

SCENE

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Jim Truncer

Realizing the People Side of Parks

NO ONE MAY know Monmouth County parks as well as Jim Truncer. And perhaps no one pays as much attention to detail to those parks as he does.

While walking around one of the Park System's 45 sites, he's been known to be the first one to pick up a piece of litter on the ground or ask his wife of 58 years to check the ladies' restroom for cleanliness.

This year Truncer celebrates 50 years as director of Monmouth County Park System. Under his guiding hand, the Park System has expanded from about 350 acres on three sites – Holmdel, Shark River and Turkey Swamp – to 16,700 acres over 45 parks, golf courses and historic sites, and five of those sites are on the federal Register of Historic Places.

In addition, the staff has grown from 12 to 640, which includes about 330 full-time and 310 part-time or seasonal, plus almost 1,200 volunteers. Its annual operating budget of \$138,000 and capital expenditures of \$265,000 has increased to today's \$38.1 million in operating expenses and \$33.1 million in capital expenses. The Park System is now recognized nationally and, arguably, internationally by those involved with parks.

"Our thrust has been and is to provide open space, provide regional park and recreation facilities," said Truncer, summarizing the Park System. "And that includes protecting natural features and potable water supplies."

Truncer, with a perpetual twinkle in his eyes and a smile, will talk about the old days of Central Jersey, when it was spotted with cities, towns, and villages, with a lot of woods and farmland in between.

Over a few years from around 1963 to 1966, James Joel Truncer transitioned from being a volunteer member of the Monmouth County Board of Recreation Commissioners, which oversees the Park System, to becoming a paid county staffer – first as a park planner with the Planning Board and, then, director of the Park System. And it's there he found his calling.

Truncer, with his easygoing manner and love for the parks, has been known to be able to work with various memberships of the county Board of Freeholders – ultimately his bosses as those who run county government, regardless of political party – and the public.

"I think he's really been a thoughtful leader, figuring out what needed to be done," said William D. Kastning, executive director of the Monmouth Conservation Foundation.

"One of the things Jim's been good at, he's a survivor," Kastning said. "He's got them (the freeholders) to do the right thing. It's always been a nonpartisan issue."

"We're very lucky in Monmouth County to get what we have, but we didn't get it by luck," said Maria Wojciechowski, a Park System employee who oversees the nonprofit Monmouth County Friends of the Parks. "He was able to bring partnerships together, between county government, private individuals and business owners."

Look at the close to 17,000 acres, or about 5.5 percent of the county land total, the Park System manages.

"That should tell you something about the man," said Freehold Lillian G. Burry, the freeholder board's liaison to the Park System. "The beat goes on – acquiring acreage, new parks."

Michael G. Harmon, a longtime member of the Board of Recreation Commissioners, called Truncer "a visionary" and noted how he realizes the "people side of parks."

The father of a son and daughter now in their 50s and the grandfather of three, Truncer is aware of the need for places to go for skateboarding, paddle-boating, spray parks, flying radio-controlled airplanes and playing soccer, Harmon said.

"Monmouth County Parks has something for everyone," Harmon said. "He's ensured that."

"We are blessed with, I'd say, a good reputation with our peers," Truncer simply said of the Park System. "We pride ourselves with the quality we provide."

Burry added, "There was never any question where his commitment lies – it's always with the Park System. He had it in his blood, he grew up in a state park."

Born in 1936, Truncer lived at South Jersey's Parvin State Park, where his father was the first superintendent, until he was 12. Then, he moved to the Princeton area, when his father was transferred to the state Division of Parks and Forestry office in Trenton. Two years later, Truncer, a high school sophomore, and his family relocated to Upper Freehold – in the county where his wife's, Ramona Rue Truncer's, roots go back to the 1600s.

"You live in a park, hang out with the guys, go to a neighbor's farm," said Truncer, who lives in Allentown. "In high school, always worked on a neighbor's farm. I was an FFA (Future Farmers of America) member. Couldn't have been a greater way to grow up."

His career followed his father's, but Truncer said he had his own interest – earning bachelor's and master's degrees from Michigan State University in natural resources management. He started full-time work with the National Park Service, then worked for the state Parks, then to Monmouth County government, when the Park System was only 3 years old and where he remains 52 years later.

"Started off with a corner of a desk I shared with a draftsman," Truncer said. "They gave me a cardboard box of papers. That was the beginning."

Truncer's office now is at Thompson Park in Lincroft – the park a

part of the former Brookdale Farm once owned by philanthropist Geraldine Thompson, who died at 95 in 1967.

"We're here because Geraldine wanted it to be a park, left it to the county in her will," said Truncer, noting Thompson's willing of 215 acres to the county.

His office is in the former summer home of Thompson's son, Dr. William Payne Thompson. Truncer's office is the son's old bedroom, a worked-in office with a desk, conference table, couch and a large fireplace. There, on a recent day, he worked with the Park System's two-way radio system playing in the background.

"Yeah, I listen, just hear what's going on," Truncer said, then joking, "That's why they don't use it much."

"He has professionals who work for him whom he allows to do their job," Wojciechowski said. "He's a hands-on manager without micro-managing. He values people's input, he listens to what you say."

Park System workers "really love the parks, they love what they're doing," Harmon said. "We haven't lost people to other parks."

Truncer is known for his sense of detail and his ability to manage by walking through the parks and sites, observing, inquiring and improving.

"Jim is a stickler for certain things," Harmon said. "I've heard him say, 'The bathroom is the most important room.'"

Under his leadership, restrooms have been painted white so it is easier to determine how clean they are and Park System staff nametags are worn on the upper right chest so that when a person shake someone's hand, their line of vision follows up your arm to the nametag.

Other qualities Truncer possesses, according to those who know him from those who know him, are his even-keel personality, optimism, intelligence and forward thinking.

Later this year, Truncer will turn 80 – which leads to a story about the old days. Years ago, while negotiating with a union, someone recalled a private sector employer giving workers off on his birthday.

"I have no problem with that," Truncer responded.

His birthday is Nov. 11, Veterans Day – a holiday for county workers.

So, is retirement in the future for the current longest-serving county employee?

"When they close the lid," said Truncer, appearing serious.

His father, Joseph J. Truncer, who worked 43 years for state Parks and Forestry, retiring as its director, advised him, "you'll know" when it is time.

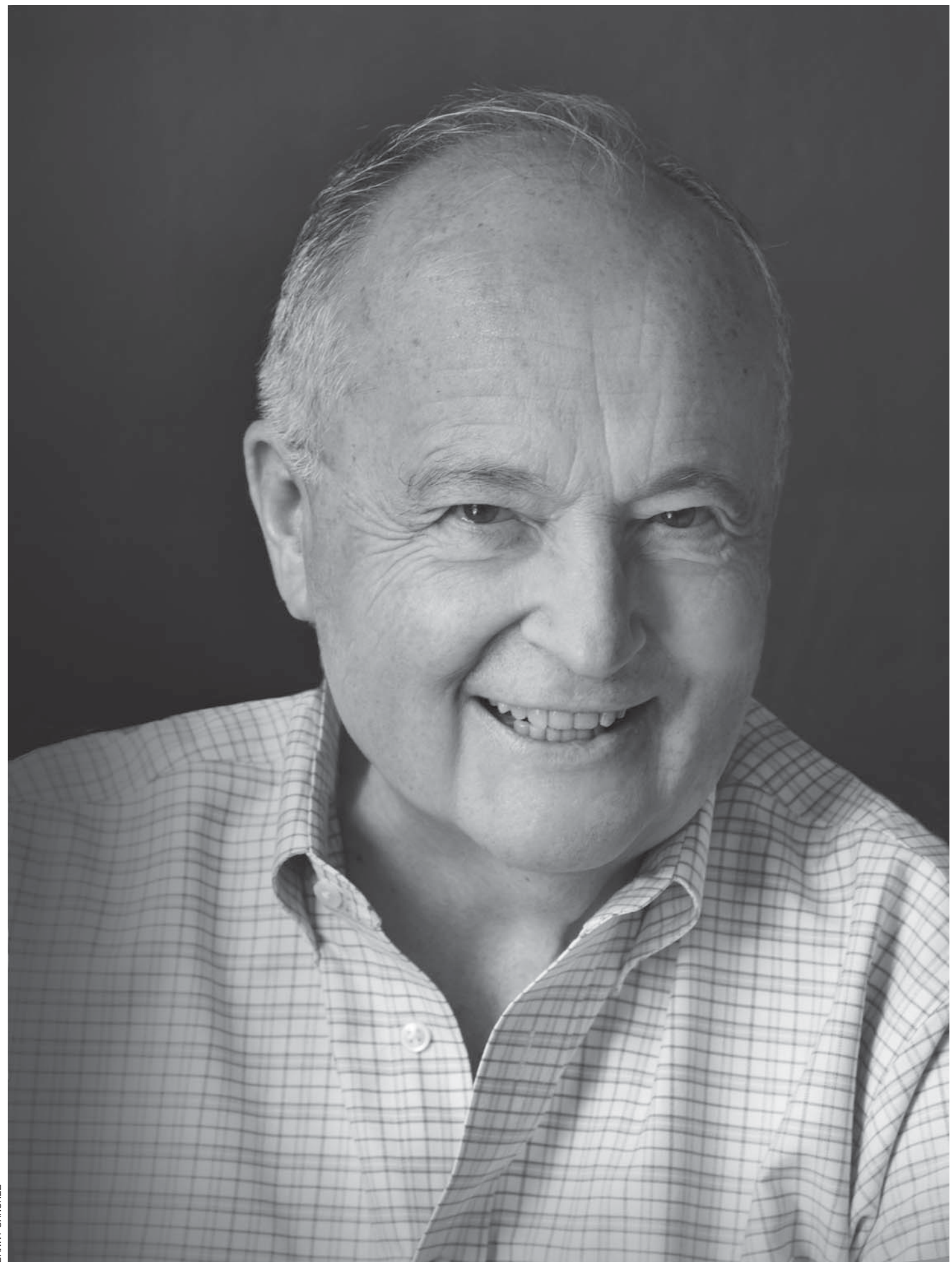
"I tell our people we've been blessed," said Truncer, who does not talk about his legacy. "Beautiful county. To raise a family, to have a business. When we have visitors, they're surprised parts of New Jersey are so beautiful."

Last year, the Park System had 6.8 million visitors.

"We're blessed we've had the support of the public, our political leadership."

"My father once said to me, 'You've got it too easy.' My father was probably right."

By Joseph Sapia



DANNY SANCHEZ