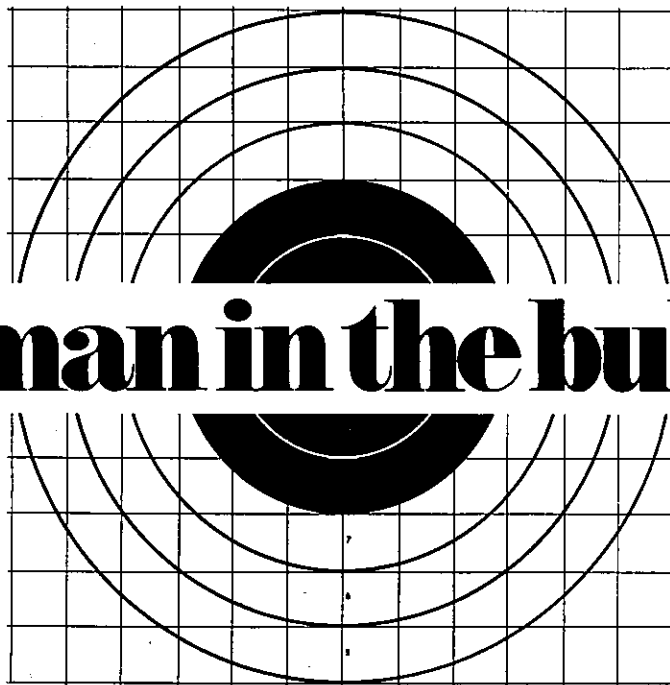


10-1-12



"Please walk on the Grass"
Thomas Thompson, Hon. Member
CSLA



The man in the bullseye

It was a summer of high drama. Ten ducks were dead, their bodies riddled with diazinon. There were denials, a Supreme Court injunction, a provincial inquiry. Sides were taken, questions were asked, and in the middle, fending off the blame, stood Thomas W. Thompson, "the best parks commissioner in North America."

By ANNE MARSHALL

Thomas William Thompson, dispirited and baffled and weary at the end of the longest summer of his life, was finally persuaded to take his first vacation in many years. Until this summer he hadn't felt he needed one, but now, if only to regain his lost privacy, he certainly did. The accusations, the public loss of face, the constant exposure and the fervent emotionalism of two months had taken their toll on the 56-year-old Metro parks commissioner. He wanted out—at least for a little while.

Little did Thompson realize that his willingness to speak last July 7 before a newly created citizens' committee against pollution would touch off such high drama and involve him in the principal villain's role. Overnight, he ceased being Tommy Thompson, affable and outspoken czar of 6,500 acres of parkland, always good for a colorful quote. At the hands of these avid anti-pollutionists he was suddenly Public Enemy, the cold and calculating poisoner of helpless waterfowl, the sycophantic exponent of red-tapery who couldn't open his mouth without his boss's approval, and, perhaps the most incriminating of all, the devious liar.

Ten ducks were dead of a pesticide known as diazinon. Their bodies had been found on Ward's Island, part of Thompson's domain. Thompson denied that his department had used diazinon this year, but the cloak and dagger Pollution

Probers and GASPs were not to be fooled. And when an unsuspecting gardener on Centre Island began work at 6 a.m. a few mornings later, a television crew was there to record the seizing of his spray. It turned out to be diazinon.

Much of the criticism directed at Thompson, however, was based on his silence. The fact that he refused to reply to questions before first consulting with Metro Chairman William Allen, subsequently evaded reporters, made only a feeble attempt to defend his guilt-by-implication—it was decidedly out of character. Thompson had always enjoyed good press relations, to the point that his colleagues tended to view him as a publicity hound. He was fond of saying his favorite hobby was talking, and his gift for outspokenness and exaggeration made him good copy.

But now, nothing. For several days following the dawn raid, he barricaded himself inside his 10th-floor City Hall office while the same enterprising television news crew hovered outside in the corridor, waiting to "serve" him with a blank piece of paper, symbol of the injunction just obtained against the further use of diazinon. At home, his wife Beryl took all calls, and he rarely came to the phone. Tommy Thompson had always been one to confront an issue head on, yet now he was hiding. Privately, among people he trusted, he stood by his original

statement—that *his* diazinon couldn't have been responsible for the deaths of the ducks because *his* diazinon was not used, not this year, not then. Ostensibly, he was also defining his position before William Allen and before the *in camera* meetings of the Ontario government's two-year-old Pesticide Board, charged with investigating "the duck situation." Publicly, he remained mum.

Thompson's earlier reputation as a showman was nothing if not deserved.

Who else was there, after all, in that gargantuan, pristine City Hall of civil servants who could boast about his own slogan? Who else placed his signature on his achievements for millions to see? Who else deliberately turned up late at crucial meetings? Who else would have the nerve to transform those 6,500 acres of public land into a personal triumph? But the man's accomplishments make it easy to forgive his flamboyance.

The parks over which he has jurisdiction, 19 sprawling oases spotted throughout Metro, are the envy of the continent. Thompson has repeatedly gone on record decrying the swings-slides-and-teetertotters syndrome; it is symbolic to him of small thinking, and as a result, there are no swings, no slides and no teetertotters to be found in his parks. Instead, there are cricket fields, soccer fields, nature trails, picnic tables, golf courses, lagoons, bridge paths. There are boats to hire, bands

to listen to and bands to dance to, horses and bicycles to ride, exotic gardens to wander through. Toronto Islands has a miniature farm, Sunnybrook Park has the Mounties rehearsing their musical ride for all to see, Edwards Gardens pipes complete operas through its loudspeaker system on Sundays. This summer, Thompson's pet boast, supplanting his "cleanest and airiest washrooms anywhere" boast of yesterday, is that, in the middle of Metro, a hiker can tramp for 6½ miles through "semi-wilderness" without once crossing a piece of pavement. There are trees of every conceivable species, enormous beds of flowers, but above all else, the huge, unbroken expanses of green, ornamented by the well-publicized sign whose message the Metro parks commissioner has embraced as a credo: "Please Walk On The Grass."

The slogan is basic to Thompson's working philosophy, that parks are for people—to relax in, to explore and get lost in, an escape from the city, a return to nature. "People" is the key word; on a recent visit to one of his parks, his face clouded over when he caught sight of a huge sheepdog lumbering unleashed across the grass, and he asked its owner to tie it up. He wants to be able to encourage visitors to his parks to wander barefoot, as he sometimes does, without getting their feet unduly dirty. He also is determined to protect what he calls "the cycle of nature."

Aside from the well-groomed playing fields, the enormous beds of flowers and the organized activity, probably the most distinguishing feature about

T. W. Thompson's parks is their "semi-wilderness" character. Deliberately, Thompson has allowed whole areas of parkland to run wild, and no one rejoices more than Thompson when a family of birds decides to build its nest in a Metro parks tree. His botanist's training (University of Toronto, Guelph, 1936) puts him in good stead as he rhymes off the names of weeds and bugs. But people still come first.

In hindsight, he shudders over his tactical error in allowing diazinon to be discovered on the Island following his denial it had been used. He had issued orders that an intensive tree spray program be undertaken at dawn on that day to protect visitors to the Mariposa and Caribana Festivals from additional sprayings through three subsequent weekends of activity, but he did not specifically forbid the use of diazinon. "Technically, I was right," he said. "Diazinon is on nobody's banned list. It carried no record of having poisoned anything. In the circumstances, it was the one effective way to control aphids through three weeks. But oh boy, from a public relations standpoint, was I wrong!"

(The well-publicized discovery was not without its own suspense. If, despite Thompson's public denial, a previous spraying had taken place justifying the phenomenally high diazinon count of 60 parts per 1,000 in the duck carcasses, then certainly there would be more dead waterfowl. Even allowing for the two weeks diazinon requires to completely dissipate, none appeared. Centre Island farm's own geese, who resided within range of the spraying, were in perfectly good health

weeks afterwards. Were the ducks deliberately poisoned?)

Yet it is a fact of life that no amount of encouragement on Thompson's part can attract a sufficient number of birds into the heart of a big city to control the aphids that are eating away at the thousands of trees. For the protection of Thompson's 19 parks, nature has to be given a hand. In the course of his six-day work week, Thompson attempts to stay abreast of all the new developments in pest control, and in 1968 banned the use of DDT in his department. And Thompson's rigid insistence on having everything on paper has resulted in a careful tally of all other pesticides used by the Metro parks department. Given any day of the week, Thompson's filing system can reveal how much of what spray was used in what area. Intensive spray programs are habitually undertaken at dawn, when the wind has dropped and the drift is at a minimum.

Anyone who has followed the Metro parks commissioner through several of his 10-hour days would be hard put to call him irresponsible. He maintains an autocratic rule over his department, insisting upon seeing and signing every piece of paper which goes out of the office. At least once a week, he takes several members of his administrative staff on unannounced inspection tours of one or more of his parks, and reports each visit to the various superintendants involved. He is personally concerned with everything relating to his department, from the quality of the hot dogs sold at Centre Island to the

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Lingering, dangerous DDT

Diazinon, the pesticide that killed the ducks on Toronto Island, is merely one of a wondrous array of chemical executioners being used today by occasionally over-zealous farmers, foresters and park administrators. But the granddaddy, the archetype of all insecticides at least in popular appeal, is (get ready)...dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane. Don't trouble to pronounce it—everybody calls it DDT anyway. And since the chemical came into general use after the Second World War, youngsters in moments of irritation have told their playmates to "DDT"—Drop Dead Twice.

Like many a contemporary villain, DDT once had positively heroic proportions. In 1939, Swiss chemist Paul Mueller discovered that DDT caused muscle spasms and eventual death in insects who came into contact with it. By 1942 the U.S. Army was sprinkling DDT all over the South Pacific—and as a result, the Second World War is said to be the first war in history in which fewer soldiers died of insect-borne typhus germs than from enemy action. After the war, civilian would-be exterminators were delighted to discover that DDT was cheap, effective—and did not require constant reapplication. The chemical lingers on and on (it has a "half life" of 14 years,

which means its strength reduces 50 per cent every 14 years) and, being insoluble in water, does not wash away in rainstorms.

The bad news was yet to come—and most of it is due precisely to the good news that preceded it. Scientists soon discovered that DDT had many serious side effects—it was certainly harmful to birds and fish and, laboratory tests strongly indicate, to humans as well. And the lingering nature of the chemical made its bad points all the more serious. In many instances in North America, whole species of birds have reached virtual extinction because DDT made their livers produce enzymes which in turn attacked calcium-producing hormones. The birds then laid eggs with shells so deficient in calcium—so thin—that they could not support their embryos. As for fish, a report tabled this year in the Ontario Legislature noted that trout caught in Lake Muskoka contained "extremely high levels of DDT" even though federal legislation forbids sale of fish with any DDT content whatsoever.

Laboratory scientists who have injected DDT into animals discovered that the chemical alters sex hormones and curbs learning ability, creates such nervousness and excitability that the victims abandon their nests or eat their young—and if all

that were not enough, DDT also causes cancer of the liver. Whether DDT seriously affects humans has not fully been determined, but preliminary evidence was sufficient to prompt Ottawa to bar DDT from use in national parks. The Ontario Department of Lands and Forests followed the federal lead, and the Metro Toronto parks department discontinued using DDT a year ago.

But farmers across Ontario are still quietly using the cheap and efficient killer—and as a result, virtually all of the food you eat (not to mention the air you breathe) contains DDT in some measure. And you contain it too—10 or 12 parts per million. Not much you may say, but the federal food and drug directorate forbids sale of food with more than seven parts per million—making Canadians an inedible nation. DDT even sneaks into mothers' milk—.01 parts per million, which is .01 parts more than is legally allowable in the bovine variety your milkman delivers.

Besides the other obvious dangers in smoking, you might as well know that tobacco farmers lavish DDT on their crops. After you eat your DDT-dusted dinner, think twice before lighting up a cigarette and inhaling even more of the chemical that all but the most blasé expert deems 'ownright dangerous.

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confusing directional signs at the ferry docks and the puddles in James Gardens created by settling land fill. Around the office he is all business, and discourages informality to the degree that he addresses all his staff members by their surnames. No member of his staff has ever been to his home, nor has he been to theirs.

But no amount of adherence to the bureaucratic system can dim the man's ingrained showmanship. Thompson is good at making impressions. Part of it is his gift for hyperbole, as in his suggestion, widely quoted in the press some months ago, that visitors to the polar bear section of the proposed Metro Zoo be handed out parkas before they enter. His views on the CNE are equally quotable. "I'd paint everything pink if I thought that was the only way the Ex would make money," he says.

Then, too, there is his sense of timing, the reason why he is sometimes late for important meetings. Thompson's strategy is that if he is the last to arrive he'll be the last to be introduced around the table, "and then when I'm ready to say my piece, they'll know it's Tom Thompson who said it.

"Sure I have ego," he grins shamelessly, "and I use it to get what I want. I have a reputation for being blunt and to the point; I know it, and I don't care if they call me a showoff.

"Let me tell you a theory I've worked out on this. Take a computer processing the weekly paychecks. If everybody comes to work at 8:30 and leaves at 4:30, then there's no problem. Zoom, zoom, zoom—in nine seconds payroll is finished. But I'm the guy who takes off two hours to go to the dentist. I didn't break the computer, but I sure made an impression."

Yet it has never been his practice to get involved in other people's problems. The Island redevelopment scheme supplied a case in point. For months following Thompson's announcements that all three islands would be gradually claimed as public parkland and that the private houses would be expropriated, he was badgered and beleaguered by the evicted residents. There was a lot of bitterness. Women burst into tears at him over the phone when they weren't turning the wires blue with their invective. "I told them I was sorry—and I was—but that I didn't intend to change my mind."

And now, with the ducks, Thompson suspects that the bitterness is still very much alive. The residents of Ward's Island are expected to move out by next year to make way for the final phase of redevelopment. It was on Ward's Island that the 10 ducks were found. Thompson claims, with support from scientific experts, that no amount of tree spraying last year or this could account for such a high percentage of diazinon in the ducks' bodies. "I think they were probably fed it on a piece of bread," he says flatly.

"The Islanders have a reason to try to discredit me," he continues. "They are losing their homes because of me. They know they won't get any sympathy from Bill Allen—he has supported me all the way on the Island project—but they might from Mr. Allen's successor." Thompson is less tolerant of the complaints he has been receiving lately from the residents whose back yards border Edwards Gardens and who protest against picnickers who place their tablecloths outside their back fences. He thinks they have a lot of nerve.

In ordinary circumstances, however, T. W. Thompson is tolerant and charitable towards the world at large. He forgives them for vandalism to his parks, reasoning that the urge to destroy is a natural one and that the only defence is to eliminate all possible targets. People's comfort and pleasure are the chief criteria he uses in the development of his parks policy. In the course of conversation, he is prone to come out with one or other of his favorite slogans: "Parks are for people" or "We are interested in people."

Until this summer, Thompson's press clippings have been a source of great pride to him. They have often proclaimed him as the best parks commissioner in Canada. During the opening of Sunnybrook Park in mid-June, Metro Chairman Allen promoted him one notch higher by calling him the best parks commissioner in North America. But, despite the setbacks of this summer, Tommy Thompson isn't satisfied yet.

"I want to be known as the best darn parks commissioner in the world."

It's still possible.

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and since 1957 the conservation authority has spent \$5,125,000 buying 1,140 acres needed as flood control lands. These are leased to the Metro parks department, which has laid out gardens and walkways and provided riding stables and picnic grounds and restaurants and even one or two places where Charles Sauriol's grandchildren might try paddling. You can even take a seven-mile stroll along the river from Dentonia Park golf course at Victoria Park Avenue, up Taylor Creek to the forks of the Don, west to Wilket Creek and on up to Sunnybrook. You could put on another mile by going on to Edwards Gardens, or two miles by crossing private property and trekking on to Hoggs Hollow. More acquisitions and parks are planned. Parks Commissioner Tommy Thompson is rather proud that "parts of the Don look pretty good now," and even Sauriol says that Thompson has done a good job of making the Don Valley fit for people again.

But the Don isn't going to let us forget its existence again. There will be more mudslides like the one which swamped the Don Valley Parkway last April, or which killed Leonard May when his Notley Place back garden fell into Taylor Creek ravine in East York in June, 1966. Conservationist Higgs says the soil of the Don labyrinth is prone to this sort of behavior and, besides, developers have built too close to the ravines and valley, or changed their natural configuration as they did in building the Don Valley Parkway. "I know of about 10 places where it could happen at any time, though not necessarily near the Parkway or in potentially dangerous places," he says.

"A lot has been done, but we're 20 years too late. We'll never get the Don back completely. In fact, in the metropolitan area you can write off the river as a place to swim. Maybe we will one day get it to the point where you'll catch fish, pike maybe, or bass or suckers, but not below Bloor; that part is probably irredeemable. But you can walk by it and canoe in it, and maybe even paddle in it here and there, if you're brave."

There may be more life in the Don than Higgs realizes. In mid-June, on a lazily warm spring day, Charles Sauriol stopped by the Don at Hoggs Hollow. As he walked, he said the return of the raccoons was encouraging, as was the appearance of muskrats in the east branch and the presence near Eglinton of a pair of great horned owls, the ones that sound like a diesel locomotive in pain. And then Sauriol paused and stared and pointed and said: "Look, a kingfisher. I haven't seen one here for maybe 15 years. You know, it wouldn't be here if there weren't something decent to eat in the river nowadays."

And, briefly, you could see the wonder of the kid from the edge of Cabbagetown suddenly discovering the Kingdom of the Don. "It's a kindly river," said Sauriol. "Sequestered and gentle and good for people and this city."

But until we pay it enough attention for it to develop a personality, the Don is still an It. ■

It's not a secret anymore.



The mystery man is Ernie Thackeray—Eastern Representative for The Leader Post—Regina and The Star-Phoenix—Saskatoon. The independent judges will remain nameless to protect the innocent.

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Our thanks to the many readers who created such amusing and interesting letters. Sorry you couldn't all win a prize.