The Impact of Prairie and Maritime Reformers and Boosters
on the Development of Parks and Playgrounds
1880 to 1930
Manuscript for paper presented at CCLR6, 1990 by Susan Markham

Introduction

Two recent research projects have investigated the development of parks and playgrounds in selected major Canadian cities between 1880 and 1930 (Markham, 1988a, 1988b). The central objective in each study was to determine if there were any common threads and links in the patterns of development of municipal parks and playgrounds in the various cities, and, if so, what these were, by examining the cities individually and then drawing comparisons on a provincial and regional basis. In both studies the urban reform movement and civic boosterism were examined to determine their impacts on the policies for and provision of municipal parks and playgrounds. One project focused on four Prairie cities (Regina, Saskatoon, Calgary and Edmonton), while the other focused on four Maritime cities (Halifax, Dartmouth, Saint John and Fredericton). The narrow focus on municipally established and developed parks and playgrounds reflected the state of municipal parks and recreation services in most cities in Canada and the United States during the time period of the study. That time period, 1880 to 1930, was established for the study of the Prairie cities and included, in the beginning years, the period when most Prairie cities were being established, and, in its final years, the period of enthusiasm and affluence that quickly faded with the fiscal crises of the 1930's. For comparative purposes, the same time period was used in the study of the Maritime cities.

Public parks and playgrounds have been developed for many reasons including those claimed by both the reformers and the boosters. Claims that parks would act as an attraction for new investment, new businesses and new residents have frequently been made by city administrators and city boosters in North America, both past and present. In addition, there were frequent assertions by promoters of the urban reform movement that parks and playgrounds were necessary services for both new and old residents which would benefit a city through the enhancement of its residents' physical and moral health. Past research about parks and playgrounds has, on occasion, accepted the rhetoric of these vocal promoters as evidence of the provision of services. However, the purpose of these two projects, following from the challenges issued by Weaver over a decade ago (1976, 1979) was to move beyond rhetoric, to ascertain if there were any resultant policies and any action, by determining the impact of two key groups, the urban reformers and the civic boosters. Past overview and comparative research about parks and playgrounds in Canada, including the work of McFarland (1970) and Wright (1983, 1984), as well as studies of cities such as Halifax (Markham and Edginton, 1979; Markham, 1980), Vancouver (McKee, 1978; McDonald, 1984) and Winnipeg (Cavett, Selwood and Lehr, 1982) laid the basis for these two studies.

Research Proposition

These two research projects searched for and explored the connections between, on the one hand, the rhetoric and actions of the various interest groups and influential individuals promoting reform, civic pride and planning; and, on the other, the development of municipal parks and playgrounds, through the following research proposition: **that urban reform and civic boosterism were factors which significantly affected the development of parks and playgrounds in the cities.** This proposition was addressed through three questions in each study:

(1) Who were the advocates of parks and playgrounds, and what motives can be found in their rhetoric?

(2) What (if any) policies were discussed and adopted by municipal decision-makers as a result of the rhetoric of the advocates of parks and playgrounds and the prevalent movements and attitudes of the time?

(3) What actions were taken to establish and develop parks and playgrounds as a result of both the rhetoric and the policies?

The research propositions reflected the previously noted need to move from accepting the rhetoric of the advocates to further analyses of policies and action. In each study the research proposition and the responses to its attendant questions were then considered in light of an interpretive framework created from theories of policy making, decision making and pressure groups developed from the writings of Adie and Thomas (1982), Bella (1981), Doern and Phidd (1983), Edginton and Williams (1978), Higgins (1986), Pross (1975), Simeon (1976) and Stone, Whelan and Murin (1979). This framework suggests that four elements of the theories, namely ideology, environment, power and rational decision making, could provide explanations about the development of parks and playgrounds, and thus move our knowledge base from restating rhetoric to understanding of the source of policies and any subsequent action.

Sources and Methods

The research used historical research methods, including the collection and analysis of primary and secondary source materials. Secondary source materials came from past studies in parks and recreation history, planning history, urban history and Prairie and Maritime development (Markham, 1989). Primary source materials, either documents about particular issues or accounts by those directly involved in the issues, formed the basis for the preparation of detailed studies of the cities and the subsequent analyses and comparisons. They included files, minutes and reports of city councils, and planning and parks and recreation commissions; similar documents from boards of trade, councils of women, and other booster and reform groups; as well as maps and architectural drawings.

Using these materials, a case study of each city was prepared. The cities were then compared with each other, both within and between their respective provinces and between regions to establish if there were any substantial commonalities in both the patterns of development of parks and playgrounds, and the roles of particular individuals and interest groups, acting either alone or in alliances. The patterns of development were then reviewed in light of the interpretive framework.

Urban Reform and Civic Boosterism: Alliances and Opposition

Both urban reform and civic boosterism involved efforts by individuals and groups to promote causes or actions which they favoured. The causes of the urban reformers were varied, including social welfare, public health, planning, and government infrastructure. Meanwhile, the civic boosters promoted their own particular communities with hopes that they would grow and become "better" - thus enhancing life for residents (or at least some of them). The causes and efforts favoured by both boosters and reformers, at times coincided although different motives may have driven each group.

The urban reformers and the civic boosters proceeded toward their respective goals through different means, with the reformers attempting to order and improve the urban environment, while the boosters emphasized urban growth and development. However, those

goals had common elements; both groups were attempting to enhance everyday life for civic residents, with the goal being to create a better city. The urban reformers' conception of this "better city" was defined by the city's health, including the physical, mental and moral health of its residents, and by the provision of services such as parks and playgrounds, utilities and good government which could benefit all residents. The reforms proposed can be described as being internal reforms, including services which would benefit those at the grass roots level and diffuse upward to benefit the entire city. In contrast, the civic boosters' efforts were to encourage growth and development, the benefits of which could trickle down to all residents. Growth and industry would provide employment and opportunity for all.

Parks and playgrounds were common ground for both the urban reformers and the civic boosters. To the reformers, parks and playgrounds were to assist in creating a humane environment where the physical, mental and moral health of all residents would be enhanced. To the boosters, parks and, to a lesser extent, playgrounds could be attractions for new residents who would bring investment and growth, and, thereby, prosperity to the city. In principle, the urban reformers and the civic boosters could agree that parks and playgrounds would be valuable to a city. In practice they might disagree about the priority that parks and playgrounds should have in any city's planning. Conflicts could occur if the reformers' efforts to provide base level community services did not coincide with the boosters' efforts to provide efficient, businesslike government with relatively low levels of taxation. Reformers would frequently favour base level services, dispersed to all groups, including the disadvantaged, while boosters would favour highly visible attractions. Thus, parks and playgrounds can be common ground for both reformers and boosters, but serving different purposes, based on the reformers' and boosters' different conceptions of what constituted a "better" city.

The Interpretive Framework

As noted earlier this interpretive framework was created from theories of policy making, decision making and pressure groups developed from the writings of Adie and Thomas (1982), Bella (1981), Doern and Phidd (1983), Edginton and Williams (1978), Higgins (1986), Pross (1975), Simeon (1976) and Stone, Whelan and Murin (1979). This framework suggests that four elements of the theories, namely ideology, environment, power and rational decision making, could provide explanations about the development of parks and playgrounds, and thus move our knowledge base from restating rhetoric to understanding the source of policies and any subsequent action. From a review of those theories dealing with policy making, decision making and pressure groups; and the background review of urban history, urban reform and civic boosterism, and parks and playgrounds, it is possible to identify a number of elements which could most likely explain the development of parks and playgrounds in the Prairie and Maritime cities. The approaches through which policy making, decision making and pressure groups have been viewed are complementary rather than competing, and are both nested and overlapping. Thus, the elements which can explain the development of parks and playgrounds are also not mutually exclusive, but are complementary; and each can provide a partial explanation for the various cities.

The four elements from the theories which should provide the most likely explanations are:

(1) Ideology;
(2) Environment;
(3) Distribution of power; and

4) Rational decision-making processes.

The prevailing **ideas** associated with urban reform, particularly social reform, and boosterism, primarily the enhancement of civic prestige, were frequently noted in the background literature of the urban history in general and the development of the urban west and of parks and playgrounds in particular. Examples of the prevailing ideas to which policy makers were repeatedly exposed, and which thus may have influenced their decisions regarding parks and playgrounds, include: the work of the Commission of Conservation and of Thomas Adams; the rhetoric of the urban reformers which stressed ordering and improving the cities; rhetoric of the boosters which stressed the need for the cities to grow; the statements urging that parks be developed to promote better health or to enhance economic conditions; and the exhortations that supervised playgrounds be established to assist in the mission of social improvement. These ideas were transmitted by popular and professional journals of the day, by newspaper reporting, and by lectures given by experts either at national conferences or in their role as invited guests at local meetings. Thus, these ideas may be expected to have had a substantial impact in the cities. The literature provides many examples of the rhetoric of the reformers and the boosters; however, the study of their impact through policy development and implementation is frequently neglected.

The **environment** of each city included both changing and stable aspects. Changing aspects included social conditions, political considerations and economic conditions. These three aspects are viewed as changing both on the world scale and on the local scale. While it may seem rather grand to deal at the world scale when considering the development of parks and playgrounds in eight Canadian cities; in the four western cities during their infancy, world scale migrations from Europe and Asia to North America, urbanization of the prairies, world economic conditions and a World War were potential sources of impacts on the cities. Westward and northward migration increased the population of each Prairie city, particularly in the early years of the 1910's. The influx of new residents into each city created a demand for accommodation, leading to social conditions which were frequently cited by social reformers as problems which required alleviation. While the Prairie cities were dealing with the problems of rapid growth, the Maritime cities were not, but had rather to deal with the problems associated with old, crowded, poorly serviced housing for many of its residents. Although the age of the problems were different, the perceptions that there were problems were similar. One mechanism promoted by social reformers as a means to alleviate urban problems was the development of parks and playgrounds, both to make the city more habitable and to make the residents healthier. Thus, aspects of the social environment may explain the development of parks and playgrounds. Fluctuations in the world economic environment had an impact upon the price paid for crops, the availability of markets for manufactured goods, the amount of available credit and the market for speculative land sales, thus creating crises in the various cities' tax bases and their revenue generation abilities. The political environment for each city included both legislation which had an impact upon the city, and political decisions which affected the role of the city, such as being the provincial capital or being on a railway line.

A more stable aspect of each city was its physical setting whose features included the presence or absence of a water body for both functional or aesthetic purposes; the presence or absence of tree cover to provide shade and possibly enhance property values; and the variety of topographic features to provide both impediments to development, and natural features to enhance the city. While the physical setting may have been relatively stable, views as to what constituted its positive or negative aspects not only varied between individuals and groups, but

also changed over time, as did views on whether and how to preserve or amend parts of the city's physical setting. This combination of variations in the presence of physical features and changing views of it may have contributed to variation in the development of parks and playgrounds between the cities.

The notion of the **distribution of power** and the backgrounds of pressure groups (the urban reformers and the civic boosters) and the decision makers is a theme noted repeatedly in the policy literature. The groups in pursuit of the public interest, who advocated changes either by reform efforts or through boosting the cities typically came from middle class or business class backgrounds. It is possible to view the class backgrounds of the various reformers and boosters as predictors of both their actions and the expected recipients of the benefits of such actions. Thus, evidence could be present to suggest that any policies and their resultant outcomes were the consequence of the prevailing distribution of power and influence, and the notions of the public interest held by the "powerful." These notions could include the perpetuation of a stratified society, whereby the reformers and boosters strove to achieve their particular group's view of the public interest and thus perpetuate their particular class' values and beliefs.

The **decision-making process** noted in both the literature dealing with the creation of the bureaucracy to plan and develop parks and playgrounds, and that of the comprehensive planning efforts, was that of rational planning, emphasizing logical, long range, structured planning. Reform efforts to restructure government organizations included the creation of professional staffs to efficiently carry out policy decisions. Professional staff members were hired to add continuity to actions over the years and to make non-partisan decisions based on a body of technical knowledge rather than supposedly biased political decisions. The theme prevalent in town planning was that of the "City Efficient," promoting health, hygiene and efficiency in addition to administering growth in the cities. Thus, rational planning and decision making involving identifying facts, using reason, measuring efficiency and establishing what is best, was the process promoted by the experts as the preferred method of proceeding.

As noted earlier, these elements are not exclusive or competing - they are complementary. For example, power has an impact on ideology, the ideas may be viewed as part of the environment, and the decision making process can be seen as part of a particular set of ideas regarding the operation of municipal policies. However, for this analysis, they have been separated. The workability of these four elements as plausible explanations can be tested through the analysis of the cities in the study.

Process and Product Model

In carrying out this research, the phrase **pattern of development** was initially used, as had been done by McFarland (1970, p. 38) in the first historical study of public recreation in Canada. This phrase was further interpreted to include the notions of **process** and **product** to explain the development of parks and playground services:

- o Through what **process** did each city move in discussing and initiating park and playground services?
- o What was the end **product**? That is, what services were implemented in each city by 1930?

The term **service** was defined as parks designated and playgrounds provided and supported, totally or partially by the municipal government in each city. Thus, playgrounds operated by a service club, but partially funded by a city grant would be included, as would the wholly funded municipal park system; but provincial legislature grounds and agricultural society

grounds would not be included.

While the focus of the research was on parks and playgrounds, it was also necessary to consider comprehensive city planning efforts, particularly in the Prairie cities. Planning was included as part of the studies when it appeared that the establishment and development of parks and playgrounds was often part of the mandate of the various planning organizations and planning exercises. At times there was considerable overlap between park planning, comprehensive city planning and the work of planning experts.

The roles of particular individuals or interest groups acting either alone or in alliance is included in the **process** of developing services - specifically, in terms of the promotion of an issue either before or after it was recognized by the municipal decision-makers. The research began by considering only individuals or groups as promoters of particular issues. However, as it progressed, however, it became apparent that local newspapers were also active in promoting parks, playgrounds and planning issues. This promotion took the form of announcements of upcoming events, plus reports of events after they occurred, often coupled with exhortations in support of the issue on the newspapers' editorial pages. The rhetoric exhibited in editorials provides some of the most abundant examples of reform and booster sentiments to which local residents, voters and decision makers were exposed.

The following "Process and Product Model" describes the actions involved in initiating and implementing parks and playgrounds services:

Recognition, acceptance and promotion of an issue by an individual, interest group or newspaper
WHICH COULD LEAD TO
Formation of a community based advocacy organization
AND/OR
Recognition of an issue by municipal decision-makers
WHICH LED TO
Discussion of the issue by decision makers
and either adoption or rejection of a policy
to pursue a deliberately chosen course of action (or inaction)
OR
Action without any policy decision
WHICH LED TO
Product (or lack of it): parks or playground or organizations to supply services

The organizations formed to deal with parks, playgrounds and planning could be part of both the **process** and the **product**. An organization would be part of the process when it was formed to be one of the advocates for a particular issue - for example, the various playgrounds associations. An organization could be part of the product if it was established as a result of deliberations by municipal decision-makers who desired to provide particular services. Examples of this would be a parks commission or a planning commission. The mere establishment of an organization did not guarantee that parks or playgrounds or planning services would be provided or that human or financial resources were available. Thus, even if an organization is part of the product, it may be seen as only one stage in the product.

Results

The proposition that urban reform and civic boosterism were factors which significantly affected the development of parks and playgrounds in Prairie and Maritime cities was not supported by the research findings.

In the **Prairie** cities, the ideology of urban reform had an impact upon the process of creating an awareness of park and playground issues and in creating organizations to manage and plan parks and playgrounds, but had little or no effect on the actual planning, designation and development of park and playground sites. Civic boosterism had little impact on either parks or playground organizations or sites in Prairie cities. The study demonstrated that there were other, more important, influences on the development of parks and playgrounds in the Prairie cities. The environment, especially the economic environment and the physical environment, was the most important influence. The activities of powerful groups had more influence on the process than on the product. Rational decision making, with logical, long-term planning was noted in the rhetoric of the process, but had little impact on the product (parks and playgrounds). Incrementalism was more useful as an explanation of the decision making activities.

In the **Maritime** cities, the ideology of urban reform was successful in promoting the establishment of supervised playgrounds in two cities (Halifax and Saint John), but little evidence exists of either efforts or success by the reformers in the other two. This may have been a function of the perceived lack of need for playgrounds in those two cities due to their size and social conditions. Civic boosterism had very little impact on the development of parks and play grounds in the four Maritime cities as booster activity was very different in the East than in the West. The development of parks in the four Maritime cities was the result, not of local advocacy followed by policy making, but rather of private donations and of grants or transfers from senior levels of government. In contrast to the Prairie cities where the need for park planning was noted in the rhetoric and discussed, there is little evidence of this in the Maritime cities. The influence of the environment appears to be limited to the physical environment, with some explanatory contributions coming from the political environment. However, there were fewer powerful groups involved in the promotion of parks in the Maritime cities than in the Prairie cities.

In summary, the two sets of Canadian cities had some common threads in the patterns of development of their parks and playgrounds. The impact of the urban reform movement was evident in creating an awareness of park and playground issues in the cities of both studies. Civic boosterism not only had little impact in both studies, but had extremely limited impact in the Maritimes. The common threads can be attributed to the efforts of a national pressure group, the National Council of Women - however, even that national group did not pursue the cause of the movement with equal zeal in each region. In cities where the reformers or the boosters were active, the rhetoric was strong and firm, even though there was little resulting action and impact. The differences in the patterns of the development of parks and playgrounds can be attributed to the different processes and spirit of urban development in the two regions of Canada.

Health or Wealth

This presentation has noted the evidence and conclusions of the two research studies and concluded that the original research proposition was not supported in either study. It is now appropriate to proceed to speculate and develop more questions about some of the evidence and linkages that were noted earlier.

The central proposition of the research addressed the roles of the urban reformers and the civic boosters. While the rhetoric of these two groups was strongly evident, their actions were

less so. The reformers' attempts to alleviate the "sorry condition" of unhealthy cities were somewhat more effective in advancing the cause of parks and playgrounds in the cities than were the boosters' efforts to promote growth, and thus wealth, through parks and playgrounds. However, when viewing the fervour and depth of belief of these two groups, it appears that many of the reformers were carrying a "second-hand cause" - a cause which had been adopted by a national body such as the National Council of Women and which local groups were expected to follow. In contrast, the boosters believed fervently in their cause - the growth and expansion of their cities, of their businesses, industries and developments and their personal fortunes. The conclusion that reformers had more impact than did the boosters on the development of parks and playgrounds does not reflect a situation whereby the boosters attempted to promote parks and playgrounds and failed. Rather, they did not contribute substantially to the advocacy about parks and playgrounds. The cause to which they did contribute substantially, the encouragement of planning and plans, was more successful, particularly in the Prairie cities. These were plans which they hoped would show evidence of a progressive prosperous city and, thus, increase the wealth of the city.

A question which arose during the Prairie research, and also applies to the Maritimes research, was whether movements or individuals were more effective in the various cities? And, of course, can individuals be separated from the movements which influenced them? The individuals were undoubtedly affected by ideas gleaned from their own training, their travels, their professional associations, their reading and from colleagues and visiting experts. But, it was only when the fervour and sustained effort of one individual was applied to the situation through their association with a movement that issues were continually brought forward to the attention of the municipal decision-makers and, thus had a chance of being discussed. And in each city, one such individual can be identified.

There are several issues which this research did not address which would be of interest to those studying the distribution of power, class relationships and influential individuals in each city. One issue concerns overlapping memberships - what in 1990 might be termed "networks." In particular the direct membership connections between various city councillors, senior bureaucrats and the boards of trade would be of interest; as would connections between the above noted groups and the councils of women through spouses or other family members. The spousal connection could lead to another set of questions regarding the notion that urban reform was sponsored primarily by "women's groups" while civic boosterism was sponsored by "men's groups." Did reform (health) only make steps forward when assisted by powerful men's groups (wealth)? Preliminary results in both projects would suggest that this was the case.

The question of whether the causes being promoted were being addressed for altruistic or self-serving motives was not answered in these studies. The promoters were noted and their effectiveness was evaluated, but the underlying motives for their support were not addressed. Were bureaucrats hoping to build larger mandates and, thus, larger budgets and larger staffs? Were individuals promoting causes which would increase their personal wealth because they owned residences or businesses or undeveloped land which could be enhanced by certain developments? Did municipal councillors promote projects which could improve either the areas that they represented or the areas in which they lived?

General questions such as the ones above can lead to questions about the designation of specific park sites including the river valleys or water fronts in each city. Was preservation of land bordering the water bodies a tool for acquiring recreation land for the general public, for environmental protection, for enhancing the city's aesthetic qualities, or for enhancing the

property values of adjacent property owners? Were lands set aside in the 1920's in the prairie cities, not for future park sites as stated, but, rather, as land for future residential and commercial development? Were parks used as a holding zone? It was easy to set aside park sites, but it took much more financial and political commitment to actually develop a usable park with appropriate community facilities. However, because of the financial crisis of the 1930's, researchers are currently unable to second guess the motives of the decision makers of the time, and are merely able to note what actually happened as the economic and political climate changed in the 1940's and 1950's, wherein some of the park sites became available for other uses, while others were, indeed, developed for parks purposes.

The urban reformers' attempts to create a healthy city at the grass roots level, with benefits diffusing upward were admirable ones. The civic boosters' efforts to encourage growth and development with benefits trickling down to all residents were more fervently promoted. However, neither one could overcome the circumstances which the economic environment imposed upon them. Health and wealth were both overcome by scarcity.

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