

■ The 1970s | THE COMPETITION FOR LAND



IN PREPARATION for the Park System's second decade, Jim Truncer and Tom Kellers prepared the "Monmouth County Open Space Plan 1970-1985," with emphasis on preserving natural areas, particularly along streams, and developing new recreation opportunities. Citing annual attendance growth at the County parks from 8,800 in 1962 to nearly 595,000 in 1970, including a remarkable 44% increase in 1970, the "Open Space Plan" noted,

The figures show that new park sites only awaken a latent interest in participating in outdoor activities, causing the total attendance figures to rise even higher. This is a good indication that present facilities are not sufficient to meet the present demand. . . As citizens become more sophisticated in their discretionary time activities and as older citizens become more active, the spectrum of recreation opportunities will have to be expanded.

The "Open Space Plan" proposed several ways to expand the County's indoor and outdoor recreation opportunities, including regional recreation centers with flexible facilities for multiple activities, from sports to crafts to theatre. The plan also proposed a network of bike-ways and trails linking parks and towns in many parts of the County and greenways protecting stream corridors. All of these recommendations would become key and popular components of the Park System over the next four decades.

Park staff targeted five areas for new County parks in the "Open Space Plan": Upper Freehold Township near Imlaystown, Millstone Township near Perrineville Lake, Marlboro Township near Big Brook, Hartshorne Woods and the H.A.A.D.S. parcel in Middletown Town-

ship, and Ocean Township near Cranberry Brook. The plan was timely, as voters approved the second Green Acres Bond Act in 1971 for \$80 million of open space funding. The Freeholders would establish new County parks in each of the targeted areas and in several others, but the "competition for land" that the "Open Space Plan" predicted for the 1970s would require multi-year efforts to establish most of them.

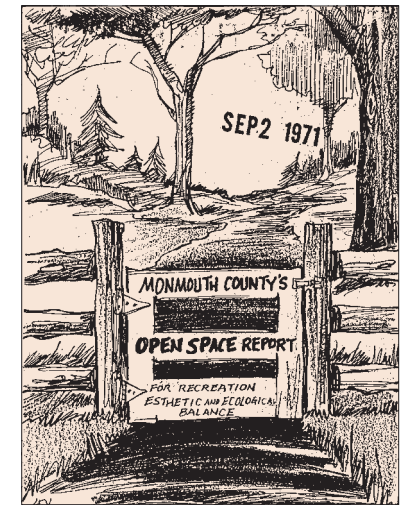
Recognizing that "Government agencies have a most definite need for land purchase programs designed to move as rapidly as their competitors," the "Open Space Plan" identified several strategies that have proved to be especially important in the growth of the Park System. To finance purchases when timing is critical, the "Open Space Plan" recommended establishing "a land bank revolving fund so that land purchases by government may move as rapidly as private enterprise." The N.J. Conservation Foundation initially provided this critical assistance to the Park System, followed by the Monmouth Conservation Foundation.

The plan suggested consideration of an open space tax to provide a dedicated funding source for land preservation and recreation facilities. Monmouth County would lead the state in establishing this critical program in the 1980s. The plan also recommended preserving open space and protecting historic and natural resources through purchases or donations of easements on private property. The Park System used easements to preserve nearly 2,000 acres by the end of 2009.

The "Open Space Plan" also recommended transfers of government property to preserve publicly-owned sites. The Freeholders purchased 160 acres on Kozloski Road in Freehold Township for a new administrative complex in 1970, but did not need the whole site, and they transferred 61 acres to the Park System for recreational use. Because of its central location, Park System staff soon established East Freehold Park as the location of the popular Monmouth County Fair.

There's no excuse for anyone

In early 1970 the Park System staff moved from Freehold to offices in Thompson Park in the former summer home of Dr. William Payne Thompson, which became the Park System's Administrative Headquarters. To coordinate and expand recreation activities and interpretive nature programs, Park System officials created the Visitor Services Department in the former Thompson House in 1971. Tom Kellers became the head of Visitor Services and hired Bob Henschel as a park naturalist. They and their staff set up nature exhibits in the house, which soon



Local newspapers such as the *Red Bank Register* and the *Asbury Park Press* provided important editorial support for the County's open space preservation program. *Red Bank Register*, September 2, 1971.

Monmouth County Park System Annual Report 1970

1970 was a year in which the people of Monmouth County developed a new sense of environmental awareness. They became concerned and involved with the problems of wildlife preservation, pollution, and conservation of natural resources. A 44% increase in the number of County Park visitors during 1970 reflects a new ecological conscience and an attempt by our citizens to utilize their natural resources to the fullest extent.

Opposite page: Weltz Park.

Left: Cross-country runners in Holmdel Park, 1979. Statewide cross-country meets bring thousands of athletes and onlookers to Holmdel Park each fall.

Right: Children's Theater in Thompson Park, 1972. One of Thompson Park's spacious horse barns became the home for the Park System's summer theater productions in 1982.

became known as the Thompson Park Visitor Center. They developed programs that used the parks as "outdoor classrooms" to teach children and adults about local plants and animals.

Visitor Services staff also developed free "Recreation Clinics" to help visitors learn basic skills for activities like cross country skiing, horse care, archery, hiking, and fishing. In the summer, they organized "Fun in the Sun" with canoeing, hiking, swimming, and field sports. For visitors interested in cultural activities, the staff created art and drama programs at the Visitor Center. In their first year, Visitor Services employees presented 1,600 interpretive programs to 46,000 people.

Visitor Services staff soon created a "Special Skills" program with activities like backpacking and survival, horseback riding and horse care, bicycle touring, canoeing, fly-tying and fishing, early American crafts, ceramics, taxidermy, flower arranging, landscaping, golf, pottery, sailing, and tennis. Park naturalists led campfire programs, bird watching, live snake demonstrations, nature photography, and nature hikes. Other staff oversaw Opera in the Park—*La Boheme*—at the Thompson Park theater barn, as well as turtle races, horseshoe and fishing contests. As Visitor Services Director Tom Kellers told a *New York Times*

reporter, "There's no excuse for anyone—regardless of age—to say 'I have nothing to do, there isn't anything for me.'"

Administrative support grew with expanded Visitor Services programming. In August of 1971, Nancy Borchert, who grew up in Freehold and attended Freehold High School, came to work in the administrative office at Thompson Park. As she recalled, "we got notice that there was a job opening at the Park System. I graduated in June, had my interview, the Park System hired me, and I started in August." Over the years, Nancy has advanced through a number of positions to senior management in the Park System, and is the first female department head.

Park System staff opened historic Longstreet Farm in 1971 with farm machinery and livestock depicting the late 19th century era when agriculture was a way of life in the County. Naturalist Tom Kellers hired John Snyder to interpret the "farm scene," which included "2 horses, 2 ponies, 3 goats, 4 sheep, 3 pigs, 2 steer, 12 sheep, and 9 Bantam chickens for children to enjoy." "Farmer John," as Jim Truncer recalled, "had a personality that people enjoyed, and they came back as regulars because they loved talking with him."





NANCY BORCHERT, Senior Personnel Assistant

I love coming to work every day

When I started, we did a little bit of everything and worked for everybody. We took steno, worked the switchboard, took reservations. We had electric typewriters and we used carbon paper, so if you made a mistake, you had to correct every carbon. But there was opportunity for growth, and over time I came to really like the Park System and to believe in what it stands for.

In '85 I decided that I wanted to further my education. The Park System had the tuition reimbursement program, so I started going to Brookdale Community College part-time at night for about six years... After I graduated, I went to Monmouth University and received my degree in business administration and management. Then I moved to Personnel. I've always liked working with people, working with the public, doing programs. I've liked the jobs and the employees, too. Every day they come in and say hello, and they're happy.

The employees know they have a beautiful place to work, and they appreciate that. I think it takes a certain kind of person to work in the parks, and they are the people who enjoy the outdoors and nature. It's hard to sit at a computer all day, but to be able to look up, look out the window, see the beautiful scenery... I love coming to work every day.

Tom also hired Doug Krampert, who had recently graduated from Utah State University with a degree in biology, to help Farmer John. As Doug recalled, "We took school groups through the farm environment and we talked about the barns and about the hand-hewn logs that they were seeing, about some of the animals there. We talked about



DOUG KRAMPERT, Chief Park Naturalist

Because we fished as kids, because we camped, I like the outdoors

Born and raised in Bergen County, Doug developed a love for the outdoors from family activities:

At a very young age, my brothers and I fished and camped together, in the backyard but also up in Bear Mountain in southern New York because that was fairly close to us. When we took family vacations, we did outdoor things and went into State parks and stayed in cabins there. So, from an early age I thought that I didn't want to work in an office. I wanted to get outdoors for my job.

I went to Utah State University where I could major in forestry and wildlife, and I graduated with a BS in fish biology in 1970. A game warden out there told me that his job not only involved science, but also talking with people and educating people, and I thought that would be kind of nice. I knew I liked dealing with people but didn't know I would like it as much as I do.

After a year and a half of working with Farmer John, I became full-time in June of '73 and started working with more of the naturalists. We did free nature walks, mostly in Turkey Swamp, Shark River, and Holmdel, and I had to learn about the natural environment on each one of the trails.

When you do a live snake show and the kids' faces light up, you see that you're kind of turning them on or you're teaching them. Sometimes kids are petrified of snakes and you get them to touch a snake and actually feel that a snake isn't slimy. It's great dealing with the kids because they keep you young.

When Longstreet Farm first opened, naturalists gave tours rather than costumed interpreters. Howard Wikoff, shown here in 1974, became Park Manager of Longstreet Farm, overseeing development of the living history programs, historical collections, and building restorations.



the equipment and how they used it at the turn of the century." That first year 13,000 children and adults visited Longstreet to see how corn was shelled, fields were plowed, and sheep were sheared. For many of those visitors it was their first time on a farm.

Part of our County's heritage

Park System staff started working in 1971 to preserve two very special properties in Upper Freehold Township. Jim Truncer knew the county significance of both properties and was determined to preserve them.

The 169-acre Clayton Farm, the first property, included 88 acres of mature forest along Doctor's Creek with majestic stands of oak and beech trees that exemplified the "Open Space Plan" criteria for a priority preservation site. Paul Clayton, then 88, had lived on the farm since he bought it in 1906. His daughter Thelma, then in her 60s, had lived there since her birth. As the Park System's appraisal noted, "The Claytons occupy the 200-year old dwelling under very primitive conditions. There is no indoor plumbing or gas, and the only water supply is from a dug well outside the back door which is equipped with a hand-operated pitcher pump."

The Claytons were regularly solicited by developers who wanted to subdivide their land and by lumbermen who wanted to harvest the

timber, but the Claytons wanted to see their farm preserved. Their friend Bob Zion, a nationally-known landscape architect who lived in nearby Imlaystown, championed the idea of preserving it as a County park, but acquiring land in the County's rural western corner was a tough sell at that time. Worried that the Claytons might not be able to wait until acquisition funds became available, Jim Truncer negotiated an option agreement with the Claytons that would enable the County to buy their farm below market value when it obtained funding, while allowing them to live there for the rest of Paul's life.

The 36-acre Walnford, the second property, is in the Crosswicks Creek stream valley, which the "Open Space Plan" had identified as a priority preservation area. Jim Truncer knew Walnford was one of the County's most important historic sites, with a 1772 Georgian house and a rare 1873 grist mill with intact machinery. In 1971, Jim wrote to William Meirs, whose family had owned Walnford for 200 years, to ask if he "might consider preserving it as a part of our county's heritage."

William Meirs was the great-great-great-grandson of Richard Waln, a Philadelphia Quaker who had built the house and whose granddaughter, Sarah Waln Hendrickson, had built the grist mill after a fire destroyed its predecessor. Meirs had never lived at Walnford but had maintained it. After vandals had burned down two historic houses on the property in 1969, Meirs had started to think seriously about selling it. He discussed the County's interest with Jim but ran out of patience while Park System staff tried to line up funding to buy it. As Meirs told a reporter, "The County hasn't made an offer. I've waited too long now... If someone comes to me with an agreement that is satisfactory, I'm not going to wait any longer."

Meirs contracted to sell Walnford to Ed and Joanne Mullen, who lived nearby on Fair Winds Farm, and he wrote to Jim Truncer, "I regret that you and the Park System had not been in a position to enter into an Agreement of Sale prior to this, as I would have liked to see it get into your hands."

Dave Moore, Director of the N.J. Conservation Foundation, offered to buy Walnford for the County and hold it until Green Acres funding came through, stating, "As far as we are concerned, Walnford is one of the most important acquisitions facing any county government in New Jersey today." When Jim told the Mullens that the County was intent on preserving Walnford by acquiring it for the Park System, they assured him that they "were not going to be doing something foolish with this place."

Ed Mullen wrote to Jim, "I want to confirm to you our intention to not only maintain and protect the Walnford property but hopefully im-

prove it so that its value as an historic farm in Upper freehold Township will not be lost. We would also be willing to open the house occasionally for those groups who might find a particular interest in seeing it. With regard to the mill, I would hope to make it operative and as you suggested in some joint effort, make it possible for children's groups particularly to visit it. ...I hope that the Board will decide that this particular property will be well off in my hands." The Mullens acquired Walnford in 1973.

Irreplaceable public value

With its commanding view of Sandy Hook and New York City and its unique geology, Park System staff identified Mount Mitchill in Highlands and Atlantic Highlands as "a natural site for a county park." At an elevation of 266 feet, Mount Mitchill is the highest point on the Atlantic coast below southern Maine, and it has been a popular scenic overlook from the time Native Americans occupied the region. When a developer revealed plans in 1971 for two high rise towers on the 12-acre site, many people urged County leaders to preserve it.

The Park System designated Mount Mitchill as a high priority acquisition because of its "irreplaceable public value," and received Green Acres and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) matching grants in 1972 to purchase 10.5 acres. Because the developer had rushed to start building one of the towers, the Freeholders had to settle for 7.1 acres. The *Asbury Park Press* reported, "Mount Mitchill Compromise Leaving Many Unsatisfied," as the outcome illustrated government's inability to compete against developers when timing was crucial. Assistance from land banks like the N.J. Conservation Foundation could help level the playing field in many, but not all, cases.

Green Acres and HUD also awarded matching grants to the Park System to finally preserve 476 acres of Hartshorne Woods, which Walter Schoellner had first targeted for preservation in 1965. Members of the Hartshorne Woods Association had also championed the preservation of the land for many years. When the Park System announced the acquisition of Hartshorne Woods, the *Asbury Park Press* lauded the preservation of this "prime public asset" for future generations.

The creation of Hartshorne Woods Park in 1973 proved timely because just a few months later the U.S. General Services Administration declared almost two-thirds of the adjacent 224-acre former Army H.A.A.D.S. facility as surplus property. Park System staff quickly applied to transfer the 161 undeveloped surplus acres to the County under

President Nixon's "Legacy of Parks" program. The Federal Bureau of Outdoor Recreation completed the transfer to the County in the spring of 1974, and the Park System added it to Hartshorne Woods Park. The Bureau also transferred a 5-acre parcel known as the Middletown Radio Propagation Site to the County, and the Park System added it to Tatum Park. Competition for the 63-acre H.A.A.D. S. facility, which was now surrounded by Hartshorne Woods Park, and the Army's cleanup of the site would tie it up for many years, but County officials remained determined to add it to the Park.

The Recreation Commissioners opened their first golf course, Howell Park Golf Course, in 1972 to immediate acclaim from serious golfers. By the end of the season, more than 18,500 golfers had played at Howell Park, and many took lessons from the professional staff. To top off the accomplishment of building a first-rate golf course, the Park System received a HUD grant for a little more than half of the property's purchase price. When combined with the Green Acres funds already received, the acquisition cost to Monmouth taxpayers was, as Freeholder Theodore Narozanick wrote in a letter, "None."

Howell Park Golf Course, 1978.





Shark River Golf Course, 1970s.

With the growing interest in golf, County officials had also applied for Green Acres funding to preserve the 180-acre Asbury Park Golf and Country Club in Neptune Township, adjacent to Shark River Park. The City of Asbury Park, which owned the Club, could not wait for the County to line up funding and sold it to a developer that wanted to build 2,019 retirement homes on it. The Park System's appraisal noted that one-third of the site was undeveloped, with wooded lowlands and meadows fronting two and a half miles of the Shark River and Jumping Brook. Because the proposed intensive development would threaten these wetlands and stream corridors and destroy a valuable recreation facility, Neptune Township officials urged the County to acquire the Club to preserve its resources.

When the Park System finally received a Green Acres matching grant for the Club in 1973, the developer had already filed plans for its project. Noting that waiting times at Howell Park Golf Course could run up to two and a half hours, the Freeholders tried to negotiate a purchase from the developer, but ultimately had to preserve the Asbury Park Golf and Country Club through eminent domain. The Recreation Commissioners renamed the 18-hole facility the Shark River Golf Course.

In the summer of 1973, a generous gift of land and timely action created a big new park. Genevieve Hubbard Tatum told Recreation Commissioner Victor Grossinger that she was considering donating 73 acres of her 170-acre Indian Springs Farm in Middletown, where he had grown up and where his father had been farm manager.

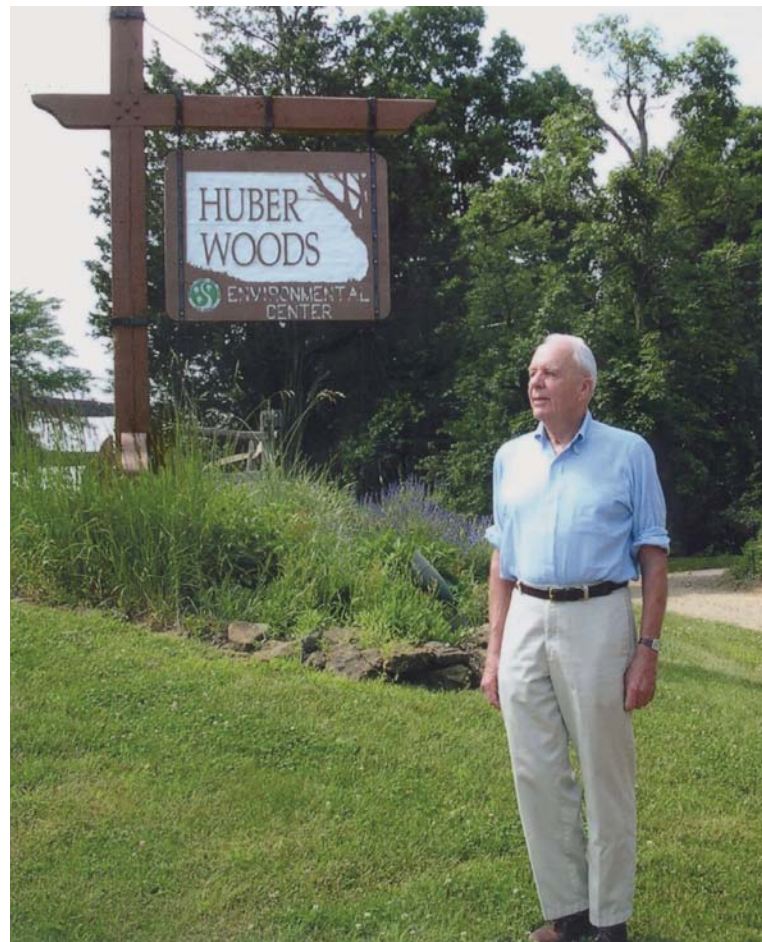
Mrs. Tatum's father-in-law, Charles Tatum, had co-founded the Whitall Tatum Company, the oldest glass manufacturer in the United States, with factories in Keyport in northern Monmouth County and in Millville in Cumberland County. Charles Tatum bought the farm in 1905 as a summer home and named it Indian Springs after a natural spring on the site used by Native Americans, according to local lore. The property included an 18th century house built by Reverend William Bennett, a pastor of the Middletown and Holmdel Baptist Churches.

When Jim Truncer and Victor Grossinger asked Mrs. Tatum if the Park System could buy the rest of Indian Springs, she agreed, but they did not have the money because there was no Green Acres funding available. Jim showed the farm to Doug Hoff, the head of the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation in the U.S. Department of the Interior, who was impressed with both the land and Mrs. Tatum's donation. The Bureau subsequently awarded a grant from its Land and Water Conservation Fund to the County to buy the 97-acre portion, using Mrs. Tatum's 73-acre donation as a match. The Park System opened Tatum Park for nature programs in 1974.

In its natural state

The Park System's increasing success led to another generous donation that created a new park in 1974. Michael Huber of the Locust section of Middletown oversaw the Huber family's donation of 120 acres of mature forest along Brown's Dock Road. Mike's grandfather, Joseph M. Huber had bought the original 30 acres of the family farm in 1915 through his J.M. Huber Corporation. Mike's parents, Hans and Catherine Huber, built an Alpine-style house on the hill off Brown's Dock Road for their large family. Having enjoyed the farm for decades, the Hubers wanted to preserve the woods as "a nature sanctuary." They donated the land to the County "for park and conservation purposes and for no other purpose whatsoever," and requested that Brown's Dock Road be maintained in perpetuity as a "dirt road."

After the donation Mike wrote to Jim Truncer, "We are pleased to be able to have this tract preserved for the public to enjoy in its natural state. We are, in addition, thankful that there is a dedicated person like you to administer the County Park System, who also has the breadth of vision to plan an expanding park system to meet the future needs of the County, and who also sees the desirability of including in the Park System many different land uses, including a conservation area such as this one." Park naturalists soon started conducting nature walks through the dense forest of oaks, beeches, and tulip trees.



Left: Mike Huber at Huber Woods Park, 2006.

Below: Early 20th century postcard of Indian Springs Farm, now Tatum Park.



In June of 1974, Holmdel native John Hoffman came to work for the Park System full time after graduating from college. John had worked the previous summer at Turkey Swamp Park, and as he recalled, “I interviewed with Bruce Gollnick and then sat down with Jim Truncer and he offered me the job, so I was very pleased and fortunate to have a job two miles from my home. Jim’s a strong believer in hiring people right out of college. He likes to get them young, and then he tends to mold and set their direction.” John retired as Superintendent of Recreation in 2009 after 35 years with the Park System.

Park System staff noted in their 1974 Annual Report that “Howell Park Golf Course hosted over 43,000 golfers and is an example of a recreation bargain of major proportions. For those who do not play golf, the open fields, green spaces, and clean air are an added bonus.” The Park System earned 22% of its operating budget from greens fees at Howell Park and Shark River Golf Courses and from activity fees at Turkey Swamp and Thompson Parks. In developing the Park System’s Trust Fund from revenues, Jim Truncer recalled, “We first sold soda from vending machines loaned to us and used the money to buy new boats and canoes, and then expanded the fund from several hundred dollars to what it is today—about \$10.1 million.”

A very desirable property

Voters approved the third Green Acres Bond Act in November, 1974, for \$200 million, and in early 1975, an extraordinary opportunity arose for the Park System to build on its accomplishments at the Howell Park and Shark River Golf Courses. The Mercer family of Rumson offered to sell Hominy Hill, their private golf course in Colts Neck, to the Park System.

Henry Mercer created the golf course in 1965 and had recently retired as Chairman of States Marine Corporation, an international shipping company he founded in 1931. Mercer bought Hominy Hill Farm in 1941 to raise Guernsey and Charolais cattle and gradually increased the farm to over 400 acres. An enthusiastic yachtsman and owner of the racing sloop “Weatherly” that won the America’s Cup in 1962, Mercer enjoyed golfing and entertaining his many business associates and friends. In 1963, he commissioned the prominent golf course architect Robert Trent Jones of Montclair to design an 18-hole course on 180 acres of his farm.

As Jim Truncer recalled, “They adapted the barn into the clubhouse and the calf barn became the pro shop. He created Hominy Hill for his guests and had a pro there. He made the golf course available on



JOHN HOFFMAN

Superintendent of
Recreation, 1985–2009

*It’s been a great place
to work*

A lifelong resident of Holmdel, John Hoffman recalled visiting Holmdel Park as a child. “I would walk to the sledding hill from Holmdel Village, probably a mile and a half. There were still a lot of farms in Holmdel at the time.” John worked as a lifeguard at the ocean while he was in high school and later graduated from East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina. As he recalled,

I went there as a liberal arts major. After freshman year, I heard about the parks and recreation program and decided it was really in line with what I enjoyed doing in my leisure time—outdoor recreation like whitewater canoeing, kayaking, rafting, sailing—so it seemed to be a perfect match. The program had a variety of courses, from conservation, geology, basic biology, to outdoor recreation programs. My area was recreation administration.

The summer prior to graduating from college, I worked at Turkey Swamp where I was in charge of the paddleboats, rowboats, and canoes. Before that, I was a volunteer leader for the outdoor recreation department for a couple of years, under Alan Jennings, the original outdoor recreation supervisor.

I started working full time in June, 1974 in the park operations office to get an orientation to the park system. Then they gave me a couple of parks to oversee, Hartshorne Woods and Huber. After that I moved over to the land acquisition department, and then I moved to recreation as assistant superintendent, and in 1985 I became Superintendent of Recreation.

The long view is, it has been a great place to work and we’ve been very fortunate. I think most people here are in the positions they’re in because they have a passion for it. So we’re very lucky. We have some great people. Our environmental educators, our outdoor recreation people, our therapeutic staff, they all just do a great job.



Hominy Hill Golf Course, 1983.

some Fridays to local charities, but it was mainly invited guests who got to play there. It was not heavily used at all. If you drove by and saw a foursome, you would think it was a busy day at Hominy Hill."

The Park System's appraisal of Hominy Hill noted, "This excellent 18-hole championship golf course designed by Jones has been lavishly cared for and appears to be a very desirable property." Jim Truncer recalled that when he showed the appraised value to Dick Mercer, Henry Mercer's son, "Dick said, 'That's right in the ballpark of what we thought it would be.' I said, 'Well, I'll need time to line up Green Acres funding, and also to get the Freeholders on board,' and he agreed to that."

Local opposition delayed the purchase and a group of would-be buyers sued to block it. Some citizens also doubted the Park System's ability to maintain such a fine golf course for the general public. During the 18 months that it took to secure the funding and approvals, Dick Mercer never wavered from his verbal agreement. As Jim remembered, "The harder people tried to undo this, the firmer Dick's handshake. In fact, the Mercers maintained the golf course and replaced equipment just as though they were going to own it forever. That's the kind of people the Mercers are."

Hundreds of eager golfers played their first rounds at Hominy Hill

Monmouth County Fair,
East Freehold Park, 1982.



when the Park System opened it in 1977. The *Red Bank Register* reported, "Golfers called the course 'superb,' while county officials breathed a sigh of relief. 'This has been a long, hard struggle,' said Freeholder Director Harry Larrison, who stood firmly behind the purchase when it was attacked in the courts. 'We have preserved something for our children and our children's children.'" After all the controversy, Hominy Hill would prove to be one of the Park System's finest facilities and one of the top public golf courses in the country.

By the end of its first season in 1977, Hominy Hill Golf Course had become the Park System's biggest source of revenue, earning 50% more than the golf course at Howell Park. The three golf courses together earned 74% of total Park System revenues, and these revenues equaled 36% of the Park System's operating costs.

The Park System developed a major partnership in 1975 when the Monmouth County 4-H Association was looking for a new site to hold its annual 4-H Fair. Tom Kellers initiated an agreement with 4-H to co-sponsor a fair at East Freehold Park, which the Park System had acquired in 1970. Over the July 4th weekend, the first joint fair attracted 9,000 people with programs, displays, and competitions, and this collaboration between 4-H and the Park System has continued ever since. Tom supervised the Monmouth County/4-H Fair for the first two years and then passed it on to another Park System staff person, Bob Cain. Since then, rotating the position of County Fair Chairman among staff has become a Park System tradition.

In the fall of 1975 Jim Truncer hired Dave Compton as the first County Park Manager. After graduating that June from Michigan State University where he studied Park and Recreation Administration, Dave was recommended to Jim by Roger Murray, a Michigan State profes-

DAVE COMPTON

Superintendent of Parks

Maintaining and providing those places that I grew up enjoying

Dave was born in the farming region of southern Illinois and moved with his family to Michigan at the age of six, as he recalled:

Both my grandparents owned farms in Illinois, and from about eight years old, the day after I got out of school I was on a bus that ran from Jackson, Michigan to Mt. Carmel, Illinois. I would spend summers with my grandparents working on their farms...feeding the animals, helping in the fields, baling hay, plus a little fishing and playing.

When I went to Michigan State, it had a natural resource division, with a park and recreation resources department that emphasized interpretation, resource management, and planning. I entered the program because it just seemed to fit with my interest of being outdoors and spending a lot of time in parks. I had done a lot of camping and backpacking while growing up, so it just seemed to fit with maintaining and providing those places that I grew up enjoying.

The Park System is a great place to work, a lot of good people, a lot of opportunities. I enjoy coming to work every day.



sor who had worked at the Park System as the first Superintendent of Parks. After completing his initial assignment, Dave assumed the management of Holmdel Park. He became Assistant Superintendent of Parks in 1981 and has served as Superintendent of Parks since 1985.

In the spring of 1976 Marjorie Wihtol of Middletown contacted Jim Truncer to discuss Deep Cut Farm, her 39-acre property on Red Hill Road opposite Tatum Park. The 39-acre site had an unusual history and contained remnants of elaborate gardens installed by reputed mobster Vito Genovese when he had owned the property between 1935 and 1948. Mrs. Wihtol and her husband Karl had purchased the farm in 1952 and built a house on the high bluff along Red Hill Road.

As Jim Truncer recalled, "Mrs. Wihtol was well-educated, had gone to the Sorbonne, had traveled the world, and was interested in a lot of



Deep Cut Farm in 1954, when it was owned by Karl and Marjorie Wihtol. On the opposite side of the road are the former Middletown Radio Propagation Site and Indian Hill Farm, both now part of Tatum Park.

things. She had previously called, wondering if we were interested in some of the plants on the property. She wasn't prepared to donate the property outright. She had a son, and she wanted to provide for him as well. She agreed to leave half to the County upon her death and to give us six months to purchase the other half." When she died in 1977, Mrs. Wihtol bequeathed half the farm for "park and horticultural purposes only...and it shall be known as Deep Cut Park." Park System staff secured a Green Acres matching grant to buy the other half of the farm from her estate and opened Deep Cut Gardens in 1978.

One of the last sizable, undeveloped tracts east of Highway 35

The 1970 "Open Space Plan" had identified the 113-acre Weltz Farm on the Ocean Township-Eatontown border as one of five "Proposed County Park Sites." Calling the site "one of the last sizable, undeveloped tracts east of Highway 35," Joseph Palaia, Mayor of Ocean Township, wrote to Jim in 1976 that, "The Weltz tract is particularly desirable as a park site. It is rolling, well-drained, picturesque, and easily accessible. The farm was active as a dairy farm until a few years ago and maintains a pastoral calm. Mr. Weltz's pond and an unusually handsome stand of Buttonwood trees along the road remain today. The Township heartily supports the 'Open Space Plan' for the development of a County Park in the highly-populated areas east of Highway 35 and we urge the purchase of the Weltz Farm while this desirable land remains intact."

Although Park System officials lacked funding to acquire the Weltz Farm, they did not want to lose it to development. They arranged with Dave Moore, the Director of the N.J. Conservation Foundation, to have the Foundation purchase and hold the property until the Park System secured a Green Acres matching grant. Mayor Palaia told an *Asbury Park Press* reporter that he was "very, very happy with the proposed sale...We owe a great indebtedness to Mr. Weltz, who has taken a liking to our town and thinks about its welfare. He could have sold that tract for a lot more money to a developer to build on. He likes to look at the open spaces the same as we do." When a developer proposed subdividing the adjacent 29-acre parcel into "Lenape Estates," the Foundation also bought and held it for the Park System.

The N.J. Conservation Foundation soon helped the Park System preserve two more key parcels of open space. In the fall of 1976, Bruce Huber from the Riverside Drive Association in Locust wrote to Jim Truncer about the 52-acre Drazin property on Brown's Dock Road that developers were eyeing, "In our opinion it would be in the best

interests in our locality and the county at large, if this property could be purchased by the county to join the two Huber parks to provide a continuous park. This property, if left in its natural state, will provide for this generation and future generations a parkland of unsurpassed beauty. No comparable natural acreage exists in Monmouth County." The 148-acre Deepdale tract, "a vital ecological area" next to Tatum Park in Middletown, was also being eyed by developers.

The Foundation bought both of these parcels at the Park System's request, and was now holding four properties until the Park System could secure Green Acres grants to preserve them. The *Red Bank Register* praised the Foundation in December, 1976 for "performing a valuable public service." The cooperation between the Foundation and the Park System, the *Register* noted, "not only saves the more valuable open lands from development for lesser uses, but also protects the taxpayers from possible spiraling land prices."

When a Middletown official interested in tax rates complained about "losing property to the county so that it could be left in its natural state," the *Register* commented, "It would be shortsighted to look upon open-space areas as 'lost' or wasted. The ecological and aesthetic values of such lands are inestimable to a neighborhood and a community, as much an asset to property values as good schools and good municipal services. Middletown is fortunate that the County Park System has permitted it to retain those values."

Faster than the County government

By mid-1977, the N.J. Conservation Foundation was anxious for the County to purchase the four properties it was holding for the Park System so that it could free up its resources for land preservation projects in other counties. Jim asked Mike Huber for his help with this situation, as Mike recalled, "I got involved early on when Jim felt that it would be worthwhile to have a non-profit land trust in the area which could move faster than the County government at times. He had been working with the N.J. Conservation Foundation, but they felt they spent too much of their effort in this area because Jim had a lot going on and used them quite a bit. They were very happy to help us get started and set up the Monmouth Conservation Foundation. I remember being in very early conversations with Jim Truncer and Dave Moore and various other people, including Chet Apy and Larry Carton. We met at Hominy Hill, upstairs. Chet subsequently devoted a lot of time and effort to the acquisition of land for the Foundation and the Park System."

“Our Monmouth Conservation Foundation”

Green Heritage, June – July 1980

The ability of a foundation to move quickly to acquire lands needed for future open space in parks assures the public that the land is protected and available until the town or county is in a position to move forward. Often, a municipality is unable to act in time on its own, due to the time periods required to raise money and get state and federal financial aid approved. Fortunately for those of us who live in Monmouth County, the Monmouth Conservation Foundation may be able to save some of our last remaining open space before land is lost to development or other uses. The Foundation is particularly interested in working to save farmland and to encourage agriculture to stay in Monmouth County.

Since its founding in 1977, and under the leadership of its long-time President Judith Stanley Coleman, the Monmouth Conservation Foundation has helped preserve over 6,000 acres at 42 sites, including 1,861 acres for the Park System, County farmland preservation projects, and many municipal projects as well.

Chester Apy, an attorney who grew up in Little Silver and served on the Borough Council, in the State Assembly, and as an administrative law judge, remembered when Jim approached him about starting a foundation, “Jim knew the people around the County and he put together the original invitation list when we had our first gathering out at Hominy Hill Golf Course. He got Dave Moore to speak and people signed up that night to be involved, and that group became the original Board of Directors of the Monmouth Conservation Foundation. Judy and Bob Stanley were in that original group, Natalie Beglin, and George Illmensee who was a real estate broker and a farm owner in Colts Neck, and Mike Slovak, the President of Steinbach’s department store in Asbury Park and in Red Bank. He was the original president of the Foundation.”

Both the N.J. Conservation Foundation and the Monmouth Conservation Foundation would soon help the Park System preserve a very important property.

The smiles on their faces in the pictures really show it

The Visitor Services staff of the Park System launched a number of new programs in 1976 and 1977. They started the “Volunteers in Parks” program, as *Green Heritage* reported in November-December 1976, to “provide unique opportunities for all people in our county...to learn from the Park System’s Professional Staff, and to assist them in conducting a variety of activities. Volunteers will attend orientation and training sessions to become fully acquainted with the skills and philosophies involved before reporting to their chosen fields. Currently, volunteers are needed in Land Management, Fine Arts, Outdoor Recreation, Nature Activities, Gardening, and Tournaments. The only requirements for participants is that they be energetic, enthusiastic, and above the age of 13.”

Park naturalists opened the Holmdel Park Activity Center on Longstreet Road in the spring of 1977 with offices, displays, and activity rooms, and from there they led nature walks around the park. The Activity Center represented a major turning point, as Doug Krampert



Park System naturalists about 1977, from left: Patty O’Rourke, Gerry Savitz, Doug Krampert, Andrew Coeyman and Robert Henschel.



Left: Building a Lenni Lenape Longhouse, a favorite program for school groups, in 1981.

Right: Park System Ranger Bruce Ege-land in 1968, wearing an early ranger uniform.



recalled, "Nick Fiorillo and I had philosophical discussions as to whether we should start charging for programs. We would often have a group schedule a nature walk at Holmdel Park, and they wouldn't show. So the feeling was, if we start charging people something, they're going to think that this program is worth something. We started charging for day-long school programs, and we did a lot with fourth grades as a unit of studies on the Lenni Lenape Indians, the Native Americans in New Jersey. We were also starting to realize that if we wanted to do more things, we needed a way of generating income and getting away from a strictly operating budget. I feel over the years that this has really helped the Park System."

As the demand for nature programs kept growing, Visitor Services staff launched a series of Group Discovery Activities in 1979 from the Holmdel Park Activity Center. As Doug Krampert recalled, "We decided to do more day-long programs. Nick Fiorillo developed the Longhouse program. Bob Henschel and I came up with a birdhouse building program, where we did a slide program on the native birds and then the kids went out and actually built a bird house. We developed the fossil program where we went down into the Shark River with one to two groups of kids, maybe fifty or sixty kids. We built a fossil screen about a foot square and they used that to dig up fossil shark teeth in the river. We all worked together as a staff and perfected the programs."

Following one of these sessions, Keyport teacher Bruce Davidson wrote to Nick Fiorillo, "The students found the experience interesting, valuable, and enjoyable. For some of them it was the first time they caught a fish or even had a rod and reel in their hands. The Longhouse

gave the students a real sense of accomplishment and the smiles on their faces in the pictures really show it."

After three 7th-grade programs, Barbara McEvoy, Vocations Coordinator of Plumsted Township, wrote to the Recreation Commissioners, "These trips were excellent educational experiences for our students. They not only learned a great deal, but also enjoyed the trips tremendously. The success of these trips was largely due to Mr. Fiorillo's excellent talent as a teacher and his very fine rapport with our students. He made the study fascinating and the experience great fun. Thank you for providing a unique and invaluable educational experience for our students."

With the increasing number of visitors and parks, the Park System developed a training program to help Park Rangers develop, as *Green Heritage* reported in November-December 1977, "the skills necessary to perform their unique, dual roles as stewards of both the visiting public and the natural resources of the parks." The "dual role" of rangers involves protecting visitors and helping them enjoy the parks, while also maintaining facilities to protect the County's investment and to provide positive experiences for visitors. In 200 hours of training, Park System staff and professionals from other organizations orient rangers to the variety of facilities and services in the Park System and help them develop communication and maintenance skills.

The outcome was worth waiting for

The Park System was finally able to acquire the four properties that the N.J. Conservation Foundation was holding for it in 1979. After State voters had approved the fourth Green Acres Bond Act in 1978 for \$200 million, the Park System secured Green Acres matching grants to buy the Weltz Farm and another parcel to create Weltz Park, to add the Deepdale Tract to Tatum Park, and to add the Drazin parcel to Huber Woods Park. With these acquisitions at the end of the decade, there were now 19 parks preserving nearly 4,200 acres. The Park System secured another Green Acres matching grant that year to finally preserve the Clayton Farm in Upper Freehold Township. As the *Asbury Park Press* reported on May 25, 1979,

The purchase by the County climaxed five years of waiting by 94-year-old Paul Clayton, who bought the farm in 1906, and his daughter, Thelma, who has lived there all her life. The Claytons are elated that the fields and woods they love so well have been saved from the developers. For years, said Ms. Clayton, they have been



Paul Clayton and Thelma Clayton in the 1990s.

'pestered' to sell off lots, and lumbermen 'tortured us to death' for permission to cut the trees. One in particular vowed he'd get the wood eventually, 'but we've both outlived him.' Sitting around the dining room table last week, the Claytons got the news of the Green Acres approval from Spencer H. Wickham, chief of acquisition and design for the park system, and he apologized for the long delay since the first option was taken five years ago. Miss Clayton said the outcome was worth waiting for and she praised the pleasant manner in which Wickham and Truncer handled the negotiations. 'They were always gentlemen,' she said.

A priceless gift

After living at Walnford for six years with their five children, Joanne and Ed Mullen decided to donate the historic site on Crosswicks Creek in Upper Freehold to the Park System. Their generous donation included the 1772 Georgian house, the intact 1873 grist mill, multiple farm buildings, historic furnishings and equipment, and 36 acres. As Joanne told a Newark *Star Ledger* reporter, "My husband and I wanted to be sure Walnford would be preserved properly." The Mullens had taken excellent care of the property, replacing roofs, upgrading utilities, and making structural repairs. "It was like having a treasure," Joanne said, "and we didn't want to do anything to lose the historical

value. I will be sad to leave, but it's important for a place like this to be preserved."

To enable the Park System to raise matching funds, the Mullens transferred the property at the end of 1979 to the N.J. Conservation Foundation, which transferred it in 1980 to the Monmouth Conservation Foundation to hold until the Park System could secure a Green Acres matching grant to acquire adjacent land along Crosswicks Creek. In a December 29, 1979 editorial on the donation, the *Red Bank Register* stated, "The Walnford tract is a welcome addition to the County's holdings of environmentally and historically irreplaceable lands, and all of us must be grateful to the Mullens for a priceless gift."

Walnford, 1992.

