

Where water lilies once congregated

Traces actually, more than traces remain of Hamilton's former shoreline of inlets

BY JOHN TERPSTRA

How many people in the city know, or remember, or could even believe, that the shoreline of Hamilton Harbour once was graced by long fingers of water that extended toward the escarpment, some reaching as far as King Street? There were at least nine of these inlets, which looked something like short, wide-mouthed rivers. Havens of marsh life.

The inlets had names, many recognizable from the city's early history: Land's Inlet, Lottridge Inlet, Sherman, Stipes, Harvey, Ogg's. The points between the inlets had names as well. In 1884, *The Spectator* ran an announcement for one:

"A scheme is on foot to build a fine summer hotel on Huckleberry Point, about two miles east of the city. It is one of the most beautiful spots in the country, is covered with a magnificent grove of maple trees, and in its immediate vicinity are a number of extensive inlets where the water lilies most do congregate."

Ten years later, there was no hotel. Instead, the company which later became Stelco had purchased Huckleberry Point and built its first factory there. More industries set up shop on other points, and as businesses expanded the inlets slowly began to be filled in.

I do not intend to badmouth industry, our civic governments or the Hamilton Port Authority, all of whom bear responsibility for the obliteration of our original bay shoreline. I would rather delight in what remains. For amazingly, a few inlets survive, though in a shabby and derelict state that only a fool could love.

There are three of these remnant inlets: Stipes, Sherman and Land's. At this point in the story, a city map might come in handy.

Stipes Inlet lies between Dofasco and Stelco, where it serves as a boat slip. The trees that line its sides are visible from Burlington Street, looking north at Ottawa. The inlet itself is not visible and, unless you work for one of the steel companies, it remains out of sight. Perhaps this is for the best. Stipes Inlet is not picnic territory, but rather a toxic hot spot comparable only to the infamous Randle Reef.

Randle Reef itself lies at the mouth of Sherman Inlet, which is visible from Burlington Street, at Birch. Here you can actually turn off and approach the water itself. With the trees edging up to its shorelines and the waterfowl landing and swimming, you can begin to imagine what an inlet landscape might once have looked like.

The Hamilton Port Authority owns this truncated bit of Sherman Inlet, which used to run to King Street, and has plans for turning it into a park. Like Stipes Inlet and Randle Reef, it requires remediation before the picnic baskets can come out. We're a city that has buried some very dirty treasure in our soil and water.

Land's Inlet also used to extend to King Street. Its mouth is now the boat slip beside Lakeport Brewery, at the foot of Wellington Street. The inlet's shallow valley crosses Burlington and enters a landscape of railway, abandoned lots, unintended forests and a few active businesses. It jaywalks Wellington at Ferrie Street, bends around the former Plastimet site (now Jackie Washington Park) and travels south between Barton Jail and the former Stelco Nail Factory, to Barton Street.

Hamilton Health Sciences purchased the former Stelco Nail Factory last spring, is tearing it down and will remediate the site for its expansion. I called HHS last month to ask if it was possible also to remediate the portion of Land's Inlet they now own, to redeem some of the city's original landscape, but apparently plans are too far along.

If you buy coffee at the Tim Hortons on Barton, just west of Wellington, you might notice the bridge on Barton Street. The bridge crosses Land's Inlet. From that point south, Land's Inlet begins to fade into the landscape.

I recently discovered a fourth inlet. Actually a tributary of Land's, it was the first of the inlets to be filled in. Eastwood Park is built on that fill. The inlet is visible in the shallow dip Burlington Street makes between Ferguson and Wellington. From there, by travelling south on Ferguson Street, you can track the dip as it winds through the north-end neighbourhood, crosses Ferguson at Picton Street, and reaches its lowest point around Simcoe and Mary streets.

I'm the fool who loves these remnant inlets. Of the four, it is perhaps this last one that I love the most, simply because it shows an ongoing relationship between the neighbourhood and the former waterway. The inlet may not be a true inlet anymore, but it still exists in the lay of the land, the rolling landscape of streets and houses.

How different that north-end neighbourhood inlet is from the eastern



PHOTOS BY PETER STEVENS, SPECIAL TO THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Trees edge up to the shoreline of Sherman Inlet, above, where a visitor can still imagine what the inlet landscape might once have looked like. Below, a dip in a North End street is a remnant of Land's Inlet, which used to extend from the harbour south to King Street.



end of the harbour shoreline, where the inlets have been obliterated. I don't ask for a return to the Garden of Eden that once existed, but sometimes in Hamilton it can feel as if you're living on scraps.

We're lucky to have had so much landscape here to begin with, and to still have as much as we do.

John Terpstra will be giving a slide presentation on the inlets at Dundas Public Library on Nov. 3, 7:30, as part of Arts Dundas. His companion article about the inlets will appear in the next issue of *Maisonneuve*. He is the current writer-in-residence at McMaster University, where he is available to any aspiring writers in the community for one-on-one consultation. He can be reached at englwir@mcmaster.ca