

CLEANING MISS LIBERTY'S HOUSE

Landscape restoration on Liberty and Ellis islands in New York Harbor was not an easy assignment last year. But the National Park Service was up to the task.

by Robert L. Tracinski



When the U.S. government closed down Ellis Island on November 29, 1954, personnel walked out of their offices and away from the immigration center that had processed 16 million immigrants in 62 years.

They didn't take so much as a file folder with them.

They just walked away.

So when the National Park Service took over Ellis Island in 1985, its staff found paper in the typewriters and calendars left open to November 29.

And they found an overgrown jungle in what used to be the parks and gardens of Ellis Island. A jungle that had to be cleaned up—virtually one branch at a time—over a period of nine months, in time for the historic Statue of Liberty rededication ceremonies over the July 4th weekend.

"We had to do everything by hand because we didn't want to risk destroying any artifacts that may have been hidden by all the vegetation," says Chuck Pellicane, chief of maintenance for Liberty and Ellis Islands. "We had a forest in the mall area behind the administration buildings on the Island—everything from pear trees to Virginia creeper to poison ivy.

"It was so dense that you couldn't walk through there. We discovered a softball field, park benches, concrete park lights and a maze of sidewalks."

The job was so massive that a full-time crew of 10 Park Service employees and dozens of part-time volunteers worked from October to July.

"If I didn't have to worry about the artifacts, I could have done the whole thing in one week with one bulldozer," Pellicane says.

The Park Service crews used chain saws, stump grinders and wood chippers to turn the five-acre forest into a presentable area. "We cut down literally hundreds of trees—all by hand—

Robert L. Tracinski is consumer information specialist for John Deere & Company

so we could save the healthy vegetation," Pellicane notes.

Once the wood chip mulch nourishes the soil, the Park Service will plant grass in order to create an area on the Island where groups can hold ethnic festivals. In fact, the Park Service plans to call it the Festival Lawn.

Part of the effort to restore the Statue of Liberty included a new land-



Chuck Pellicane, chief of maintenance at Liberty and Ellis Islands, plans to set up a preventative maintenance schedule.

scaping design to focus attention on the Statue. A line of trees along either side of the entrance to the Statue draws the eye directly to Miss Liberty. A ring of trees around the base of the Statue blocks out the New York City skyline as people approach the entrance. New grass, trees, shrubs, plants and groundcover were installed as part of the new design, including 5½ acres of sod, nearly 200 trees, 440 shrubs, 55,075 ivy plants as groundcover and 5,150 narcissus bulbs.

All that new greenery means that the Park Service uses a lot of chain saws for pruning and leaf rakes to pick up fallen leaves from 200 trees.

Kentucky bluegrass was planted on Liberty Island because of its ability to grow well in the shade. Pellicane said sod was laid rather than planting

grass seed because "there wasn't enough time to plant seed on Liberty Island. The contractors were laying sod on Liberty Island until midnight on the third of July."

Contractors remain on Liberty Island finishing up the last details on the restoration project. Once they leave, Pellicane says he plans to start a motor pool division with a shop set up to service the equipment.

"We want to set up a good preventive maintenance schedule," he says.

Pellicane joined the National Park Service in 1974 as a maintenance foreman at Gateway National Recreation Area, which encompasses 26,000 acres of land and water in Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island, N.Y. and Sandy Hook, N.J.

The maintenance crew for Liberty and Ellis Islands consists of 40 people in two divisions: 14 in Buildings and Utilities and 26 in Grounds.

The Grounds Division is responsible for picking up and burning garbage, cutting and watering the grass, and cleaning inside the buildings and the Statue. Four people in the Grounds Division spend all day, every day, from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., seven days a week, from April to October, cutting the grass on Liberty Island. One maintenance worker spends all day cutting the grass on Ellis Island.

Each day, the staff arrives on Liberty Island on a 7:30 a.m. boat from Battery Park in lower Manhattan. They start their day by picking up the garbage left by the crowds.

"There's so much garbage here now that everyone has to spend time picking it up. Even the mowing operators are out there with a 'pickstick,' because you have to clear the grass before it's safe to mow it," Pellicane notes.

At the end of the day, the mowing crew shuts down at about 4 p.m., 30 minutes before the end of the work day, to hose down the equipment,

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grease it, maintain it and refuel it, so the equipment is all ready to go right to work in the morning. Most of the crew is seasonal because visitation drops off between October and April.

During the mowing season, it's a seven-day-a-week operation, with weekends the busiest days because of largest crowds. (About a month after the reopening ceremony, crowds were peaking at more than 20,000 people each day.)

And when Ellis Island reopens to the public in 1992, the Park Service estimates there will be even bigger crowds with more than 30,000 people each day visiting the two islands.

The Park Service plans to restore and open to the public 25 of the 30 buildings on Ellis Island. The Immigration Center will be turned into a museum tracing the history of immigration to this country.

The Festival Lawn will open as early as 1987 and the Great Hall will open in 1988. The remaining buildings will open in succeeding years, culminating in a centennial celebration in 1992, coinciding with the 500th anniversary of Columbus' discovery of America.

Chain saws and all the other lawn care and landscaping equipment were provided by John Deere, which has signed an agreement to be the official supplier to Liberty and Ellis Islands for the next 10 years. The equipment list includes compact utility tractors, lawn and garden tractors, walk-behind mowers, weed trimmers, tillers, chain saws, portable generators, welders, back pack blowers and high-pressure washers. Also provided is a variety of attachments: loader, backhoe, snow blower, dumpcart and grass collection systems.

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Larry Cooper, a maintenance mechanic's assistant at the Statue of Liberty, uses a lawn tractor to cut the 5½ acres of new sod on Liberty Island.

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