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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Mill Creek Park Project

Personal Experiences

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Charles Creager

Interviewed By

Katie Sabel

On

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Interviewee: Charles Creager

Interviewer: Katie Sabel

Subject: Mill Creek Park Project

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This is an interview with Charles Creager for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Mill Creek Park Project, by Katie Sabel, on May 7, 2003, at the Historic Preservation Office.

S: Can you tell me where and when you were born?

C: I was born in Youngstown Ohio. And you want to know when, did you say?

S: Yes.

C: January 7, 1932.

S: Can you tell me about your family?

C: Well, I have three children and six grandchildren. Do you want to know more?

S: Sure.

C: Well, my oldest daughter is in California. She's an attorney for Naval Air, and her husband's a captain in the Navy. My son is a school psychologist in Springfield, Ohio with three children, and my youngest daughter lives in Canfield and has three children.

S: What was it like growing up in your community, in Youngstown?

C: That would be a hard one to answer. I don't know what you'd compare it with, but it was depression days and then the Second World War.

S: How far did you grow up from Mill Creek Park? Did you go there frequently?

C: My parents took me there frequently from the time I was a baby on up. We went over quite a bit. We had picnics there and hikes.

S: What did your parents do?

C: My parents were librarians.

S: At a library in Youngstown?

C: My mother was with the Mahoning County Public Library. My dad started the library at Hayes Junior High School, and then he moved to South High School and was a librarian there until he retired from the school systems and went to Youngstown College Library. He finished up at Girard Free Library. My dad was also a policeman in Mill Creek Park in the summers.

S: What is your educational background? Where did you go to high school?

C: Well, I went and graduated from Rayen. I graduated in mid-year, and then I went to Youngstown College for the spring semester. Then I had a one-year scholarship to Oberlin College, and I went there for one year. Then I went to Westminster College for one year, and then I decided to go into forestry. The nearest forestry school was in Anne Arbor, the University of Michigan, and I graduated from there then with a B.S.

S: In forestry?

C: Yes.

S: What's your first memory of Mill Creek Park? Do you have a first memory? You said you used to go there on picnics and hiking.

C: Not really. I can remember going with the nature groups on the hikes, but I suppose that would be my first memory. I used to go sledding there. I can remember going down the hill across from Orchard Meadow. I was sledding, and I hit a stone at the bottom. That just about knocked me out. [Laughter]. I wasn't too old then.

S: What made you go into forestry?

C: I've always liked the outdoors and the woods, and my parents both liked nature. We spent a lot of time outside. Then when I graduated—well the summer before I graduated I worked at Mill Creek Park in 1954—and when I graduated in January of 1955, I was expecting to be drafted so I came back here and worked for a while. I was waiting, and I wasn't called up so I just kept working at Mill Creek Park.

S: What was your first position at Mill Creek Park?

C: I was on the survey crew. I was not the engineering foreman then, and later I became the engineering foreman.

S: What did you do on the survey crew? What type of work did you do there?

C: Anything surveying, transit work and measuring, note taking, drawing up maps.

S: How and when did you get your job as the engineer there?

C: The previous engineering foreman switched jobs so they promoted me.

S: Was there any specific training necessary?

C: No because I'd had a lot of training at the University of Michigan and trained on the job here.

S: How long did you work at Mill Creek Park? What year did you begin?

C: Ten years. 1954 to January 1965.

S: What did you do after 1965?

C: I went to State Farm Insurance. I was a claims specialist there and office manager there for a while.

S: Can you describe a typical day at Mill Creek Park when you worked there?

C: If the weather was good and we had work to do outside, I'd get my survey crew. We would go out to wherever they needed work done, and if it wasn't . . . Well, we'd even go out on bad days. After I would do that, then I would be spending time in the office going over my notes and making drawings for the park. I would send them out to Olmsted's in Massachusetts. They would draw up plans and then send back to us, and then we'd go out and lay out whatever they wanted to put in.

S: Since you worked at the park, what changes have you noticed, since 1965?

C: There have been a lot of changes, not all to the better. I guess more manpower. Wages are a whole lot better than they used to be. There's a very good director right now. The previous—well, I'd rather not talk about the previous superintendent. Before that was Chuck Wedekind, and he was very good. Al Davies was superintendent for many years, and he was an excellent, very excellent superintendent. By the way I knew the first superintendent, Lewis Rogers. I'm not quite that old, but he was superintendent when the park was first founded in 1891. Is that right? I knew him when he was a man up in his eighties and I was a small boy. We went to the same church.

S: Is there anything that you can tell me about him?

C: Not particularly. He was feeble and hard of hearing at that point.

S: What is your favorite part of the park and why?

C: I don't think I have a favorite part. I think I know the park as well as anyone or better because I've surveyed the whole perimeter. I've hiked through all the places where there's no trails. I just like all of the park.

S: Did you guys help lay out some of those trails while you were there, or were they all pretty much done?

C: Most of the trails were done. The Boy Scouts wanted a trail for them so the local Boy Scout leader and I spent a couple of days walking the existing trails. Then I made up a map that the Boy Scouts could use for their hikes.

S: Can you describe a meaningful experience at Mill Creek Park either work-related or personal? Any one memory that stands out?

C: Well, one memory is when I was surveying in the middle of the road at Chestnut Hill Pavilion. Superintendent Al Davies was there, and I had my survey crew there. I think we were surveying for a parking lot there at the time. Anyway, I was behind the transit out in the middle of the road, and a car came down the road and hit the transit and me. I ended up about a hundred and forty feet away, but I didn't have any broken bones fortunately, a lot of bruises. I was dressed; it was wintertime, and I was dressed heavily. That had a lot to do with it.

S: When you were there were there a lot of park programs like social events? I know today they have concerts and educational programs.

C: They have quite a few more. I don't remember too many then.

S: Do you think this is an important aspect that they've gotten into?

C: Oh, yes. Yes. I think that has added a lot. Especially they've had some excellent speakers in the last five or ten years. It should attract a lot more people than it seems to. They've done a good job. Of course, they have the facilities now to hold them, which they didn't then. All they had was the cabins and the office, 2nd Pioneer Pavilion, that was about it.

S: Did they have the ice-skating rink then?

C: They put one in Kirkmere when I was here, and I certainly did the surveying for that. It was tennis courts, and then it could be converted to ice-skating in the wintertime. Then they built the one at Wick Recreation Area, and of course that was in a shelter. It was enclosed. The rink was outdoors of course. I guess that took over the other one. They used to have ice-skating on Lake Newport and Lake Glacier, and I don't know whether they still do that or not. They'd go out and scrape the ice and maintain guards out there and watch when it wasn't being used that people didn't get out on the ice when it was too soft. They'd keep a fire going when the skaters were there. A lot of people used that. I used to skate there on Newport.

S: Where did you go sled riding? The same place as now?

C: Well, the sled riding then was across from the Orchard Meadow.

S: Where's that?

C: It's between the Lily Pond and the creek. It's right up against the creek. There are slopes there. They weren't big slopes, but they were all right for us kids. And then they had sledding in the amphitheater, the Indian Circle, skiing and sledding from way on top of the hill all the way down, and that was a pretty steep slope. That's been closed for many years now. Well, the amphitheater has been closed too. I don't agree with things like that. They should have kept that open because there was a nice picnic area and skiing.

S: Where is that area? I've never heard of Indian Circle. Is that down in the flats?

C: It's off the flats. It was a dirt road leading from Hiawatha Flats back to this huge amphitheater or Indian Circle, and there were high banks around most of it, which is why they called it the amphitheater. Presumably Indian tribes met there. I don't think they lived there, but they met there. It was naturally formed. Bill Whitehouse or Ray Novotny could tell you about that. There were restrooms in there and pumps, a lot of nice picnic areas, tables. It was just a good place to go, forested and isolated.

S: Do you play golf?

C: I don't.

S: Do you remember, do you know when the golf courses were created? I think the par three was created a little bit later.

C: I helped to create that. I did all the preliminary surveying for the par three at Wick Recreation Area. That was done in the early sixties I believe, and I did some modifications to the main golf course, different places where they needed to put in drainage or change the green a little bit or something like that. I was there off and on over the years and did the surveying for the property lines around the course. I surveyed most of the property lines around the park.

S: What impact does the park have on Youngstown?

C: I think it has a huge impact, certainly with visitors to the area. They come to either see Mill Creek Park or the Butler Art Gallery first of all. Then of course there are a number of other attractions, but I think those are two of the best known.

S: I know a lot of people go up to see the flower gardens.

C: Yes.

S: Have they always been there?

C: No. Most of that area belonged to Mrs. Fellows, and she lived on Mahoning Avenue right next to the, well above the park where the ice pond was, right down by Price Road also. In fact, I used to go up to her house to collect payment for something, and I don't remember what now. I don't think it was rent. It might have been utility bills or something. She donated her farm up there to the park around 1960, I think—1959, 1960, somewhere around there. So my job was to do all the surveying, and then I had to make a topographical map of the area. Then this was sent to Olmsted Brothers in Massachusetts who designed Central Park in New York City among many other places, and they drew up the plans for the rose garden. And then we implemented them. Of course there's been a lot more work done since I left there, and they built the new Davis Center, which is a spectacular place.

S: You said that Olmsted did it or helped design?

C: Well, Olmsted died in the nineteenth century, but his firm did a lot of the work in Mill Creek Park. I know they did in the fifties and sixties. I don't know about other times.

S: Do you know of anything else besides the flower gardens that the firm worked with in Mill Creek Park?

C: Wick Recreation Area, the par three course. I have to think a little bit about what else, but those were two major projects. I know they did other work too.

S: What do you think the city would be like without the park?

C: Very sad. A lot of people wouldn't have any place to go to relax or to enjoy nature. Of course I'm thinking back to steel mill days, and it certainly had to help a lot of the people that worked in the mills. That was their only chance to get outside to enjoy the outdoors, to swim, to fish, boat, hike.

S: Did the steel mills have any negative impact on the park that you can think of?

C: Well, of course they provided jobs. They also provided certain pollution, and that didn't help the park. The park survived it though.

S: What effect does suburban sprawl have on the park?

C: What effect?

S: Boardman has been growing. Canfield has been growing, kind of encroaching on that park area on 224.

C: Yes, I'm sorry to see all that growth. I don't think that's good for the area, but it's also increased the tax base, which is important for the park. It's given them a lot more income.

S: You're talking about the change to the Metro Park?

C: Yes. I was certainly opposed to the way that was handled. I think that was handled very badly. I know it was approved by the Supreme Court, but as far as all the communities that were not in Mill Creek Park, I think they all voted against the change. Everybody in Youngstown voted for the change because they knew it would lower their property taxes. It still does not seem to me a very fair way of doing it, but it's done. It's been good for the park.

S: They've expanded into some of the other areas. I know they have a horse farm out in Ellsworth. They have an area in Canfield, and it goes all the way through to almost Columbiana County. Do you think that those changes have been positive since it wasn't a Metro Park?

C: Oh, I think so. I don't know about the horse farm.

S: I know there's an area out there.

C: Vickers Nature Trail is out there, and there's some kind of a working arrangement with the horse owners. They may even be leasing them. I'm not sure. Going south, I'm not sure the park has bought any property south of Western Reserve Road. Do you know?

S: I don't know.

C: Okay. They did buy property there when I was working for the park, and we had to survey all of that, check all the property lines. We did that clear out to, almost to Western Reserve Road. We didn't quite make it to there. We'd have to carry all of our equipment in and for a while we had a raft that we would float our transit and so on in from Western Reserve Road. I worked out there for quite a while, but as far as I know Mill Creek Park didn't extend beyond Western Reserve Road. There is something about Wetlands, but I'm not sure of the details on that.

S: The new bike trail that they put through, do you know anything about that? How far that extends?

C: That was done long after I left there, but I'm very much in favor of it. They've done an excellent job in preparing their portion of it, and I hope the other communities can extend it. Let's see, I think you can get on it at Western Reserve Road. I'm not sure how far north you can walk it. I've jogged on it, but I haven't ridden my bicycle on it.

S: What environmental concerns are there for Mill Creek Park?

C: The concerns are pollution from all the developments surrounding the south end of the park and the north end too. We had to check many of these properties when I was working. Many of the properties in Boardman were sending wastewater into the creek so I had to monitor those, and I'm not sure that the park came down very hard on any of the property owners. We did get the sewage plant to alter some things so that all their water going into Mill Creek presumably is clean, but pollution's a big problem. Also damage that the deer do is a big problem. They need to be thinned periodically, and it's a humane thing to do. Otherwise the deer will stay in an area, and they'll starve when they run out of food. They don't leave the area when they're hungry in the wintertime. They stay right in that area, and I've seen a lot of them starve to death because of that. And the geese are a problem, a very big problem. If people would stop feeding them . . . I think they should be hunted too. They're just too proliferous, and they're too dirty. I like geese, but not in the quantities that they are now. They're a major nuisance.

S: Can you tell me a little bit about Lake Newport? Did you guys have problems with that while you were there? It was probably after you were there that they drained it.

C: As I recall, they dredged it before I started. I might be wrong about that. Maybe they didn't. After I left, the superintendent before the present one, they drained it. They wanted to dredge it, and some of the property owners complained about the odor of the muck when it was brought out or would be brought out. There really wasn't that much to complain about, I don't think. Then they took two stones, two layers of stone off of Newport Dam. I've never discovered the reason for that. If anything, if they would have added two layers, then the lake would have been deep enough and they wouldn't have had to dredge it. But of course there are other concerns too with that, trails and building and so on. Taking off two layers of stone certainly doesn't make the lake any deeper. It makes it two layers shallower, and I've never heard the real reason for that. I hope it wasn't a mistake on somebody's part. Anyway, it's gone now. The lake is much lower. It's not good, I don't think. I know they settled for the wetlands preservations. There were wetlands south of Shields Road all the time. Now there's more wetlands north of Shields road. I don't think that was necessary. We dredged Lake Glacier when I was here, and that was a huge project. We spent a couple of summers on that. We had to drain it, and then we had to run cross sections all over Lake Glacier before it was dredged. Then after they dredged it we had to go back and run cross sections the same way again, and that way we could compute from our maps, we could compute the quantity of earth that was removed. The excavators were paid on that basis. It was extremely mucky, sticky. We had to be careful. We'd get stuck sometimes, lose our boots in the mud. I can remember coming out one day, and there was an old man that tried to go out there. He was stuck. He couldn't get out at all. Fortunately we came by and helped him out. There were some boys once that got stuck too. We had to put boards out to them to get them out.

S: How did the closing of Idora Park impact Mill Creek Park?

C: I'm not sure whether it did. I suppose it did. I just wasn't around there much in those days anyway. I don't know. Of course, we gained some parking area for the old mill.

We now use part of the Idora Park parking lot. I expect there was a lot of interchange of people between Mill Creek and Idora Park. They'd go from one place to another I'm sure. Oak Grove, was used quite a bit, I think. People picnicked there, and then they would go over to Idora. I seldom see it used anymore.

S: Did you frequent Idora Park?

C: I did when I was much younger, yes, but not like a lot of people did. I used to go to ball games there.

S: How did Idora Park impact Mill Creek Park while you were working there? Did it bring more people to the park?

C: I imagine it did, especially around Oak Grove and maybe the East Cohasset Drive too. Then they closed the East Cohasset Drive anyway, which was the prettiest drive in the park, and that's been closed for many years. I understand there are plans to reopen that drive now.

S: Where's that at?

C: It's on the east side of Lake Cohasset, running from Old Furnace Road down to Oak Grove or where Idora Park comes in. They closed it. Then they supposedly kept it for hiking or for skiing, cross-country skiing in the winter. But I took my skis out there once, and they plowed the road so I couldn't ski there.

S: Do you have any idea why the park didn't buy Idora Park? I know you weren't there then.

C: I don't know. I'm not sure. Did they have a chance to buy it? I don't know. I can't say, but it was not a natural park. I don't think they wanted to get into the entertainment business in that aspect, but unfortunately they had a lot of options to buy land adjacent to Mill Creek Park back in the twenties and thirties when it was cheap, no developments on it. They didn't do it, and I'm sure one reason was they felt they didn't have the money. It's a shame they didn't because it's all built up now, and you couldn't do it.

S: Which area?

C: Well, it'd be Boardman, north and south, almost any place south of the Youngstown city line adjacent to the present Mill Creek Park. There are a lot of homes and so on, properties that could have been obtained by Mill Creek Park. That was before Al Davies. I'm sure the reason they didn't was lack of money, but also some lack of foresight I think.

S: What do you think the future of Mill Creek Park is as it keeps on expanding in the community, as to the programs they do? Do you foresee it growing in the future now that it is a metro park area?

C: It would be hard for it to grow because of all of the developments that are around it. It's a long park, but it's really pretty narrow in most places. The need has expanded all the time, I think, increased. Of course, Youngstown's getting smaller, but more people have access to it. With cars, you can drive out there. I'm not sure if as many people use it now as used to, but I don't know. I would assume so.

S: Is there anything that you would like to add? Any stories, anything?

C: Oh, I'll think of something later on. [Laughter]. I had a great set of people I worked with there. I really enjoyed working for Mill Creek Park. I hated to leave, but with my family I couldn't afford to stay there anymore. I shared an office with Lindley Vickers for some years and enjoyed that experience very much. We had a lot of good times together. He was a philatelist as was I. If you wonder, that's stamp collecting. I miss all the people that have died. Walter Scholl, he was a good friend. He was recreation director for many years there. A good bunch of people to work with. The old office, of course, as many of you know, was on the corner of Glenwood Avenue and Falls Avenue. It was across from the Volney Rogers Statue, stone structure there, and we were really crammed in there. We needed more space, and there was a nice two-story house right next to the office, a very nice place. Two old ladies lived there who were crippled, and they tried to take care of each other, but they really couldn't. One of them was bed-ridden. So they would call us over at the office, whoever was there, to go over and help them in and out of bed once a day and back in to bed. So whoever was in the office would go over, Walter Scholl or Tom Galich, the head of the police force, or Lindley Vickers or me or the assistant superintendent. We did that for some years. Well, they were very grateful for our help, and when they died they left that building to the park. It became the park office annex. My office was moved from the basement of the old office into the basement of the annex, and Lenly's office was moved in upstairs there. So was Walter Scholl's. I don't know what they use the annex for now, but at least we did get that additional building at a time when we really needed it. Of course they've got Ford Nature Center now which they didn't have then, and they have a number of rooms they can use for offices or meeting rooms, lectures, and so on. That's been a great acquisition too. I can't think of anything else. I will later.

S: Thank you.

C: You're very welcome.

I HAVE READ AND EDITED THE INTERVIEW AND, BY MY SIGNATURE,
INDICATE THAT IT IS APPROVED.

SIGNATURE

DATE