

## Public Gardens a Hidden Gem

*Jane Barry, The Greater Saint John Community Foundation*

Saint John has been ahead of its time with a focus on public green spaces for more than a century.



The Saint John Horticultural Association (SJHA) has been maintaining a green space of beauty and tranquility since the 1890's. Greg Burgess, SJHA board member, Bob Capson, SJHA board treasurer and Geoff Spear, Superintendent, are pictured at the Public Gardens centennial rock.

The Saint John Horticultural Association (SJHA) is one of our community's oldest organizations and has been working to improve our natural environment and quality of life for 116 years. The New Brunswick Legislature granted it a charter in 1893, giving it responsibility for what would become Rockwood Park and the Public Gardens. Community leaders and philanthropists over the years came together to assemble the huge area which now encompasses Lily Lake, Fisher Lakes the Rockwood Park Campground and Golf Course, the Hatheway Pavilion, Interpretation Centre and Cherry Brook Zoo.

In the 1890's, Sir Samuel Leonard Tilley, one of the Fathers of Confederation, Hon. John Boyd, James Reynolds, James F. Robertson and John Valentine Ellis first conceived of Public Gardens for our community. Land around Lily Lake and beyond owned by William Pugsley, called Rockwood, was acquired. The SJHA hired Downing Vaux, a noted New York landscape designer, to plan the growing green spaces. Gifts of land and purchases from such well-known Saint John families as the Allison, Fitzgeralds, Hazens, Gilberts, Drury, Peacocks and Pedersons augmented the park. A tea house, fountain, zoological garden, bear cage and amusement park were among some early features. For many years, the lakes

were the water source for the city, as well as supplying ice for refrigeration purposes. Skating in winter and swimming in summer became synonymous with Lily Lake and the Park. It wasn't until 1967, Canada's Centennial year, when an opportunity arose to access federal funding, prompted the transfer of Rockwood Park to the City of Saint John from the SJHA.

As part of the transfer, the agreement was that the city would continue to provide support to the SJHA, which retained authority over the Rockwood Park Campground and Public Gardens, which it does to this day. In recent years the 18 member Board of the SJHA has been led by the late Wallace MacMurray, Eric Teed and Terry Hutchinson. Ian Stead currently is President, Dr. John Acker Vice- President, Bob Capson serves as treasurer and the late Brenda Farren served as secretary. The operation employs two full-time and about ten seasonal staff. Geoff Spear has been the Superintendent for twenty-seven years. He recalls Bill Ross and Bob Arsenault who both held the post over long periods. Mr. Ross actually lived in an apartment at the Lily Lake Pavilion.

The four acre gardens at the corner of Seely and the Saint John throughway exit are a sight to behold in early fall as many colorful plantings are at the height of their beauty. Although it is a regular spot for some locals to walk, many don't know it exists. Geoff Spear calls it "a hidden gem". It is home to towering American elms, maples, linden, ash and evergreens, spaced among winding, peaceful paths and flower beds. At the urging of Wallace MacMurray, a monument to those from the neighbourhood who perished in the two World Wars was erected. It was paid for by neighbours in the area. Another stone monument commemorates the SJHA's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1993, along with an arch constructed by the New Brunswick Community College.

The large greenhouses not only supply the adjacent gardens but about 70% of the city's handsome uptown beds as well as 34,000 marigolds for Main Street, 3,000 geraniums, hanging baskets, planters and other annuals. It's no wonder that the Public Gardens are popular for wedding and graduation photos, with some 45 special photo shoots this year.

The Gardens hope to take advantage of a substantial gift from Emera/Brunswick Pipelines, which constructed the natural gas pipeline. As part of the phased Rockwood Park masterplan, funding is going to upgrade the infrastructure in front of the Lily Lake Pavilion, to the SJHA and UNBSJ.

One aspect of the Public Gardens is refreshing, that is the respect which visitors have for the area, reports Geoff Spear. Incidents of a negative nature are rare. The SJHA can also take credit for the restoration of the Lily Lake Pavilion. The driving force, Wallace MacMurray, along with Bob Capson and Pat Watt, galvanized the community into action. Some board members also serve on the Rockwood Park Advisory Board and the new Lily Lake Pavilion Board. New volunteers with an interest in preserving these unique urban green spaces are welcome. Information contact: 657-1773.



*Community Profile is a weekly column highlighting community causes and work done by non-profit organizations in the Greater Saint John area. It is contributed by Jane Barry, executive director of The Greater Saint John Community Foundation. Contact the foundation at 506-672-8880. To view other Community Profiles go to [www.saint-john-foundation.nb.ca](http://www.saint-john-foundation.nb.ca)*