

Urban Reform And Civic Boosterism In The Development Of Canadian Parks And Playgrounds: 1880-1930

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1. Introduction and Background

a. The Research Problem

This presentation deals with the findings of two research projects which investigated the development of municipal parks and playgrounds in selected major Canadian cities between 1880 and 1930.[1] In both studies two factors, 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 focussed on four Prairie cities (Regina, Saskatoon, Calgary and Edmonton), while the other focused on four Maritime cities (Halifax, Dartmouth, Saint John and Fredericton). These cities were examined individually, with comparisons then being drawn among and between them on a provincial and regional basis.

The central objective of both studies was to determine if there were common threads and links in the patterns of development of municipal parks and playgrounds in the various cities - and, if so, what these were. 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 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 1930's. 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 both new and old residents. Much of the past research about parks and playgrounds in Canada has accepted the rhetoric of those vocal promoters as evidence of the provision of services.[2] 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.

b. 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.

2. The Research Proposition

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 proposition 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.[3] 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.

3. Sources and Methods

The research used historical research methods, including the collection of primary and secondary source materials.[4] Secondary source materials came from past studies in parks and recreation history, planning history, urban history and Prairie and Maritime development. 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 of the cities 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.

4. Process and Product Model

In carrying out this research, the phrase **pattern of development** was initially used, as had been done by McFarland in the first historical study of public recreation in Canada.[5] This phrase was further interpreted to include the notions of **process** and **product** to explain the development of parks and playground services; i.e.

- Through what **process** did each city move in discussing and initiating park and playground services.
- 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. 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 planning organization 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 and 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 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.

5. 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, urban reform had an effect upon the process of creating an awareness of park and playground issues and in creating organizations to manage and possibly plan parks and playgrounds, but had little or no effect on organizations developed to do the actual provision. Urban reform had little impact on the actual designation and development of park and playground sites. Civic boosterism had little influence on either parks or playground organizations or sites in Prairie cities. The first 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, urban reform was successful in promoting the establishment of supervised playgrounds in two cities, but much less work was done by the reform groups 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 playgrounds in the four Maritime cities, with booster activity being 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. There were substantially 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 both park and playground issues in both studies. Civic boosterism 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 firm and strong, even though there may have been little resulting action and impact. The differences in the patterns of development of parks and playgrounds can be attributed to the different processes and spirit of urban development in the two regions of Canada.

6. Postscript - 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 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.

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 1989 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 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 those 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.

NOTES

[1] The thesis from which the part of this paper dealing with the prairie cities is drawn is S.E. Markham, "The Development of Parks and Playgrounds in Selected Canadian Prairie Cities: 1880-1930" (Ph.D. thesis, The University of Alberta, 1988). The research dealing with the maritime cities is an ongoing project of the author at Acadia University where she is a faculty member.

[2] For example, the following studies are overviews:

E.M. McFarland, The Development of Public Recreation in Canada (Ottawa: Canadian Parks/Recreation Association, 1970);

J.R. Wright, Urban Parks in Ontario - Part I: Origins to 1860 Toronto: Province of Ontario Ministry of Tourism and Recreation, 1983); and

J.R. Wright, Urban Parks in Ontario - Part II: The Public Park Movement 1860-1914 Ottawa: Province of Ontario Ministry of Tourism and Recreation, 1984).

Studies of individual cities are:

M.E. Cavett, H.J. Selwood and J.C. Lehr, "Social Philosophy and the Early Development of Winnipeg Parks," Urban History Review 11 (June 1982): 27-39;

W.C. McKee, "The Vancouver Park System, 1886-1929: The Product of Local Businessmen," in Recreational Land Use: Perspectives on Its Evolution in Canada, eds. G. Wall and J. Marsh (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1982), pp. 299-310; and

R.A.J. McDonald, "'Holy Retreat' or 'Practical Breathing Spot'?: Class Perceptions of Vancouver's Stanley Park, 1910-1913," Canadian Historical Review 65 (June 1984): 127-153.

[3] This framework was developed from the following:

R.F. Adie and P.G. Thomas, Canadian Public Administration: Problematical Perspectives (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1982);

L. Bella, "The Politics of the Right Wing Welfare State" (PhD thesis, The University of Alberta, 1981);

G.B. Doern and R.W. Phidd, Canadian Public Policy: Ideas, Structure, Process (Toronto: Methuen, 1983);

C.R. Edginton and J.G. Williams, Productive Management of Leisure Service Organizations (Toronto: Wiley and Sons, 1978);

D.J. Higgins, Local and Urban Politics in Canada (Toronto: Gage, 1986);

A.P. Pross, "Pressure Groups: Adaptive Instruments of Political Communication," in Pressure Group Behavior and Canadian Politics, ed. A.P. Pross (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1975);

R. Simeon, "Studying Public Policy," Canadian Journal of Political Science 9 (December 1976): 5; and

C.N. Stone, R.K. Whelan and W.J. Murin, Urban Policy and Politics in a Bureaucratic Age (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979).

[4] For complete details of the research sources, both primary and secondary, see S.E. Markham, Research Bibliography: The Development of Parks and Playgrounds in Selected Canadian Prairie Cities, 1880-1930 (Wolfville, NS: 1989).

[5] E.M. McFarland, p.38.