

## Gravel and Stone; Transforming a Community

*Stories from the "East St. Paul Centennial 1916-2016" book  
Submitted by Mayor Shelley Hart*

If you have ever taken a walk through, or a drive by Silver Springs Park on Birds Hill Road you know what a beautiful asset this is to our community. What you may not know is how this park came about and what an important part of our history the gravel and stone industry was.

Today, Silver Springs Park is ravine with lakes, grassy slopes, trails and an abundance of wildlife, an area which was transformed from an operational quarry where gravel and stone were mined for over a century. Since the early days of the quarry's operation, "Birds Hill Gold" - as the gravel was called in the old days - was used for railway beds as far away as the west coast and for streets and roads in Manitoba.

The land was originally owned by Dr. Curtis James Bird and was then sold to the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1870. The proximity to Winnipeg and its market for building materials was hard to resist, and CP wasted no time building a spur line to the pit.

In 1882, the pit was purchased by the City of Winnipeg, which operated a portion of the mine for many years. Other companies that worked the pits over the decades include Fraser Sand & Gravel Limited, Mulder Brothers Sand & Gravel Limited, Ramsay & Bird and most recently, Birds Hill Gravel & Stone. The latter, owned by the Swistun family, operated the pit until it was depleted, ending mining operations in the late 1990's and embarking on a rehabilitation plan for the area.

This man-made park, that without the foresight of an East St. Paul family, would have been a scar on the environment after over 100 years of mining. "If you want a modern civilization, you have to mine for material to build railways, roads and houses," says Michael Swistun, a member of the family that owned Birds Hill Gravel & Stone for over five decades. "But mining companies don't have to walk away after the resource is depleted and leave a chronic eyesore on the land. They can take responsibility and rehabilitate the area." This was the vision of Michael's late father, Bill Swistun Sr., and Uncle Don Swistun Sr. They passed this vision on to their children, who worked together to rehabilitate the landscape.

Rehabilitation got started in 1983 with the sloping of the north bank and the development of a walkway in preparation for the housing subdivision that would overlook the area. The esthetics of the area were phased in with the addition of paths, trees and grass. The Swistun family was able to obtain small funding grants, but 90% of the funding came from Birds Hill Gravel and Stone's profits in an effort to give back to a resource that had provided so much for so many years.

Today, this park looks like a natural feature rather than a manicured city park or a retaining pond. Deer, foxes, muskrats, turtles, birds, frogs and other wildlife populate the area. People come in all seasons to walk the trails, canoe, skate and toboggan. East St. Paul owes a debt of gratitude to the Swistun family for their gift to our community.



*Brothers Bill Swistun Sr. & Don Swistun Sr. (in 1984) standing by the historical marker for the Silver Fox development site overlooking Silver Springs Park*