty Point Land Complex. One of the most notable is the increase in Barn Swallows nesting at the conservation area. There are three significant colonies, all on manmade structures:



Aerial view of Grimsby Wetlands showing Phragmites control in southern part - photo Drone's Eye Photography.

under the deck at the Marina Centre with over 30 nests, the Winona Pavilion with up to 30 nests and a growing colony under the new bridge crossing the pond.

At the Grimsby Wetlands, waterbirds like Soras, Wood Ducks and Virginia Rail have certainly taken advantage of new nesting habitats. Purple Martins have taken well to two new nesting structures here as well, and there is now a thriving colony. Tree Swallows have found the numerous nesting boxes very attractive and fill the spring sky with their song.



Virginia Rail and chick at the Grimsby Wetlands - photo Friends of Grimsby Wetlands.

Hatchling Painted Turtle at Grimsby Wetlands - photo by Dr. Bill Davis.

Since 2000 when Niagara Region started to decommission the Biggar Lagoons, the Hamilton Naturalists' Club has been active in having the lagoons left as water bodies and creating four new waterbodies on the property. The work here has received numerous environmental awards at the local and Provincial level. These activities of the Club have been well reported in the *Wood Duck*. The Grimsby Wetlands makes up 29 acres and the northern nine acres is a large pond that sits on property belonging to the DND Rifle Range. The Club has enjoyed the welcome privilege since 2017 of working on habitat enhancement and nature interpretation projects on the southern 20 acres that is owned by Niagara Region. In addition to the habitat enhancement projects the Club has also worked actively on the control of Phragmites grass and Wild Parsnip on the Region's 20 acres.

At the eastern end of the Land Complex lies the Rogers Radio Towers. They now make up about 90 acres of grasslands. They have become vitally important breeding habitat for Eastern Meadowlarks, Bobolinks and various sparrows (especially Savannah Sparrows) as well as various rodents, like Meadow

Voles which can be so important to mammalian predators and wintering raptors. Up until 2020 these lands were mowed and sometimes even during the breeding season. The HNC approached Rogers and asked if they could consider altering their mowing schedule to accommodate nesting grassland species and migrating butterflies, like Monarchs, in the fall that benefit from the flowering goldenrods and asters for nectar and pollen. Rogers obliged in a big way by dramatically altering their mowing. Breeding birds are not disturbed now and the migrating butterflies find the late season flowers a great fuel stop. Rogers is a great corporate citizen.



Rogers Radio towers land is now important grasslands - photo
Bruce Mackenzie.

Today we do not see the Fifty Point Park as Robert Hewson first envisioned it. What we do see though is a wonderfully large green space, full of life and mostly accessible to the public. Not only does it add tremendously to the quality of life to the urban population that surrounds it but it also provides

very important and now rarely found habitat and refuges along the Lake Ontario shoreline for flora and fauna.

Today, most of these lands are in the Greenbelt or zoned open space/agricultural. Which means there is some level of protection. The word protection as we know may not mean forever as land use policies might change. As we get to know more about this precious natural area and what they mean to us our task becomes even more important to champion these lands.

On the east end of the Fifty Point Land Complex is 10 acres of mostly open land that is in the Greenbelt. Three years ago it was sold by the previous owner to a developer. In 2022 the developer started an application process to have the land rezoned out of agricultural. In November 2022 the Province of Ontario took these 10 acres out of the Greenbelt. In early September 2023, the Province said the land would be put back into the Greenbelt.

To keep lands that are protected we must continue to study and tell the public of the incredible nature in their backyard and how their quality of a good life depends on it. 🐦

The author would like to thank the Walters Family of Grimsby for keeping the newspaper clippings from the 1960's and 1970's on Fifty Point together. He would also like to thank the Stoney Creek and Grimsby Historical Societies and Rick Woodworth of the HCA for his long time support. And a special nod to his editor, Laurie.

Deer Exclusion Fencing at the Sheelah Dunn Dooley Nature Sanctuary

by BRITTANY KILLINGBECK, Stewardship Technician

IT IS NO SECRET that southern Ontario has an overabundance of White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*). Colonization, land use changes, and urbanization have significantly reduced or eliminated predators from the region, which, combined with favourable habitat changes and milder winters, has allowed deer populations to drastically increase. While many people fawn over these marvelous hooved animals, too many deer browsing on the landscape can cause immense damage to our forests.

Through the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System Ecological Corridors Pilot Program the Hamilton Naturalists' Club (HNC) has installed monitoring plots with deer exclusion fencing at our Sheelah Dunn Dooley Nature Sanctuary (SDDNS) in Aldershot to help us understand the impact of deer on our nature sanctuary, observe what will grow in the

absence of deer browse, and help inform our management strategies.

Background

A large portion of the property was farmed for many decades before it was left fallow in the early 2000s, transitioning to a dogwood thicket with open patches of meadow and grassland. The edges and slopes of the ravine were left untouched throughout this time and have retained their forested features. However, as you gaze across the ravine edge you will notice a lack of small and medium-sized trees. During our initial plant surveys we noted a healthy canopy of oaks, maples, and hickories. Yet there is a notable absence of these species in the understory and sub-canopy layers, and only a handful of understory species like American Witch



Brittany Killingbeck.