

THE COMING OF THE DUNES NATIONAL LAKESHORE, 1958 - 1966

DUNE ACRES HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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It was not easy being a lakeshore community in the decades after World War II. The sixties and the seventies were not easy anywhere, of course, as America experienced the Civil Rights movement, the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the Vietnam War, and the Watergate affair. These events charged the atmosphere here as elsewhere. Young residents of Dune Acres and their parents faced the Draft or its alternatives, residents were shocked by a racially inspired murder in a tavern just down the road on Highway 12, were shaken when students at Valparaiso University burned a building on campus after Kent State. All of this must be remembered as part of the tense and turbulent *milieu* in which local crises arose and were being addressed.

Dune Acres was faced with a series of pressures from 1950 to 1980 which ranged from the merely bothersome to those that threatened the existence of the town. Some were shared with other lakefront communities, Ogden Dunes and Beverly Shores; others were uniquely ours. The great issue of these decades was, of course, the future of the southern shore of Lake Michigan: was it to be completely industrialized, or could the Dunes be preserved as a natural area?

The struggle began with a proposal in 1949 to construct a port at Burns Ditch that could accommodate ocean going vessels. The purpose of the port was to bring more industry to the Indiana lakeshore, specifically steel mills (which needed cheap transportation by water). Proponents of the port anticipated that dunes and wetlands along the shore would be cleared to make way for factories and mills. In opposition to the port, there emerged the counterforce of "Save the Dunes", a movement whose purpose was to preserve the land along Lake Michigan in its natural state.

The Save the Dunes Council was formed on June 20, 1952, by 25 women, most of them from Ogden Dunes and Dune Acres. (The first Treasurer was Gertrude Conklin of Dune Acres, a Ph.D. in medieval history and former faculty member of the University of Chicago.) The Council began with a limited purpose: the education of the public as to the importance of the Dunes. In 1953, however, it made a strategic move -- the area south of Dune Acres (now known as Cowles Bog) came up for tax sale, and the Council hurriedly raised the money and bought the land. But events quickly moved beyond the Council's otherwise deliberate pace. The Indiana legislature and governors were taking an active interest in the Port; rumors were thick that Bethlehem Steel Corporation was buying up choice dune lands. In fact, the decade of the '50's was full of rumors and alarms. Stories were rife of blind trusts being used to acquire dunelands, the Murchesons (a wealthy, well-known Texas family) were said to be involved, Midwest Steel was reported to be planning a mill on its property near Ogden Dunes, the steel companies were thought to be hand in glove with the State of Indiana in pushing the Port. If you lived in Dune Acres then, unsettling rumors came thick and fast. And they turned out to be true. Bethlehem announced in 1956 that it had, partly through a blind trust, acquired over 9,000 acres between Ogden Dunes and Dune Acres. Midwest Steel revealed plans for a mill near Ogden Dunes, and NIPSCO began construction of two coal burning generators on its Bailly site next to Dune Acres. Both steel companies sold land to the State of Indiana for the port.

The Lake Michigan shore was going very fast to the industrialists. Local, regional and state politicians favored the development as did businessmen in Chesterton, Porter, and other local communities. (The mayors of Gary, Hammond and East Chicago opposed the Burns Ditch site; they wanted one built in the East Chicago area.) The Indiana delegation in Congress and the governors and legislature of Indiana were solidly behind the port. Especially potent was Charlie Halleck, leader of the House Republicans, whose district included Porter County and thus the central dunes.

As the shoreline seemed to disappear before their eyes, the Save the Dunes Council turned from education to political activity. Their new goal was to create a National Park in the Dunes. They found a sponsor in Senator Paul Douglas, Democrat of Illinois, who before the War had owned a house in Dune Acres, (at 12 Ridge Drive, now the Kuehn residence) and who knew and loved the Dunes. In 1958, he introduced his first bill to establish an Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore..

It was ironic that the spokesman for the Dunes should come from Illinois, not Indiana. It was, moreover, contrary to established custom and political sense for an outsider to propose a park against the wishes of home state senators and the local congressman of the area in which it was to be located. But it was a fitting expression of the reality of the situation: the lakeshore communities had always been more strongly tied to Chicago than to Downstate Indiana; the Indiana beaches had been intensively used by Chicagoans; the existing State Park was often considered by Hoosiers as a valuable source of revenue for the "real " Indiana parks downstate rather than used or valued for itself. The Douglas proposal was considered another effort by outsiders to block the development of Indiana resources. Governor Welsh of Indiana, a Democrat, denounced the Douglas bill at a news conference as an "out-of-state" conspiracy.

So intense was the opposition that passage of a National Lakeshore Bill was long in doubt. From 1958 to 1966, Senator Douglas pushed the project hard, but without success in the face of opposition of most of the Indiana delegates in Congress, both Democratic and Republican. Finally, in the fall of 1966, when Douglas was running for re-election, President Johnson, wanting Douglas returned to the Senate, put powerful pressure behind the latest Dunes bill and it passed into law. One month later, Douglas lost his seat in the Senate to the young Charles Percy.

The bill as passed differed radically from earlier versions. Douglas had hoped for a park built around the finest of the dunes, the then unspoiled area between Ogden Dunes and Dune Acres. But Bethlehem Steel had already bought most of that land, and in 1961, began leveling the dunes (selling the sand to Northwestern University for a landfill) and revealed the full extent of the massive plant it would build. The Burns Ditch Port was also approved and took land that Douglas had hoped to include. The Park as it exists today contains almost no area that was in the original Douglas bill.

Where did Dune Acres fit into all of this? That story begins in 1961 when Senator Douglas introduced his most ambitious bill with the central dunes between Ogden Dunes and Dune Acres as its core. This bill included most of Dune Acres in the park. It must be remembered that the town limits of Dune Acres include all the land to the South Shore tracks and to the boundary with NIPSCO. Much of the undeveloped area was zoned for commercial or industrial use. That area was included in the park, but so was the developed land in the West End, including 13 residences and two miles of roads. Thus, only the east end of town, the First Subdivision (extending to Oak and Linden Lanes) would have remained out of the park.

Dune Acres residents, most of whom had supported the park concept, were now put to the test. Were they still for this park if Dune Acres were so reduced in size as to be no longer a viable community? Emotions ran high, and conflicts were deep as the issue was discussed in 1961 and 1962. A few committed conservationists favored the bill, believing that such sacrifices had to be made to get the park. The great majority of residents were against the inclusion of Dune Acres in the park, but differed as to the exact stance the Town should take. The Town Board (Philipp Brockington, President, Robert Bonin, Dwight Sanders) opposed the bill in its entirety. Brockington appeared before a Senate Subcommittee on February 17, 1962, and speaking officially for the Town, opposed the establishment of a national lakeshore. Immediately, residents were aroused either in support of or opposition to the Board's action. Led by Tom Washburn, a group circulated a petition which was signed by 107 residents and property owners, repudiating the Board's action and supporting the Park itself if Dune Acres were omitted from it. Conflicting statements, petitions, and letters flooded Washington from residents, but in the end it didn't matter. The bill was not passed.

The year 1963 was one of vain efforts and sometimes Utopian dreams. The main effort of the Save the Dunes Council and Senator Douglas was to solve the Port problem by moving its location from Burns Ditch to

the East Chicago area. The effort was in vain. More imaginative and even more hopeless, was a proposal that Bethlehem build its plant south of U. S. 12, constructing a canal to connect the inland site with Lake Michigan, thus keeping the central dunes intact. As we know, it did not happen. But sentiment in Dune Acres had crystallized. Residents were still divided over the larger question of whether or not there should be a Park, but they were convinced that Dune Acres could not survive if confined to the current east end. For this reason, 90 per cent of the residents signed a statement in summer, 1963, opposing the taking of land within the Town's boundaries for a national park. This move was initiated by H. B. Snyder, publisher of the Gary Post-Tribune early resident and developer in Dune Acres and for decades the leading figure in town affairs. He and the Post-Tribune were a consistently powerful voice for the Port and against the Park

In 1964, Senator Douglas produced a new bill which omitted developed areas of Dune Acres, and limited use of the beach (which was still in). The Park boundaries in relation to Dune Acres were pretty much what they are today.

That January a new Town Board took office (James Savage, president, Norman Burns, Ed Carlson) and at once set up a strong committee of residents to recommend what policy the Town should adopt toward the Park. The committee was chaired by Luther Swygert, Judge of the U. S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Chicago; other members were Brevard Carihfield, secretary of the State Governor's Association, Ray Daly, president of the Indiana National Bank in Gary, Richard Smith, owner of Smith Chevrolet in Hammond and recent past-president of the Hammond Chamber of Commerce, and Ray Thomas, a well-established lawyer in Gary with statewide political connections. Their long and thorough report itemized the industrial developments -- both present and anticipated -- some possibly within the town limits of Dune Acres. For example the woodland north of the South Shore parking lot on Mineral Springs Road was zoned for industry and a likely industrial site. Another section dealt realistically with the impact even the modified 1964 Bill would have on the Town. The report concluded with a paragraph which summed up the not very attractive but very real situation the Town faced:

"The Town of Dune Acres inevitably faces change. Our town cannot 'Stay As It Is', no matter how much we wish this were possible. The dilemma facing us is obvious. Industrial development, economic expansion, and population-growth will create increasing problems for our Town. Establishment of a National Lakeshore Park will also increase our problems. Our task is to determine and recommend an approach which will minimize our problems and maximize our chances of preserving Dune Acres in its present state. After studying all information available, your committee is of the unanimous opinion that a modified National Lakeshore Bill would offer us the best alternative."

With this report to build on, members of the Town Board moved forward in a manner that carried most residents with them. The Board adopted a statement supporting the Park (with certain clarifications of language and intent), circulated it in town and asked supporters to sign a record of their agreement to it. A substantial majority of the community did so. When Savage testified before the Senate Subcommittee in February, 25 residents traveled to Washington to add their support

Now Dune Acres residents threw themselves earnestly into the effort to get the Bill passed. The period from early 1964 until a Park bill finally became law in October, 1966, was one of intense and enthusiastic political activity in Dune Acres. A group of resident of wide public experience and well-established political contacts became the very active leaders. There is space to mention only a few. Judge Swygert used his widespread political contacts to get the Town's position before members of Congress. Dick Smith had for some time left day to day management of Smith Motors to others and devoted his time to civic affairs in Hammond. Now he pitched into saving the Dunes, making it almost a major occupation. Hunton Rogers, Norman Burns, Leonard Conklin, Farwell Smith were others. Farwell, from Chicago was a weekend resident, and like many weekenders he had an acquaintanceship outside of Indiana which proved useful. Other resident especially Ed and Ruth Osann and Lois Howes, were working for the bill as members of the Save the Dunes

Council. Still others, for example several employees of Inland Steel, supported the Park, but necessarily kept a low profile through loyalty to their employer.

Residents were urged to ask friends outside of Town to write their Congressman ("use your Christmas card lists"). Delegations went to Washington by air and overnight sleeper to canvass senators and representatives. When the March, 1964, hearings were held, the New York Central Railroad announced that sleeper accommodations were sold out. A large and enthusiastic group of Dune Acres ladies descended on Congressmen in summer, 1966, and had a great time while doing their civic duty.

In these final stages, proponents of Park and Port reached a compromise, agreeing to provisions for both. But the battle was not over. In 1966, the key effort was to include what is now the West Beach area in the Park. This land was owned by Inland Steel. Inland took the view that since both National Steel and Bethlehem had plants on Lake Michigan, they should be allowed to use their land for a mill. But so much land had been lost already for the Park that supporters felt it vital to include the West Beach. A crescendo of letter writing, trips to Washington, behind the scenes politicking was reached in the summer of 1966 over the West Beach issue. An issue for Dune Acres and Ogden Dunes was also (although much less stressed) the extent to which their beaches, which were included in the Park, were to be available to the public. The resolution reached was that non-residents would have 'walk-along' privileges, but could not swim or picnic. This was supported by Dune Acres, but not by Ogden Dunes. In the end, the West Beach was included and the Park was authorized by the Senate. But in the House, it was hung up by the opposition of our Congressman, Charlie Halleck, and by a lack of enthusiasm among some Democrats. Passage came when Lyndon Johnson leaned on Congress in the way he did so well. According to a Chicago Daily News article of October 17, 1966, entitled, "How Park Plan Passed the House," President Johnson called Speaker John McCormack and said, "John, Paul Douglas wants this bill. And Paul Douglas needs this bill. I want you to see that he gets it." Speaker McCormack out-manuevered Republican Minority Leader Charlie Halleck and brought the bill to a vote at the optimal moment. It passed easily, 204 - 141.

Very quickly Dune Acres had a new neighbor. We were surrounded by, protected by, and at times seriously alarmed by the new National Lakeshore. But the story of that subsequent history is a tale for another occasion.

Although President Johnson gave the final push that led to adoption of the Park Bill, that would not have been possible without the long and faithful efforts of Senator Douglas and the Save the Dunes Council. Within that broader context, the residents of Dune Acres played a part. The focus of this paper is inevitably on Dune Acres' involvement and thus necessarily pays little attention to the Save the Dunes movement. Many residents were members of the Council, and some were leaders of it. Within Dune Acres, it should be noted, finally, and once again, how involved the residents were. The Town Board took official positions and testified before Congress. The Town Board did not become involved, however, in direct political action. In typical Dune Acres fashion, Dune Acres residents when faced with a crisis organized a voluntary response to it. Leaders emerged and citizens enlisted their aid and support for continuing, committed, and (if we may say so) sophisticated political action.

So that is how we got the Park.

Dune Acres Historical Commission
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(Based on letters and newspaper clippings in Dune Acres Archives and recollections of residents. Special thanks to Mrs. Richard Smith and Mrs. James Halley, who read and commented on a draft copy).