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By **Bill Vibbert** Guest Columnist *who served as the Liberty State Park superintendent from 1969 to 1976. LSP opened in 1976.*

Liberty State Park retrospective: The vision emerges

By an accident of government, **I was assigned to be the first park superintendent of Liberty State Park**, New Jersey's first urban park. I remember my first impression in 1970 evolved from **"What am I going to do with this industrial wasteland"** to be a highlight of my 33-year State Park Service career.

The Central Railroad of New Jersey had left just before my arrival and there were still many industrial uses including the McAllister tugboat repair, the Lehigh Valley Railroad, a minesweeper demolition business, Spooner dredging Company, Weeks materials handling, a massive McMyler coal dumper, and a variety of leases.

The film, "Funny Girl" had just finished filming in the Central Railroad terminal.

I remember walking on an inch of ice in the terminal building. I watched the World Trade Center towers rise to completion and attended the early planning meetings on the top floor of the North Tower. I met several mayors including Mayor Tommie Smith and Mayor Paul Jordan, both park advocates.

The total staff was two: ranger David Caroff and me.

Later, WWII veteran pilot Jerry McCabe arrived to take over the initial development preparing for the Bicentennial celebration. Suddenly, thousands of visitors discovered Liberty State Park and my years as superintendent sadly ended when a full-time superintendent was assigned.

Park champions then-New Jersey Conservation and Economic Development Commissioner Robert Roe, Morris Pesin, Audrey Zapp, state Department of Environmental Protection Commissioner Richard Sullivan and Assistant Commissioner Helen Fenske led the effort to develop the park. Now Sam Pesin carries the Liberty Park torch for the "people's park."

I began to notice the remarkable wildlife resources that took advantage of the varied habitats including the tidal marsh, north cove, acres of shrubs, upland grasslands, freshwater ponds, Hudson River, and Caven Cove estuary. I still remember approaching Caven Cove and hearing the roar of thousands of canvasback and redhead ducks feeding on the abundant clams. There were flocks of ring-necked pheasants and songbirds singing from the

shrubs. Flocks of black ducks fed in the tidal marsh and puddle ducks were frequently flushed from the small ponds. Marshhawks and short-eared owls cruised over the grasslands along the Hudson River.

I worked with Texas Instruments on the 1976 Liberty State Park Biological Assessment that documented wildlife resources. The study documented the importance of the park habitat to the wintering population of waterfowl. **The result was the (south side Richard Sullivan Natural Area) tidal marsh and north cove were saved from filling.**

I recall one day I was assigned to attend a meeting with DEP Commissioner Richard Sullivan and Division of Fish and Wildlife Director Russel Cunningham. As we met on a pier at the south end of the park among sunken barges and tugboats, we noticed a parade of residents walking past carrying fishing rods and crab nets. At that moment, the Liberty Park vision shifted from an urban-developed plan including restaurants and boutiques submitted by the consultants to a park featuring not only the major themes of transportation, immigration and liberty, but also recreation and protecting the remarkable wildlife resources that were everywhere. I remember Commissioner Sullivan saying, "We're not doing that, we are going to connect the park to the residents."

The (NJDEP) vision from that moment became natural, cultural and historic resources and passive recreation. (in 1978, the completed Geddes Master Plan after dozens of public meetings, was approved by the NJDEP for a free and green Central Park-type park).

Gov. Christine Whitman stayed true to the vision when she vetoed a golf course proposal in the park interior. She was quoted as having said, "The people don't want it."

The Interpretive Center and interpretive program plans emerged from those early discussions. Students now paddle kayaks through Caven Cove and pull seines to discover the life of the Hudson River. Today, visitors delight at the abundance of wildlife; even white-tailed deer and turkeys are seen. Flocks of Atlantic brant and Canada geese graze lawn areas, often among visitors.

As I look back, I am thankful for the early park champions who had the vision to see what could become of the "industrial wasteland" that I remember from that first day more than 50 years ago. With ferry access to Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty, the restored Central Railroad terminal, acres of green open space, fishing access, views of New York harbor, the two-mile Hudson River promenade, and the remarkable wildlife resources, Liberty State Park can be not only a place for visitors to enjoy, for wildlife to thrive, but an economic engine (as a special destination behind Lady Liberty) for the entire region and a park of national significance.

Bill Vibbert served as the Liberty State Park superintendent from 1969 to 1976. (LSP opened in 1976). Now retired from a 33-year career in the NJ State Park Service, he managed Island Beach State Park, Cheesequake State Park, Edison State Park, Double Trouble State Park, Barnegat Lighthouse State Park, Boxwood Hall Historic site, and Twin Lights Historic Site.