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## COUNTY PARKS.

BY T. H. MACBRIDE.

The title of this paper would seem to require little definition. By county parks are meant simply open grounds available for public use in rural districts, as are city parks in towns. There is nothing new in the idea; it is simply an effort to call back into public favor the once familiar public "common." This does not, however, refer simply to public land such as government land, to be claimed and plundered by the first comer, nor, indeed, to land to be used by the public indiscriminately at all, but to land devoted to public enjoyment, purely to the public happiness, a holiday ground for country- and city-folk alike.

The general features which should characterize such public play-ground as is here discussed will also quickly suggest themselves to any one who chooses at all to consider the matter. In the first place the county park should be wooded, that it may afford suitable shade and shelter for those who frequent it; it should be well watered to meet other patent needs; it should be romantic, in order by its attractiveness to be as far as possible efficient. Above all it must be under wise control, be at all times suitably warded and kept, that its utility be transmitted from generation to generation. All this is plain enough and will be disputed by nobody. It is my purpose here to show that such parks are needed, that they are needed now, that they should have the highest scientific value, and that in Iowa they are everywhere practicable.

The necessity for such parks in Iowa seems to me to be threefold:

*First.*—As directly affecting public health and happiness.

*Second.*—For proper education.

*Third.*—To preserve to other times and men something of primeval nature.

Let us consider these points briefly in the order named

All of us in one way or another know something of the monotonous grind which makes up the life-long experience of by far the larger number of our fellow men. On the farm, in the shop, in the mine, day after day, one unceasing round of toil, into which the idea of pleasure or freshness never enters. How many thousands of our fellow men, tens of thousands of our women see nothing but the revolving steps of labor's treadmill, day in, day out, winter and summer, year after year, for the whole span of mortal life. This is especially so here, in these western states, where the highest ideal is industry, the highest accomplishment, speed. Our rural population is wearing itself out in an effort to wear out "labor-saving machinery." If you do not believe it take a journey across the country, anywhere through Iowa, and see how our people are actually living. They know no law but labor; their only recreation is their toil. Now, it is needless to say how abnormal all this is. We are as a people entrapped in our machines, and are by them ground to powder. The effect of it is apparent already in the public health, and will be the most startling factor in the tables studied by the man of science in the generations following. Not to paint too darkly the picture, attention may be called to the fact that rural suicides are not uncommon, and that the wives of farmers are a conspicuous element in the population of some of our public institutions. There must be something done to remedy all this, to preserve for our people their physical and mental health, and to this end, as all experience shows, there is nothing so good as direct contact with nature, the contemplation of her processes, the enjoyment of her peaceful splendor. If in every county, or even in every township, there were public grounds to which our people might resort in numbers during all the summer season, a great step would be taken, as it seems to me, for the perpetuation, not to say restoration, of the public health. We are proud to call ourselves the children of "hardy pioneers," but much of the hardiness of those pioneers was due to the fact that they spent much of their time, women, children and all, out of doors. All the land was a vast park, in which that first generation roamed and reveled. They breathed the air of the forest, they drank the water of springs, they ate the fruit of the hillsides while plum thickets were their orchards, and all accounts go to show that hardier, healthier or happier people never lived. Such conditions can never come again, but we may yet, by public grounds for common enjoyment, realize somewhat of the old advantage.

Again, such parks as are here discussed are an educational necessity. Our people as a whole suffer almost as much on the esthetic side of life as on that which is more strictly sanitary. How few of our land-owners, for instance, have any idea of groves or lawns as desirable features of their holdings. If in any community a farm occurs on which a few acres are given over to beauty the fact is a matter for comment for miles in either direction. A county park well-kept and cared for would be a perpetual object lesson to the whole community, would show how the rocky knoll or deep ravine on one's own eighty-acre farm, might be made attractive, until presently, instead of the angular maple groves with which our esthetic sense now vainly seeks appeasement, we should have a country rich in groves conformable to nature's rules of landscape gardening if not to nature's planting.

I am aware that at the first the right appreciation of a public park might be meagre. The first instinct might be to use the park as a convenient source whence to draw one's winter firewood, or as a free cow-pasture for the adjoining farmer, but such abuse would soon be rectified when the better idea of public ownership came to be understood. This leads also to the remark that such parks in Iowa are to-day absolutely needed to teach our people the first lessons in forestry; to advise them how and when to cut timber; the economic value of different kinds of trees and the value of woodland as such; the kind of soil which should be left to trees and such as may be profitably given over to tillage. We are soon as a people to be sent all to school in matters of forestry and arboriculture; sent to learn the value of the forest in the dear school of experience where we are to be taught the arithmetic of cost.

In the third place county parks would tend to preserve to those who come after us something of the primitive beauty of this part of the world, as such beauty stood revealed in its original flora. I esteem this from the standpoint of science, and, indeed, from the standpoint of intellectual progress, a matter of extreme importance. Who can estimate the intellectual stimulus the world receives by the effort made to appreciate and understand the varied wealth of nature's living forms? In this direction who can estimate how great has been our own advantage as occupants of this new world? But such is the aggressive energy of our people, such their ambition to use profitably every foot of virgin soil that, unless somewhere

public reserves be constituted, our so-called civilization will soon have obliterated forever our natural wealth and left us to the investigation of introduced species only, and these but few in number. It is a fact lamented, grievously lamented by all intelligent men, that in all the older portions of the country species of plants once common, to say nothing of animals, are now extinct. County parks, if organized soon, would enable us to preserve many of these in the localities where originally found.

The objection to all this is that such parks as here broached are impracticable. Such objection can lie in two directions only: (1) The lack of suitable sites, and (2) the lack of suitable control. As to the first, it may be said that in a great number of our counties, especially eastward, such sites exist and have, in many cases, been long used and, I am sorry to say, abused by our people:

- “The Caves,” in Jackson county;
- “The Backbone,” in Delaware county;
- “Wild Cat Den,” in Muscatine county;
- “Gray’s Ford,” in Cedar county;
- “Pinney’s Spring,” in Allamakee county.

“The Palisades” in Cedar and Johnson counties, may be cited as illustrations both of the fact that sites exist and that people need and appreciate them. The “Backbone,” in Delaware, is ideal. Here are cliffs and rocks, woods, rivers and bountiful springs and, what is rare in Iowa, clusters of native pine. Hundreds of people visit the locality every year, and hundreds more would do so were the roads leading to the park in more passable condition, and especially were the grounds a park properly managed and controlled instead of, as now, a cow pasture, so stocked as to jeopardize everything green it contains. The “Den” in Muscatine county might be referred to in the same way. I believe it is not yet too late to find in possibly three-fourths of our Iowa counties, suitable sites, grounds, for the purpose contemplated in this argument.

The second count in the way of objection is a real difficulty whose gravity I do not for a moment attempt to minimize. How to secure, own and care for several hundred, or for that matter, several thousand acres of land to be used by all the people is a problem, especially under our form of government. Were we in the old world we should find no difficulty. Such localities are owned by the king or his equivalent and are

cared for and guarded with the same assiduity as any other private property. Nevertheless the people have free use of the most splendid parks and beautiful woods in the world. The same thing can be true of the United States, of Iowa, hopeless as the task may now seem. In the eastern states a movement to this end is even now discernible.

What Mr. Vanderbilt is doing in North Carolina, at Biltmore, will doubtless be done presently in all our mountainous and forested states. This is another opportunity for our millionaires, and forest foundations properly established will prove for future generations rich in benediction as any university endowment left in the name of whatsoever state or sect. In Massachusetts five years since a movement was inaugurated for the accomplishment of similar purposes in New England. A board of trustees, by legislature authorized to act, becomes the legatee of suitable property donated for public use, becomes the curators of such grounds and the custodians of funds bequeathed for the care of such lands or for their purchase. The results in Massachusetts of just a simple effort have in five years proved most gratifying to the projectors, as to every lover of his native land. Thousands of acres have already been rescued from spoliation and subjected to intelligent management, such as will eventually result in the attainment of all the beneficent ends for which public parks exist. In Iowa nothing is done; nothing will be done until somebody or some association of our citizens makes a beginning. That the effort will one day be made there is no doubt. Whether it shall be made in time to save that which nature in this direction has already committed to our hands is a question. Is not the problem worthy the consideration of the Iowa citizen and legislator, and does it not open to us a field where by practical activity we may again show before the world our practical sense and wisdom?