

A private organization joins hands with the City of New York to breath new life into Manhattan's green jewel.

Central Park...One of a Kind

by Ron Hall, assistant editor

Park maintenance problems! How about 14 million visitors a year? Or Miss Piggy doing \$1,700 damage to the plant life during the filming of her celebrated Manhattan movie a while back?

Central Park has problems that are either uniquely large, or just unique.

Solutions to these problems are equally unusual, including the unlikely marriage and cooperation of a public and a private agency. The public NY Parks Department and the private four-year-old Central Park Conservancy have joined forces in the restoration of New York's 840-acre sanctuary. Central Park is being returned to what the park's improbable creator Fredrick Law Olmsted (he had tried his hand at farming and publishing, both unsuccessfully, prior to gaining fame) envisioned some 127 years ago in his now-famous "Greenward" plan which resulted in the first public park in the country.

Olmsted wrote that he felt New Yorkers, even then with the city just 370,000 strong, needed "a sense of enlarged freedom," a place "to recreate the mind from urban oppression through the eye."

A place apart and away from the hustle of the city. That's what Olmsted sought; that's what he accomplished.

That's what was almost lost.

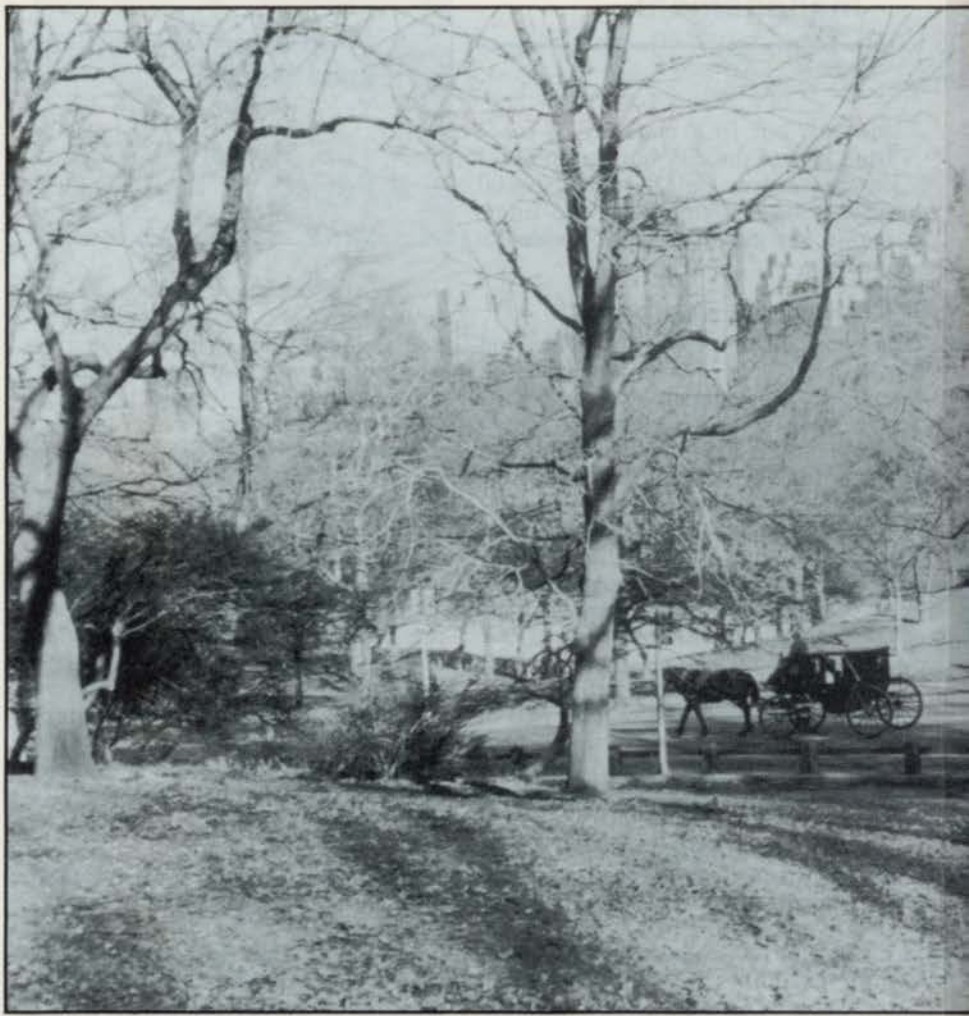
Stricter management

It's coming together nicely now, thanks to a rejuvenated NY Parks Department, the Conservancy (which convinced prestigious foundations to support the Park like other NY treasures) and young minds like Director of Horticulture Frank Serpe and his deputy John Hart, who this frigid winter day are mulling the liberties Miss Piggy (more accurately, her film crew) took with Central Park's turf and shrubs.

"We're the ones that need the say over something like that," Serpe snaps as he eases the blue van up a snow-covered path in the Park. "It's up to us to say what we're going to allow to be done in the Park. And how it's going to be done."

Serpe's stand reflects a tough new

management and maintenance philosophy in Central Park, based in part on economics. In four years the Conservancy has pumped more than \$6 million in private funds to help the Park recapture its 19th century charm. In 1984 the City spent \$6.6 million, the Conservancy added \$1.2 mil



The unmistakable skyline of Manhattan's green jewel.

lion for capital construction work.

That means stricter management of the park's resources. Surveys show that's what New Yorkers want.

To one survey, 80 percent of those polled indicate they come to the Park "for passive recreation." Although it is used by thousands of joggers and

bicyclists daily, and contains 26 baseball diamonds, 30 tennis courts, and 23 playgrounds, much of its restoration is aimed at trees, shrubs, and turf.

New Yorkers care

New Yorkers do care for the green life in the Park as evidenced by grants—

skating rinks, rustic shelters; name it and chances are it's getting fixed.

But, Serpe's speciality is plantlife and his goal is lofty, if admittedly a bit unrealistic.

"When people walk in off the streets I want to give them the feeling that they're in the Adirondacks. Hey, I know it can't be the Adirondacks but we can give them that feeling," he says. "I'm not interested in making it a botanical garden but we want to make it as naturalistic as possible, a place where people can come and enjoy all the wildlife."

Trees catalogued

New techniques aid Serpe and other park workers. Computers are used as management tools with a complete inventory of every tree in the park over 6 inches—its condition, location, size, and type—accessible at a finger tip. There are 24,000 trees in the Park, including 2,000 American elms, and use of the computer and a regulated visual inspection routine have reduced tree mortality significantly. Other cities, including Washington D.C. are using Central Park's system as a model.

Recent surveys have also catalogued animal and bird populations, but Central Park holds surprises even for the experts.

"I saw a parrot. I saw a parrot I tell ya," Serpe, a self-confessed "bird nut" says to skeptical Hart. Down goes the coffee, out the van door goes Serpe, up over a fence to the base of a naked 30-ft. black cherry tree. There it is, bright green, about the size of a 16-oz Pepsi bottle.

"Still looking for our first leopard though," Hart tosses off nonchalantly as Serpe attempts to whistle the curious parrot to his waiting arm.

Not quite an Oscar Madison-Felix Unger combination, but close enough.

Serpe is a New Yorker, a "West Chesterite," he corrects. He's been working with plants since he was a toddler (his dad's an arborist). The intense, slender Serpe, a University of Connecticut graduate, limits himself to one cup of coffee daily. ("I promised my wife") and usually swallows his lunch by mid-morning ("he's too nervous to wait," a co-worker explains).

Bewhiskered Hart, a well-travelled Kansas native who now serves



Frank Serpe and John Hart—committed to keeping Central Park "naturalistic."

like the \$1 million provided by the late John Lennon's wife, Yoko Ono, for the creation of a small wooded preserve called "Strawberry Fields"—and thousands of hours of volunteer labor,

Central Park's rebirth is sparked by the privately funded Central Park Conservancy

over 4,000 in 1984 alone.

As Serpe and sidekick John Hart coast along the Park's meandering trails in the blue van evidences of restoration are everywhere. Archways,



as deputy director of horticulture, took a circuitous route to the Big Apple, including a stint as grounds management supervisor at a South Dakota campus, five years in sunny Sarasota, and some work on a private estate in New England. Hart, the holder of a Masters degree from Michigan, is a day-at-a-time kind of guy.

They're a big part of the story. But, the rebirth of Central Park is molded

“What we lost in this park was not the trees but the understory”

—Serpe

by fascinating personalities, people like silver-haired whirlwind Lynden Miller. The Conservatory Garden, a stylized English border garden in the Park's northeast corner (right across from Harlem) is her baby. Few babies receive such attention. This garden is budgeted about \$50,000 annually.

The fashionably attractive Miller, with a park employee scrambling to keep pace behind a wheelbarrow of mulch, buzzes to clumps of sagging plantlife (it's 20 degrees and blowing like crazy), all the while keeping up a furiously animated conversation with Serpe.

“She's really something,” Hart says almost in awe.

So is the Conservatory Garden. Even in winter it's a showcase of Miller's efforts, and those of the New York committee of the Garden Club of America which began its rescue several years ago.

In the spring it's ablaze with color, first crocus, then 20,000 hybrid tulips. Summer brings the planting of pink and white geraniums and fall features the spectacle of 20,000 Korean mums. Mix in some annuals such as blue salvia, snapdragon, and cleome. Conservatory Garden is just one of Central Park's recent success stories.

Another is an area called Long Point, a finger of land sticking into a small lake popular with the rowboat set. Park workers reset all the old edging stones along the shore line while adding 5,000 pieces of plant material to the small peninsula, species such as bayberry, blueberry, and Russian

olive. Thorny ornamentals discourage foot traffic in environmentally fragile areas.

Serpe and Hart say the reestablishment of the Park's understory is cornerstone of their work. Says Serpe: “What we lost in this park was not the trees but the understory. We just lost it, the shrubs, the flowering plants, the grass. Some areas of this park were just like a desert.”

With the planting of 30,000 shrubs, 200,000 bulbs, and 400 understory trees (species such as dogwood, mountain laurel and redbud), Central Park is beginning to approach the look Serpe seeks. “We try to stay with naturalistic plant material. But, it is not necessarily native and we've had some trouble finding some of this material in the nurseries.”

Turf restoration

Popular turf areas in the park have been getting more attention too. This is where the new aggressive maintenance spirit is most evident. A former dustbowl, the Sheep Meadow is now a handsome turf area groomed for beauty and passive pursuits such as picnicking and sun bathing. Irrigation is supplied by Toro pop-up sprinklers, and fertilizer and lime are administered according to soil tests taken each spring and fall.

The success of the turf in the Sheep Meadow caused park administrators to upgrade the three-acre East Green as well. “They're calling it a revolutionary type of turf area, but it really

“It can't be the Adirondacks, but we can give visitors that feeling”

—Serpe

isn't,” Serpe says. “It's a sand concept area and a lot of athletic fields are similar, with extensive irrigation and good drainage.” Workers brought in 1,620 cubic yards of sand and laid 2,750 feet of drainage pipe in this one area.

Use of the East Green, like that of the Sheep Meadow, is going to be carefully monitored. “We can close 'em down anytime we need to,” Serpe says. Sturdy fences with padlocked gates encircle the grassy areas.

And the classy Mall, lined with stately American elms, is finally green again. The seven-acre area is regularly overseeded with Hounddog, a turf-type tall fescue. The Great Lawn (the scene of massive rock concerts and anti-nuclear demonstrations and dubbed the “Not So Great Lawn” by some critics) could be their next turf restoration project.

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Problem areas

While the marriage of Conservancy and parks department has been a good one so far, not every project has been successful. The seeding of 10 acres of wildflower meadows hasn't lived up to expectations, but there's still hope since Serpe feels it might take three to five years to develop a good stand of wildflowers.

Serpe and Hart deal with a workforce of 12 persons year-round, 16 during the summer. Additional high school students help in the peak season. Serpe's budget breaks down to about \$300,000 for tree care, \$200,000 for horticultural maintenance, and \$124,000 for turf care.

The Park has come a long way since Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux won a design competition in 1858, and workmen spent 16 years carting in nearly 5 million cubic yards of stone, earth and topsoil to turn a patchwork of stone quarries, fetid swamps, and pigsties into one of the world's most celebrated locations. They planted 500,000 trees, shrubs, and vines.

Olmsted's dream almost died and so did the Park in the early 1970s because of apathy, management with a laissez-faire attitude, and New York's financial woes which dried up funds for proper maintenance. That's changing in a big way.

“Everything had to be carted in to make this park,” Hart reflects. “I guess you can call it a huge flowerpot.”

Finally, it's starting to look like one again.

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