

A Brief History of Towner's Woods Park

By Allan Orashan, Park Director from 1975 to 1979; Park District Commissioner 1995-present

The Towner's Woods story begins with receding glaciers twelve thousand years ago that left rolling hills of sand and gravel dotted with kettlehole lakes. Over time forests and wetlands developed, and about 2,000 years ago Native Americans, now known as the Hopewell, settled there and created a sacred burial mound on a prominent hill with a commanding view of the pristine lake, now known as Lake Phippen and considered one of the highest quality natural lakes in the state.

During the mid 1800s Marvin Kent acquired tracts of that land to route a section of the Atlantic and Great Western Railroad, later the Erie Railroad, near the southern border of the park. In 1911 a major cut was made in the landscape for the Pennsylvania Rail Road (now Norfolk & Southern Railway) which roughly parallels the border of the park, and yet another railroad, the Pittsburgh and Lake Erie, branched off to the west from the lower tracks up a rise to an elevated road bed.

The iconic two story concrete Brady Lake Interlocking Tower near the Towner's Woods entrance was reconstructed in about 1928 to accommodate switching connections between various branches from the lower railroad. It housed a system of hand operated levers, rods and hinges that went from the second story to the first, swung out through the back of the building and down the bank of the cut, then off in different directions to switches on the tracks. The railroad tower has been used since the park opening as a shop and storage area, though other uses are now being considered.

Around 1920 a young George Towner purchased about 43 acres from the Marvin Kent, using the property to harvest lumber and mine sand and gravel--still evidenced by the cuts around the current gazebo area. In 1932 Towner was on the hill overlooking Lake Phippen and noticed at his feet what he thought to be some ancient beads. He called in archeologists from Kent State University whose subsequent excavation of the mound resulted in the discovery of multiple Hopewell burials. That discovery made regional and even national news at the time. Towner built a small hut to display some items from the excavation until vandals destroyed it, with remaining undocumented artifacts ending up at historical museums or in private collections.

Forward to 1973 when Portage County Commissioners John Carson, Carl Broderic and Robert Stratton, ostensibly intending to establish water wells for the County, purchased Towner's property and an adjoining 130 acre tract of farmland from the Brigham family, with \$120,000 in federal revenue sharing funds. In 1975, they used Federal Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) funds to provide for a 16 person crew to develop the park. The Parks Department Director hired to design and manage the park was a graduate of KSU with training in industrial design who grew up the son of an architectural draftsman and general contractor, and who admittedly learned a great deal from the project and crew. That person would be yours truly.

In 1975 the crew removed many truckloads of dumped trash and a half-dozen wrecked automobiles. They established trails and constructed the original collection of unique park structures with scavenged materials including cast-off lumber, used railroad ties, old telephone poles, fallen logs, and

an old loading dock from what is now the Pufferbelly Restaurant that was disassembled for the walkway and gazebo near the park entrance. The Commissioners dedicated the park as part of the county's bicentennial celebration in 1976 while construction continued for a few years. When funds for staff were depleted, most of the crew moved on leaving former foreman, Merrill Evans, to serve as the part-time manager, keeping the park maintained, and organizing events with volunteers such as cross country ski races and the Wildflower Festivals until he left in 1995.

In 1991 the Portage Park District was established and took over management of the park a few years later. Christine Craycroft was hired in 1996 by the Park Commission as Director and has overseen the growing Park District ever since. Towner's Woods has expanded with the addition of 64 acres on the east side of the park, and most recently the residential parcel of over 7 acres near the entrance. With the PORTAGE Hike and Bike Trail running through it, Towner's Woods is known and enjoyed by more people than ever who come out to hike, sled, ski, run, walk dogs and simply enjoy the quiet beauty of nature on 5 miles of trail. With the passage of the Park District's first ever levy, more funding is now available to maintain or replace the aging structures and plan for new improvements, as we look forward to many more decades of public use and enjoyment of this very special place.