

Floods, the Cycling Craze, and Baseball Fever: A Century and a Half Transformation of Tecumseh Park/Labatt Park, 1877-2000*

Introduction

Last year at this time I reported on the May 1877 historical establishment of Tecumseh Park, in 1937 renamed John Labatt Memorial Park (hereafter “the Park”), and argued its longevity pathway towards being, beyond all debate, the oldest, still functioning ball grounds in baseball’s lengthy history. A challenge persistently put forward by debaters of such distinction, most notably by A. J. Bastarache on behalf of Clinton, Massachusetts, argued that disastrous floods in London’s history “removed” the storied Tecumseh/Labatt diamond from its original location to a completely new site, thus negating the record of continuous operation in one specific place. Inferred, too, was the charge that the floods

necessitated lengthy periods of baseball dormancy before activity was re-established, thus compromising the “continuous use” claim relevant to the Park’s systematically sustained status. For this study Riley Nowokowski, a PhD student at Western University, joined me in examining newspaper and bicycle magazine material germane to the transformation over time of Tecumseh/Labatt Park, an investigation which, to our knowledge at least, is the first study yet undertaken to examine the “disastrous” flood periods surrounding the Park’s history and, as well, to delve into a second consideration germane to the Park’s transformation, the rise of the bicycle craze in late 19th century London.

From the pages of the *London Advertiser* of the 1880s and 1890s¹ and the *London Free Press* of the 1930s² comes the primary record that supports beyond all argument the record that preserves the heritage distinction which the hallowed Park has rightfully earned. A thorough examination of the two floods in question proves beyond a shadow of doubt that in both cases, the “one and the same” Tecumseh Park (1883) and John Labatt Memorial Park (1937) were in timely fashion renovated following the destructive inundations that in both cases interrupted scheduled activities. This study puts to rest the argument that the storied baseball park changed physical location.³ Such findings provide further evidence undergirding the bona fide heritage distinction the Park enjoys. Let us begin!

The July 1883 Flood

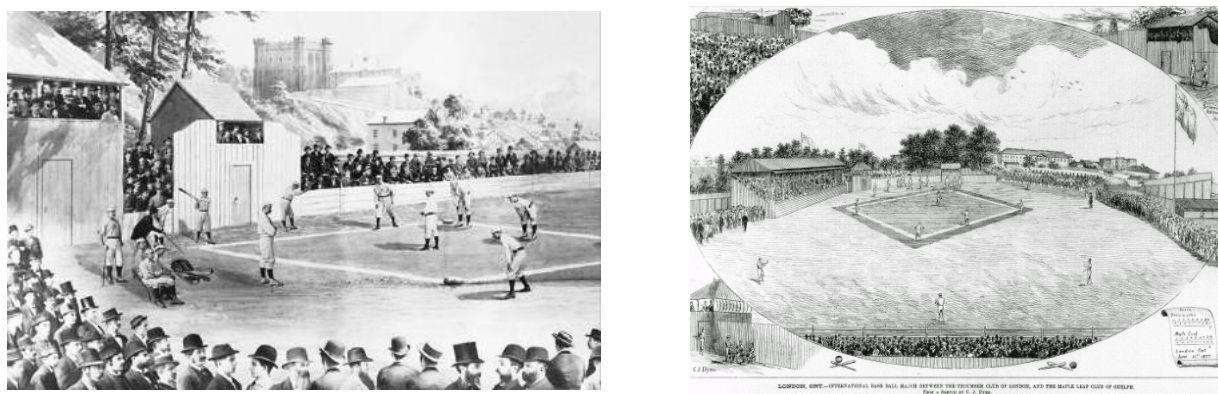


Figure 1: Two late 1870s artist views of Tecumseh Park⁴

For the first five years of its existence (1877-1882), Tecumseh Park was the hub of London’s sporting activity. During that five-year period, not only was it the most active and prestigious venue for baseball, it also hosted the central activities of

two other prominent sporting pursuits and their supporting constituencies, the “bicycle and lacrosse crowds.” London, like much of North America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, embraced the period’s cycling craze. The cycling pastime experienced phenomenal growth in the city and its surrounding areas during much of the 1880s and 1890s; in fact, few recreational sporting activities rivalled cycling in terms of numbers of participants, individual club organization, and investment in facilities. London’s Forest City Bicycle Club headquarters, located in a large three-floor warehouse on Dundas Street, formerly a wholesale dry goods establishment, was the envy of most of the city’s sporting aggregations. Referred to as “elegant and spacious,”⁵ the top floor was fitted out as a Club room, the lower two floors for riding activities.⁶ Part of the Club’s activities focused on track racing, much of which was carried out in Tecumseh Park before large and enthusiastic crowds.

Lacrosse, riding the pinnacle of its success in mustering Canadian sporting attention over that of other “national sport” claimants in the 1880s, 1890s and early twentieth century, also focused squarely on Tecumseh Park for its main competitive attractions. Members of the London Lacrosse Club, meeting on 10 April 1883, reported the *Advertiser*, “crowded into meeting rooms, showing that the national game has taken a strong hold on the lovers of sport in this city.”⁷ Club secretary Wylkie reported that the Management Committee had “. . . secured the entire [exaggerated] control of Tecumseh Park for the coming season . . .”⁸ At a subsequent meeting held some two weeks later, the London Lacrosse Club announced an effort to “put Tecumseh Park in order, and have the stands moved and grounds scraped, so as to commence practice as soon as possible.”⁹ Arranging a spectacular opening of its 1883 competitive season, the Lacrosse Club scheduled a game with the “Brants” of Brantford for May 24th, an affair that drew a reported crowd of about 2,500 to “the Tecumseh grounds.”¹⁰

Meanwhile, as Tecumseh Park played host to bicycle and lacrosse activity, it also accommodated the activities of London’s foremost baseball nines. The city’s 1882 champions, the Mutuels, determined to “retain the laurels won last year” [were hoping] “to commence practice as soon as the state of weather permits” [while declaring an intent] to “secure, if possible, the Tecumseh Park.”¹¹ During the month of May 1883 Tecumseh Park was the center of London’s busy baseball activity. A number of local baseball aggregations featured the play of both young

adherents to the game, for instance on teams such as the Young Athletes and Young Tecumsehs, and, as well, older experienced players on such baseball clubs as the Eurekas, the Alerts, and, of course, London's "diamond pride," the senior Tecumsehs.

What appeared to be a rosy and active athletics life for Tecumseh Park for the season of 1883 was torn asunder by events occurring on the evening and early morning of July 10th/11th. In what the *Advertiser* proclaimed a catastrophe "altogether unknown at this season of the year," an "uninterrupted torrent of rain fell throughout the night, lasting until mid-morning the next day."¹² London West, and with it, Tecumseh Park, were hardest hit; the water was said to have reached the highest point ever known: "The whole of Tecumseh Park, fences, stands, and houses, together with Massie's boat house, all went down the river."¹³ And, it was not solely baseball that suffered the consequences of the disaster. As the *Advertiser* reported: "All the effects of the London Lacrosse Club were swept away by the flood, including sticks, clubs, balls, etc. They were stored on Tecumseh Park, and were carried away with the buildings."¹⁴ Tecumseh Park, for the moment, ceased to function. The remainder of the 1883 outdoor sports season in Tecumseh Park was suspended. London newspapers during that time were replete with reports of elite athletic contests, normally contested in Tecumseh Park, occurring on the grounds of rival teams.

Almost four months following the July 1883 flood, London city officials met on 1 November to decide on tax rates and priority expenditures, of which flood-related damage issues were prominent. The *Advertiser* reported that one subject of discussion was the plight of Tecumseh Park: "The baseball grounds should be looked after. The want of fence along the street renders walking after dark on the sidewalk a very dangerous matter."¹⁵ A week later the London West Council met for further civic allocation purposes. No funds were allotted for Tecumseh Park, only a motion, unanimously passed, "that the Tecumseh Base Ball Club be notified to fence their property on Dundas Street, as it was in a dangerous condition."¹⁶ As winter set in, thought and action towards rehabilitation of Tecumseh Park from the ravages of the great flood of July 1883 were put on hold until the following spring (1884).

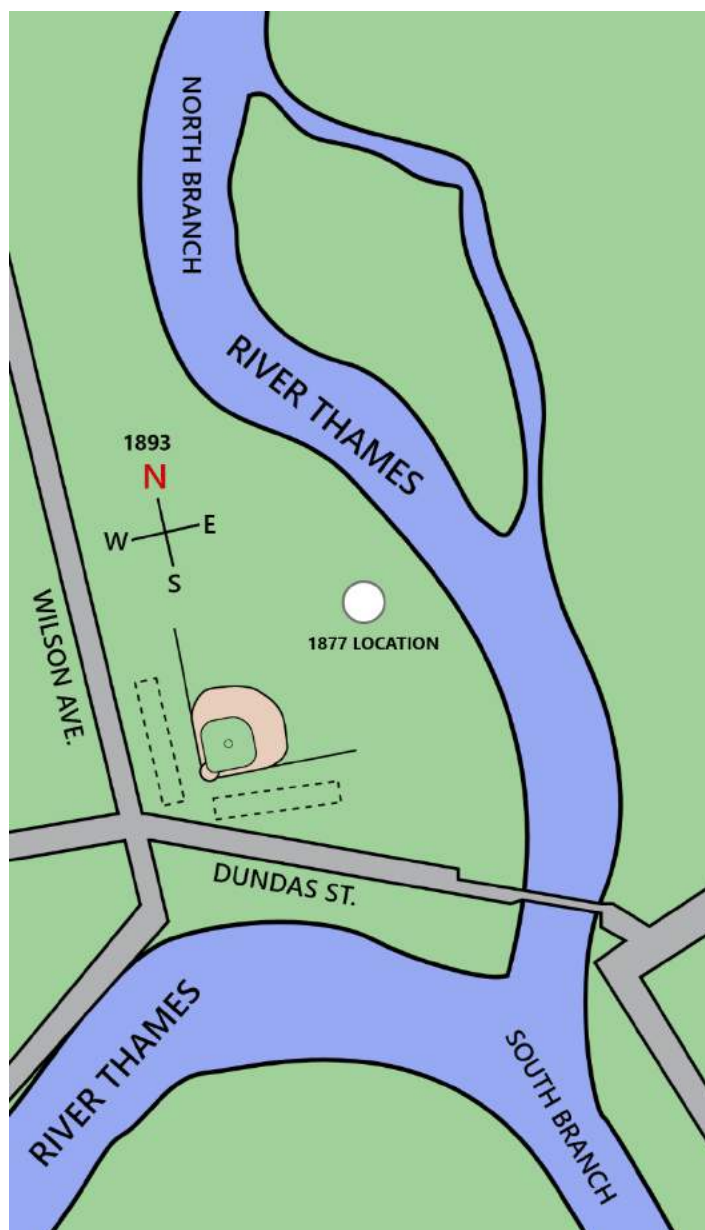


Figure 2: Approximate 1893 location of Tecumseh Park's home plate, infield and grandstands

revelation is true, then the diamond's infield position within the Park property's confines changed from its original northeast location to a southwestern location in 1893. As seen in Figure 2 (above), Dundas Street would have run somewhat parallel to the diamond's right field foul line; Wilson Avenue (at that time, Central Avenue) ran parallel to the left field foul line. Moving home plate away from the consistently menacing overflow of the Thames River might have been the motivation for such action.

A decade following the 1883 flood, London's foremost baseball venue underwent significant change--a geographical alteration in the location of the Park's baseball diamond home plate and infield. In mid-December 1936, as the City rejoiced over the John Labatt family donation of Tecumseh Park to the City of London, the *Free Press* was moved to recall aspects of the Park's history. Accordingly, the following notation appeared: "Originally the home plate was at the eastern section of the park and the players batted towards the west. In 1893 the diamond was rearranged and the home plate was close to Dundas Street, with the teams batting towards the north. Later the home plate was placed within a few feet of where it is now."¹⁷

Further documentation for this change from the Park's original

1877 infield location has yet to surface, but if the *Free Press*

Cometh the Great Bicycle Track with its Ball Diamond

Probably the single most critical development in the Park's diamond sport history evolved not from baseball, but rather from the widely popular late 19th century sport of bicycling. We have previously noted the prominence of cycling affairs in London.¹⁸ In the latter part of May 1895 the *London Advertiser* reported on the opening of the ball season, grumbling: "With decidedly uncomfortable weather, and a somewhat one-sided exhibition of baseball, the season of 1895 was opened at Tecumseh Park Saturday afternoon. Though the temperature was chilly and rain threatened to fall every minute the same old grandstand and the same old bleachers held about the usual number of cranks, who, however, owing to the tameness of the match, had little opportunity to whoop 'er up."¹⁹

And then, scarcely five days later, a startling *Advertiser* announcement: "It is A Go: The Much Talked of Bicycle Track Will be Built at Once."²⁰ An auspicious facility, "one of the best athletic parks in Canada," was projected to be finished in Tecumseh Park by late July,²¹ "... a third of a mile brick-dust and cement track, complete with proper banking on the turns, and a baseball diamond mapped out, the infield of which was to be arranged inside the perimeter of the track itself, together with a grandstand seating 2,500 folks, all at a cost of \$3,000."²²

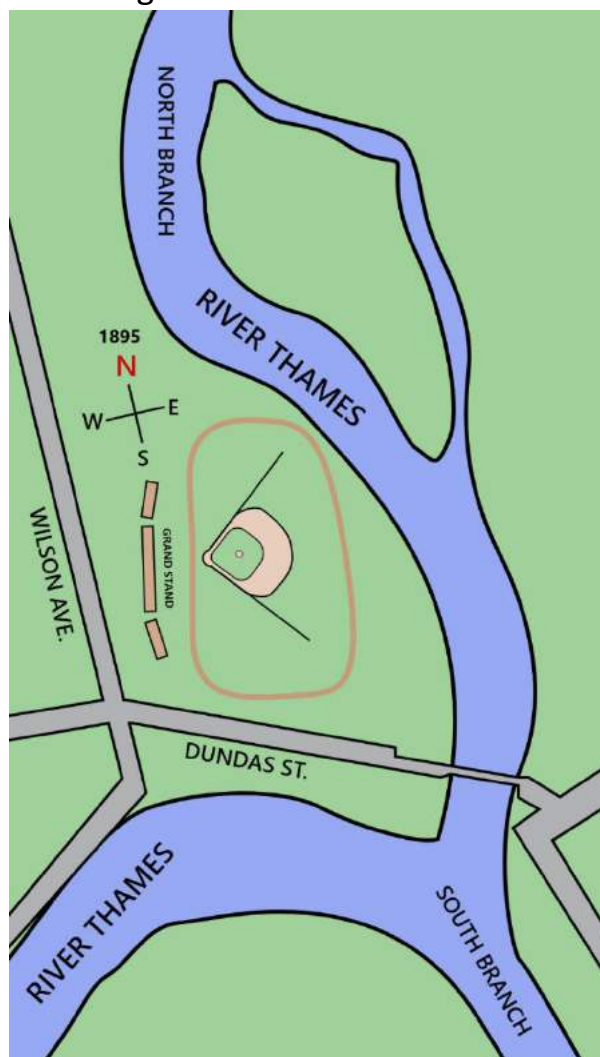


Figure 3: Approximate 1895 relocation of Tecumseh Park's home plate and infield, together with the "a third of a mile" bicycle racing track with its "home stretch" in front of the central spectator grandstand.

There was more! Specific Park enhancements render a graphic picture of the Park's new arrangement.²³ Representatives of the London Bicycle Club, among them W. J. Reid, the owner of Tecumseh Park, were the conceptual architects and exclusive financiers of the entire endeavour. Throughout June and July, well into August, London newspapers, particularly the *Advertiser*, reported the progress of the grand project,²⁴ carried on without the need to curtail the Park's baseball activities. And then, finally, the grand opening of Tecumseh Park's "new look." On Saturday afternoon, 17 August, a procession of townsfolk and dignitaries led by the Musical Society Band formed at Richmond and Dundas Streets and marched to Tecumseh Park, arriving in pouring rain. A crowd of some 800 souls, considerably short of the several thousand expected, braved the weather to attend.²⁵ London mayor J. W. Little opened the formal ceremonies by orating on the prospective value of the cycling development to London youth and the debt owed to the facility's initiators: "The cultivation of these qualities and their application to our regular duties should certainly under ordinary circumstances, lead to success in any calling (applause). We are, therefore, under obligation to those who furnish facilities for the development of young people in this way."²⁶ Then, W. J. Reid spoke to the spectators and explained, "I trust...this is only the start of an era of bicycle riding in the city, and I will gladly do anything in my power to further the sport. We will have in the near future, so Mr. Human has told me, a cricket club laying out their crease here. We already have a baseball diamond, and with a cricket crease and bicycle track we will have as good an athletic grounds as there is in the country."²⁷ Despite the August 17th attendance disappointment, subsequent bicycle race events held at Tecumseh Park's new cycling track generated robust spectator crowds witnessing races for prizes which often were bestowed in the form of rings set with diamonds.²⁸

And so ended yet another chapter in the transformation of Tecumseh Park, one that brought the historic grounds closer to the perspective in which the Park resides in these times. In closing this discussion of the bicycle club's installation of its racing track and subsequent relocation of the Park's baseball diamond to the track's elongated oval infield in 1895, it should be noted that possibly by 1916, cycling activity, along with the celebrated racing track, had disappeared from the Park's scheduled activities and physical landscape, probably the victim of

a rapidly emerging preoccupation of Americans and Canadians alike with a relatively new technological fascination, the soon-to-be ubiquitous automobile.

Transformation: Tecumseh Park to Labatt Park

Sometime prior to 1922, possibly dating to 1916, Tecumseh Park noted a reconfiguration of the Park's expansive grounds with the installation of a new facility to accommodate the play of the Western University Mustang football team. As the 1922 aerial photograph of Tecumseh Park (Figure 4) demonstrates,²⁹ the football facility was laid out across the baseball diamond, directly in front of the spectator grandstand.



Figure 4: Tecumseh Park, 1922, with its football field arranged over the baseball infield.³⁰

By the late 1920s the Western Mustangs had abandoned Tecumseh Park to instead play their contests in the university's newly constructed J. W. Little Stadium, built on the campus proper. By the mid-1920s the football arrangement in Tecumseh Park had disappeared, and for all intents and purposes the Park stood as a facility almost totally focused on London's ever expanding baseball scene.



Figure 5: Tecumseh Park, 1920. Courtesy Western University Archives³¹

The April 1937 Flood

The most devastating disaster in London's now two-century community history was the great flood of April 1937, an event that had repercussions for the city's premier baseball precinct. The disastrous late April flood was preceded by an event occurring scarcely five months previous, the donation of the Park property to the City of London by a recent purchaser, the John Labatt family. Tecumseh Park thus became the John Labatt Memorial Athletics Park.³² In mid-December 1936 the *London Free Press* blared the good news: "City is Given Tecumseh Park, \$10,000: Famous Playground Donated By Labatt Family to Citizens." The Labatt family also gave the City an endowment sum of \$10,000 to

be used for capital improvements to what from that time on became known to most folks as simply, Labatt Park.

The December announcement and local celebration of the Labatt bequeathment had hardly subsided, when, once again, as was annually anticipated, the city began to brace itself for the fallout from melting snow and ice and the onset of heavy spring rainfalls. In early January 1937 early omens of approaching disaster were placed before London newspaper readers: “Nearly Five Inches of Rain in 15 Days,” reported the *Free Press*.³³ And, approaching mid-February, continuing alarm: “Heavy Rains Flood River Flats.”³⁴ And finally, the late April 1937 catastrophe: “. . . the swollen waters of the Thames River overflowed its banks in a wild rampage today . . .”³⁵ The preliminary flood damage cost rested at 3 million dollars; newspaper descriptions underscoring the flood’s consequence detailed a great city-wide tragedy,³⁶ from which Labatt Park was not exempt: “Flood Plays Havoc to Ancient Grandstand . . . John Labatt Memorial Park now completely covered by water . . . grandstand has been cracked and temporary bleachers have been washed away . . .”³⁷



Figure 6: Looking westward “into” Labatt Park from the east bank of the flooded Thames River, April 1937. Though the Park’s central grandstand (barely visible in centre-top of photo) remained in place, the disastrous flood demolished and swept away the two flanking grandstands. For photo source, see Box #129, London Public Room, London Public Library, London, Ontario, Canada.

Unlike the July 1883 flood impact on Tecumseh Park, which nullified any further sports activity until the spring of 1884, the early April 1937 London flood disaster did not have such sustained consequence for the newly christened Labatt Park. On the eve of the flood's occurrence, the *Free Press* reported on an inspection of Labatt Park by Frank Dark, construction superintendent of the P. U. C. (Public Utilities Commission) and William Farquarson, London playgrounds supervisor. The property is "in bad condition. Fences need immediate attention, the roof of the grandstand leaks, fungus is growing on the grandstand seats."³⁸ Together with flood damage itself, pre-flood deterioration conditions added to a restoration urgency towards providing improvements and upgrading of the facility. Ultimately, the Park remained inactive for all activity for a little over a month. During that period alternative arrangements were made for previously scheduled contests. The *Free Press*, for instance, noted that the London Senior baseball team would "play [their] first six games away from home,"³⁹ the first home game to occur on 19 June 1937. From mid-June the Seniors played the remainder of the 1937 season at Labatt Park.

Following the flood, certainly by 1940, as Figure 7 (below) demonstrates, Labatt Park was once again transformed. The two spectator stands that



Figure 7: Labatt Park, 1940.

previously flanked both sides of the central main grandstand (placed there originally to accommodate the home stretch of the bicycle racing track), were destroyed in the 1937 flood. Neither was resurrected in its original place. Instead, extended spectator stands were arranged contiguous to and behind the first base-right field and third base-left field foul lines. Home plate remained in roughly the same position as it had been prior to the flood. As the photograph also demonstrates, a softball diamond was installed on the northern end of Labatt Park's grounds, a facility that particularly related to the explosion of ladies' softball in London and vicinity in the 1940s and 1950s.

Epilogue

Since the location of home plate in the Park remains somewhat controversial, our research on the subject inclines us to argue that the home plate's location and its accompanying infield changed at least four times in its now almost century and a half of history.

Over the years, following the 1937 flood, Labatt Park's baseball diamond remained generally located in its 1895 perspective, that is, with Wilson Avenue located directly west behind home plate, and batsmen hitting eastward. By 1940 the Park was close to its present circumstance. In 1937 the storied London Majors Clubhouse was built.⁴⁰ Enlargements in spectator seating, dugout accommodation for players, and relocation of home plate to a slightly more northerly

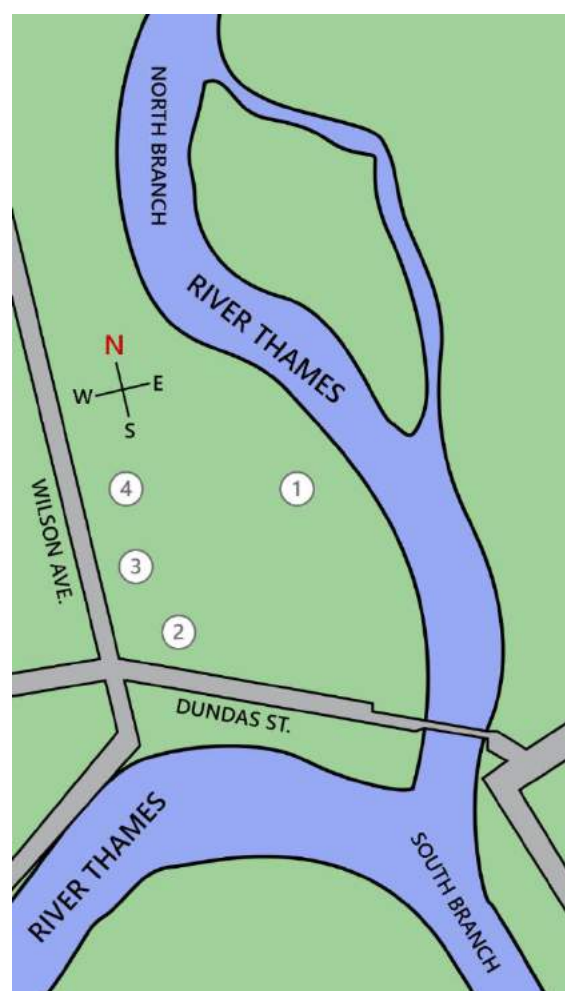


Figure 8: Changes in Tecumseh Park/Labatt Park home plate location: 1=1877, 2=1893, 3=1895, 4=post-1937.

location were effected in the decades of the 1850s, 1860s, and 1870s. It remains ironic that the most significant “change agent” in the arrangement of the Park’s baseball playing field location, the sport of cycling and its spectacular racing track, disappeared completely from the sporting scene, the victim, in part, of the development and infatuation with the automobile.

Further research on Labatt Park needs to be completed in order to understand even more of its modern character. We would like to know, for instance, when the grand bicycle track established in 1895 disappeared from the grounds between 1895 and 1920, leaving the Park, for all practical purposes, the primary home of organized baseball. Finally, if the storied Park is to be guaranteed lasting prominence in the sporting culture of London it must seek national heritage distinction. Canadian national heritage distinction, united with its already established London Municipal and Ontario Provincial Heritage distinctions, would ensure that the Park remain in place despite the contingencies of city growth and reconfiguration.



Figure 9: Labatt Park, 1971



Figure 10: Labatt Park, 1989⁴¹

Endnotes

* Special thanks Devin Lindsay, Stephen Harding, and the entire London Room staff of the London Public Library.

¹ The *London Advertiser*, established by John Cameron in October 1863 was an evening newspaper, in contrast to the morning *London Free Press*. The *Advertiser*, an almost immediate success, proved an able competitor to the *Free Press*, right up to its eventual demise in the fall of 1936. It was born in the midst of the American Civil War, an event that captivated the interest of London citizens, particularly as hundreds upon hundreds of fugitive Southern Negro slaves escaped to Canada, even more particularly, to southwestern Ontario. See Fred Landon, *Western Ontario and the American Frontier* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967—Carleton Edition, original publication 1941), p. 215.

² The *London Free Press*, an extension of the *London Canadian Free Press* (1849-1852), was established in 1856.

³ Admittedly, the position of home plate within the Park grounds did indeed change, it would seem on at least four occasions over time, to its present position here in 2019.

⁴ These are the earliest pictorial renditions of Tecumseh Park after its opening in May 1877. The illustration on the left is a “composite photograph” by Edy Brothers of a sketch from an unknown artist. It depicts an 1878 Tecumseh Park contest between the Tecumseh Club of London and the Stars of Syracuse (N.Y.). See: Library and Archives of Canada, Collections and Fonds – 3261769, Accession Number 1966-094 NPC. See also: <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/CollectionSearch/Pages/record.aspx?app=fonandcol&IdNumber=3261769&new=->

[8586265606769476636](#) . The illustration on the right is a sketch done by C. J. Dyer of a Tecumseh Park contest between the Tecumseh Club of London and the Maple Leafs of Guelph. Dyer's sketch was published in the *Canadian Illustrated News*, Volume XVI, No 2, 14 July 1877, p. 21.

⁵ "Sporting," *London Advertiser*, 11 April 1883.

⁶ For more on this elaborate facility, see *Wheelman* issues of December 1882 (Vol. 1, No. 4) and November 1883 (Vol. 1, No. 3).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid. Brackets ours.

⁹ "Sporting," *London Advertiser*, 28 April 1883.

¹⁰ "Sporting," *London Advertiser*, 25 May 1883.

¹¹ "Sporting," *London Advertiser*, 6 April 1883. Brackets ours.

¹² "The Latest," *London Advertiser*, 11 July 1883 (Evening Edition). A prolonged sub-headline told the tale: "Terrible Destruction by Water – London West and Low Points of the City Submerged – Immense Loss of Life Feared – Moving Tales of the Flood – The Damage to Property Incalculable."

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ "Sporting," *London Advertiser*, 18 July 1883.

¹⁵ "London West," *London Advertiser*, 2 November 1883.

¹⁶ "London West," *London Advertiser*, 7 November 1883.

¹⁷ "City is Given Tecumseh Park, \$10,000" *London Free Press*, 15 December 1936.

¹⁸ We originally became interested in the orientation of a bicycle track in Tecumseh Park introduced in 1895 due to a reference made to us by Stephen Harding, for which we are grateful. Furthermore, there is a notation regarding the bicycle track in Daniel Brock's *Fragments from the Forks: London, Ontario's Legacy* (London, Ontario: London and Middlesex Historical Society, 2011), p. 147.

¹⁹ "The Green Diamond," *London Advertiser*, 20 May 1895.

²⁰ "It is A Go," *London Advertiser*, 25 May 1895.

²¹ Discussions on building a bicycle racing track occurred as early as 1894, as noted in the *Canadian Wheelman Magazine*. For example: "The Meteor club has a membership now of about 70, and we are receiving applications for every meeting. We are growing fast, and, 'to put a flea in your readers' ears,' it is our intention to make a strong bid for the C.W.A. meeting of 1895. By that time we expect to have one of the best athletic grounds in the Dominion, including an up-to-date bicycle track. We are in the swim to stay." "London Meteors," *The Canadian Wheelman*, 6 August 1894.

²² "It's a Go," *London Advertiser*, 25 May 1895.

²³ "Work Begun," *London Advertiser*, 27 May 1895: "... The track has been staked out. The home stretch is to be west of the baseball diamond and 30 feet wide. The course will gradually narrow, until on the east side, or near the breakwater, it will only measure 16 feet ..."

²⁴ See, for instance, daily copies of the *London Advertiser* from 25 May to 16 August 1895.

²⁵ See "Wheelmen Happy," *London Advertiser* 19 August 1895 for a "blow by blow" description of the entire grand opening.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ "The Diamond Meet," *The London Advertiser*, 29 August 1895.

²⁹ As far as can be determined, this 1922 aerial photograph was among the first of its genre taken in London. The age of flight commencing in the early part of the 20th century exploded an already established but severely limited endeavour—photography from balloon flights.

³⁰ For this unique aerial photograph, see https://www.lib.uwo.ca/madgic/google_index_1922.html.

³¹ Photograph is digitized by Western University Library and Archives, London, Ontario: See: <http://minweb.lib.uwo.minisisinc.com/scripts/mwimain.dll/337/1/57/59465?RECORD&DATABASE=PUBDESCRIPTION>.

³² "City is Given Tecumseh Park, \$10,000: Famous Playground Donated by Labatt Family to Citizens," *London Free Press*, 15 December 1936.

³³ *London Free Press*, 14 January 1937: "Last night streets ran deep with water and small floods were reported at one or two city parks."

³⁴ *London Free Press*, 9 February 1937: "Old Man River went on a rampage in London following heavy rains . . ."

³⁵ *London Free Press*, 26 April 1937: "Scores of homes were menaced, streets were submerged, at least four district bridges were closed to traffic . . ."

³⁶ *London Free press*, 27 April 1937: "... mounting menace of disease, one man drowned, 6,000 without homes, South London completely isolated to motor traffic."

³⁷ "Labatt Park Is a Young Lake," *London Free Press*, 28 April 1937.

³⁸ "Labatt Park in Bad Condition," *London Free Press*, 6 April 1937.

³⁹ Howard Broughton, "On The Sport Trail With Howard Broughton," *The London Free Press*, 14 May 1937.

⁴⁰ In the 1960s and 1970s the Majors Clubhouse was remodeled yet again.

⁴¹ Note: A comparison between the Labatt Park aerial photograph scenes in Figures 9 (1971) and 10 (1989) reveals some important developments in the transformation of the Park towards what exists today (2019). One of the most important developments between 1971 and 1989 was the extension of Queen's Avenue with its own bridge westward over the Thames River to intersect with Dundas Street running parallel to it, thus forming a junction from which Riverside Drive extends through London West. The Queen's Avenue extension necessitated removal of the small cluster of houses in the deep right field corner, which in turn modified the dimensions of the right field portion of the playing field. By 1989, too, the houses bordering Labatt Park on the east side of Wilson Ave. had been removed, greatly enlarging the Park's main entry precinct. Other developments between 1971 and 1989 were the construction of extended bleachers along both foul lines, a warning track around the perimeter of the outfield, and much landscaping beautification.

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