OUR FIELDSTONE HERITAGE
Over the last 100 years, thousands of acres of Michigan land have been transformed into 103 state parks that feature the best of our state’s rivers, forests, lakes, fields, and beaches. Those treasured places—stretching across the Lower and Upper Peninsulas alike—experienced a storied road to success, beginning with the formation of the Michigan State Parks Commission in 1919.
In 1917, the Michigan Legislature allocated $60,000 for a land purchase to protect a 200-acre tract of virgin pine trees in Grand Traverse County.

Two years later, that parcel, situated between Duck and Green Lakes, became Interlochen State Park, the first such designation made by the newly established Michigan State Parks Commission. Created by the state legislature on May 12, 1919, the commission was given responsibility for overseeing, acquiring, and maintaining public lands and establishing Michigan’s state parks system.

Parks and Cars

Since that time, the state’s burgeoning parks establishment and growth of the auto industry have been connected—bound tightly together by an extensive network of roadways crisscrossing the state.

Advancements made by Henry Ford in plant automation, cheaper prices for the Model T, and a growing public fascination with automobile travel and ownership all drove up the number of registered drivers in the United States to 8 million by 1920.

By the close of the decade, that figure would reach almost 23 million.

Meanwhile, Michigan’s state parks system expanded. Fourteen parks in the Lower Peninsula—from Traverse City to Harrison to Grand Haven to Onsted—were secured under the auspices of the state parks commission by 1920.

The following year, with one car for every ten people in the United States, Congress passed the Federal Highway Act to begin construction of the first national highway system. And in 1922 came the creation of the Upper Peninsula’s first mainland state parks at Baraga and Brimley—as well as a significant boost to Michigan’s park system from the Dodge Brothers Company.

The Detroit auto company’s directors gifted sizeable acreage to the state in memory of founders John and Horace Dodge, who had both passed away in 1920. The donations covered 875 acres, which would comprise 10 parks.

Formal presentation of the parks came in the form of a letter to Michigan Governor Alex J. Groesbeck from Howard Bloomer, chairman of the board of directors of the Dodge Brothers Company. According to the
Detroit Free Press, the letter discussed the “over-crowded condition of beaches and picnicking grounds in Oakland and adjacent counties, due principally to the widespread ownership of motor cars among people who naturally turn to the inland lakes as their only sources of weekend recreation.” The land donation would hopefully help “relieve the congestion.”

The parks were named in numerical succession, with Dodge Park No. 1 established in 1922. The original 40-acre parcel is now the Dodge Unit at Island Lake Recreation Area.

Throughout the remainder of the 1920s, state park development continued, as did the rising number of automobiles manufactured and registered in Michigan and across the nation. According to Lisa Gamero, cultural stewardship specialist for the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), the Michigan State Parks Commission viewed “the automobile as being the main transportation to our future state parks system” and thus looked “for property near major highways, or where...major trunk lines were to be built.”

By 1930, a total of 32 state parks had been established throughout the state, including seven in the Upper Peninsula, the latest of which was Palms Book State Park—home to Michigan’s largest free-flowing spring, Kitch-iti-kipi. State park attendance, which was logged at 200,000 annual visitors in 1922, shot to more than 8 million by 1930.

Gillette’s Contributions

Amidst the continued rise of U.S. auto industry production and the increasing importance of state parks came a woman whose life’s work would center on preserving natural settings and making them available to the traveling public.

In 1925, E. Genevieve Gillette—the first female landscape architect in Michigan—returned to her home state after working for Jens Jensen in Chicago. Jensen, a Danish landscape architect, encouraged Gillette to become involved with Michigan’s developing state park system.

Gillette, who was a graduate of Michigan Agricultural College—now Michigan State University—returned to Michigan just as Percy “P.J.” Hoffmaster was appointed the first superintendent of state parks. The two were introduced through a mutual friend, and what followed was a rewarding partnership. In Hoffmaster’s quest for an expansive Michigan state parks system, he relied on Gillette’s expertise and advice as a volunteer, in addition to her detailed research and reports.

“Over decades, her career supported her enduring volunteer efforts in raising awareness of Michigan’s natural wonders and their value to society,” reads a historical marker honoring Gillette in White Lake Charter Township. “She established important conservation groups, gained funding for Michigan state parks, and even advised President Lyndon Johnson on recreation and nature.”

Meanwhile, Gillette continued her work as a landscape architect. Notable projects to her credit are scattered from Ferris State University and Albion College to the Detroit Parks & Recreation Department and the city of Lakeland, Florida.

Roosevelt’s Tree Army

As the shadow of the Great Depression stretched over the nation, attendance at Michigan’s state parks—aided greatly by the popularity of automobile travel—put tremendous demands on park facilities. During 1933, the worst year of the economic downturn in Michigan, the Lansing State Journal reported that the annual per capita income, adjusted for inflation, totaled less than $5,000. Nationwide, unemployment jumped to 24.9 percent.

However, with the election of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, programs put in place would not only address the nation’s crippling unemployment but also benefit state parks. Five federal work relief agencies partnered cooperatively with the Michigan Department of Conservation, precursor to the Michigan DNR, to make numerous improvements at state parks.

Those federal “New Deal” agencies contributed $4 for every $1 in state funding for park upgrades. It was estimated that, from 1933 to 1943, the improvements made...
would have taken 25 years to complete with reliance solely on state appropriations.

In particular, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), nicknamed Roosevelt’s Tree Army, made significant lasting impacts on Michigan state parks—building cabins, bunkhouses, shelters, and other structures in the stone-and-wood rustic architecture styles of Ralph B. Herrick and Ernest F. Hartwick. Numerous examples of those buildings remain in use today, including bathhouses at Ludington, Wilson, and P.H. Hoeft State Parks in the Lower Peninsula and a stone picnic shelter at J.W. Wells State Park in Menominee County.

The CCC boys, who were between 17 and 25 years old, also worked to create recreational areas, reforest lands cut over during the state’s pine rush, and protect natural resources.

Parks in the WWII Era

World War II virtually stopped state park improvements in Michigan since men, money, and materials were redirected toward the war effort. Automobile production also ceased in 1942, while U.S. carmakers shifted from producing civilian vehicles to building machines for the military. A Lansing State Journal headline reported, “Highway travel, state park use show war taking tourist toll,” with state park attendance over Memorial Day weekend down by 25 to 30 percent.

As the war wound down, work resumed on state park improvement projects previously left unfinished. By the late 1940s, the Department of Conservation began to use state prison camp labor to complete some projects. Construction shifted to inexpensive methods using standardized materials, rather than the durable hand-crafted efforts of wood and stone produced in earlier years.

In 1944, nearly a dozen state parks were established, including the U.P.’s Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park. At more than 59,000 acres, including portions of Gogebic and Ontonagon Counties, it remains Michigan’s largest state park and the first designated wilderness state park. The development of the cherished land of trails, waterfalls, and vistas as a park came in response to efforts to commercially mine and log the area.

The Ontonagon Sportsmen’s Club supported the park’s establishment, pointing out that the Upper Peninsula contains 16,681 square miles of area, compared to the 70 square miles proposed for the park: “It readily appears that the acquisition... will remove from local tax rolls such an insignificant part of the total area as to present no serious threat to the economic life of any of the municipalities involved. And as compared to the permanent advantages and values to be derived from state ownership of such an area as to warrant the present investment for the general good of the present and future generations.”

The state allocated $1 million to purchase the initial 46,000 acres, protecting forests full of hardwoods and hemlocks.

A Rallying Cry

The Department of Conservation moved away from state parks development after the death of Hoffmaster—who is considered the father of Michigan’s state parks system—in 1951. The parks system faded during the decade, though the number of people using state park camping facilities rose by 200 percent.
In 1956, Gillette again came to the aid of Michigan’s ailing state parks, highlighting concerns and rallying citizens and lawmakers. Three years later and with Gillette’s help, the Michigan Parks Association was formed to champion efforts to craft a statewide park development plan and increase funding to state parks.

The Michigan Legislature passed Public Act 149 in 1960—the state motor vehicle and bond authorization law—which put in place the state’s first motor vehicle entry fee the following year. Lawmakers also approved a $5 million bond to help fund state park improvements. Thus state park use increased into the mid-1970s, with Michigan leading the nation in overnight camper numbers and outstripping the availability of campsites.

In 1976, the nation’s bicentennial year, Michigan Governor William G. Milliken attended a nature center dedication at P.J. Hoffmaster State Park in Muskegon County. There, along the shores of Lake Michigan, Milliken said more than $90 million had been spent over the previous eight years on the development of recreational lands and facilities.

“We are doing a good job of providing the opportunity to experience the sights, sounds and smells of our natural surroundings,” Milliken was quoted as saying in the The Holland Evening Sentinel. “And through the construction of facilities like this, I hope that one day we will be able to do just as good a job at educating people about the importance of our relationship with our environment.”

The facility Milliken referenced was the E. Genevieve Gillette Nature Center. “It is to her efforts that we owe the saving of such natural environments as Ludington and Hartwick Pines state parks and such recreational facilities as the Huron Clinton Metroparks and other recreation areas surrounding Detroit,” Milliken went on to say. “Future generations will thank her for helping to preserve the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, the Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park and more than 70,000 acres of unique natural areas of Michigan.”

Park-Bound Michiganders

Today, the system of parks that the Michigan State Parks Commission started 100 years ago has grown to 103 parks that attract 28 million visitors each year. Motor vehicle permit windshield stickers have been replaced by Recreation Passports which, for $12 per year—new pricing effective March 1, 2020—provide visitors access to state parks, boat launches, state forest campsgrounds, trailheads, and other attractions. In turn, the revenue generated goes back into maintaining and improving amenities and providing grants to communities for a wide range of recreation-related projects.

Despite that initiative, today’s state parks system continues to face funding challenges, including a $274 million infrastructure deficit. The search for a definitive solution to keeping park improvements up with demand and disrepair continues.

The centennial of the Michigan State Park Commission’s creation was commemorated throughout 2019 by the DNR. The commemoration looked to acknowledge Michigan’s rich state parks history, with an energizing look forward.

“A hundred years ago, people in Michigan were rallying to protect the state’s most beautiful outdoor destinations,” said Ron Olson, chief of the DNR’s Parks and Recreation Division. “Fast forward through time and you’ll find that generations of residents and visitors have fallen in love with these treasured natural places.”

Just as they have done for a century, Michigan’s cars and citizens alike still head—whether to the mighty Tahquamenon Falls or Belle Isle, Sleepy Hollow or Muskallonge Lake—to state parks across the breadth of the Great Lakes State.

John Pepin is the deputy public information officer for the Michigan DNR. Based in Marquette, he is an award-winning photographer, filmmaker, and former journalist.