

The Impact of Prairie and Maritime Reformers and Boosters on the Development of Parks and Playgrounds 1880 to 1930

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INTRODUCTION

Two recent research projects have investigated the development of parks and playgrounds in selected 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 of the Canadian cities in the time period of the study. That time period, 1880 to 1930, 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 1930s. For comparative purposes, that same time period was applied to 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 residents and new investment, were frequently made by city administrators and city boosters in North America both past and present. In addition, there were frequent claims made by promoters of the urban reform movement that parks and playgrounds would benefit a city through the enhancement of its residents' physical and moral health.

The research projects explored the connections between various interest groups and influential individuals, on the one hand, and the development of municipal parks and playgrounds, on the other. The groups and individuals were often promoters of reform, civic pride, and planning, making statements which touted parks and playgrounds as being attractions to new business and residents, and providing necessary services for new and old residents. Much of the past research about parks and playgrounds has accepted the rhetoric of these vocal promoters as evidence of the provision of services. The purpose of these projects, however, was to attempt 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, in keeping with the challenge issued by Weaver over a decade ago (1976, 1979).

The research proposition for each study was 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 need to move from accepting the rhetoric to further analyses of policies and action. In each study, the research proposition and its attendant questions were 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, would provide explanations about the development of parks and playgrounds, thus moving our knowledge base from rhetoric to an understanding of the source of policies and any subsequent action.

SOURCES AND METHODS

The research used historical research methods including the collection 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; and 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.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

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. Civic boosterism had

very little impact on the development of parks and playgrounds in the four Maritime cities as the role of the boosters 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.

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