

Ed leaves the parks he shaped

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Ed Burleigh has seen a lot of parks seasons come and go.

In fact, he's one of the people responsible for overseeing the evolution of the city's parks system from a handful of parks to a greenbelt now spread throughout the community.

And Thursday, as Burleigh's association with Belleville's parks came to an end after more than two decades, he can look back at a career which saw him rise from a general laborer to the man responsible for planning and coordinating the day-to-day work that keeps the system neat and attractive.

When Burleigh first made it to the parks payroll in 1965, the department operated out of a converted brick house at the corner of Catherine and Yeomans streets.

His wage: \$1.25 an hour. His duties: Just about everything, from manual labor to driving tractor.

In those days, the department didn't have much equipment at its disposal, just a one-ton truck and a tractor. But then again, it didn't have much in the way of staff. Only six men were responsible for maintaining the parks.

Burleigh, who rose from laborer to lead hand to foreman before reaching the general supervisor's position from which he's retiring, arrived on the scene at a time when the parks system was about to undergo a massive expansion.

He ticks off on his fingers the years the various projects got underway: Alemite Park in 1965, East Riverside in 1966, Zwick's Island in 1967--and so on.

Another more recent development in the system's evolution has been the creation of a series of parkettes throughout the city that add a touch of green and floral beauty to high-profile locations.

Burleigh knows full well that the parks season doesn't end when the grass dies and leaves fall from the trees -- that it's a year-round job. And that fact is the source of one of the many anecdotes he can relate about life in the parks.

One of the department's key jobs during the winter months is creating and maintaining a series of ice-skating surfaces around the city. One winter, a new employee attempted to create a rink -- by spraying the hose into the wind. Burleigh happened across the unfortunate individual and found him suffering from the consequences of his action.

"He was almost like an ice statue," he recalled.

With retirement looming, Burleigh has plenty of plans -- but none of them related to gardening. For 20 years before joining the parks department, he was an apiarist. Now Burleigh plans to start beekeeping again, this time only as a hobby. He also enjoys hunting and fishing and has been a member of the same hunting camp in North Hastings for 32 years.

Still, it isn't without sadness that Burleigh gives up being part of the parks team.

"I was glad to get the job and really appreciated working here...it was my bread and butter."