

Early years of the Civic Holiday at the Beach and East Toronto Prepared by Erik Malmsten, August 1, 2024

Civic Holiday is a public holiday that now is celebrated throughout Canada every year on the first Monday of August. The holiday goes by many different names depending on the province and the local community. [A Guide to Civic Holiday and Simcoe Day](#)

Known in Toronto as “Simcoe Day” since 1969, Civic Holiday goes back in this city to at least the early 1860s when it was introduced for a midsummer "day of recreation." Starting in the late 1870s, with the opening of the first local lakeside parks (Victoria Park and Kew Gardens), the Beach area became a popular destination for holiday makers. East Toronto declared August 12 as a Civic Holiday in 1889, only a year after the municipality was established. The unincorporated village of Norway at Kington Road and Woodbine Avenue also had Civic Holiday events.

The fantastic new [TBETHS Local History Index](http://tbeths.com/lhi.asp) [http://tbeths.com/lhi.asp] was my major source for details about early Civic Holiday celebrations in the local area - a search in the index for “Civic Holiday” resulted in 71 hits!

1878, Victoria Park was visited by 20,000, coming on one of the four steamers from Church Street. The Sons of England held their annual picnic and races. In the evening there was the band of the Royal Engineers and fireworks. Further west, streetcars from downtown took people to the Woodbine Park horse races. [August 13, *Globe*]



Wharf at Victoria Park, about 1900.

[Toronto Public Library Digital Archive PICTURES-R-6592](#)

1887, Kew and Balmy Beach residents organized a regatta on the Civic Holiday, open to residents only. “The residents and campers of this choice spot are all of the better class of citizens and their life, as a community, seems to be that of a pure democracy.” [July 27, *Globe*]

1888, Kew Beach, a cottage community of only 40 families, had 25 events including swimming and duck hunts, followed in the evening with bonfires and fireworks. [August 13, *Globe*]

1890, On Saturday East Toronto’s cricket team hosted a match with West Toronto Junction, and won 49 to 30. Then on the Civic Holiday Monday they defeated Brampton 84 to 60. [August 16, 18 & 19, *Globe*]

From 1893, the Kew Beach volunteer fireman annual picnic and games were held on the Civic Holiday Monday on the grounds adjoining the Kew Beach firehall on Queen. [Aug 16, 1895, *Globe*]

1894, "the Balmy Beach resort is now being found out by a very large number of citizens, thousands whom came down on the Civic Holiday and spent a quiet day with their families." [August 7, *Globe*]

1895, "East Toronto will celebrate Civic Holiday by a capital list of athletic events on the old Newmarket track, Danforth Road. A number of Scarboro horses will compete in the races. There is to be a football match, open to local clubs for a cup valued at \$15, and bicycle races will be held among the members of the Union Cycle club for several good prizes. The York Citizens' Band will be in attendance." [August 14, *Toronto World*]

1896, "Victoria Park kept up its reputation as a holiday resort yesterday, and had within its borders about as big a crowd as could well squeeze into it. Boating, bathing, games and dancing went on unceasingly and the Punch and Judy box was nearly upset at each exhibition by delighted children who couldn't be prevented from pulling aside the back curtain to find out how the machinery worked." [August 11, the *Toronto World*]

1900, "The annual excursion of GTR employees was held in Port Perry ... Proceeds went to injured railway men." East Toronto and Little York stores were closed for the day. [July 18, the *Toronto World*]

1903, "Great preparations are being made for celebrating Civic Holiday by the Woodbine Beachers. A program is being arranged and the rivalry as to the best show between themselves and Kew and Balmy Beaches is very keen." "Afterwards a dance will take place at the Stay-a-While Cottage." [July 29 and August 3, the *Toronto World*] Kew Beach had a parade of decorated boats but canoeing and sailing races were called off because of rough weather [August 10, *Globe*]



Civic Holiday Sports in Kew Gardens, 1907
[Toronto Public Library Digital Archive PC 4368](#)

1904, "Civic Holiday is the Henley day of Balmy Beach ... An event which caused the greatest interest was the tilting contest, in which some eight crews participated ... the members of the Balmy Beach Ladies' Tennis Club conducted a pow-wow and high tea." There were canoeing and rowing races, and a rescue race. The Gun Club held its first shoot. At Kew Beach the events included a sack race, wheelbarrow race, fat men race (190 lbs), and a fat ladies' race (160 lbs). [August 2 and 6, the *Toronto World*] At the Norway Lawn Tennis Club, the Norway team defeated St. Matthew's.



Regatta at Balmy Beach Club, 1905
City of Toronto Archives

1905, "Saturday is the day set apart by the Norway people as a Civic Holiday. This is the one day in the year when business is wholly suspended in Norway. This year the outing will take place to Scarboro Cliff Park [Munro Park], immediately to the east of Blantyre." A local trapezist, Mr. Barras, gave a number of worthy exhibitions and dancing on the green was continued until a late hour. [July 20 and 24, the *Toronto World*]

1907, Over the 1907 Civic Holiday the 15th annual Dominion Lawn Bowling tournament was at Woodbine Park, the largest lawn in the world, 364 bowlers entered. (August 9 & 20, *Globe*. Also in 1908, & 1909.)

1914, A lawn bowling tournament was organized at Kew Beach on the Civic Holiday that evolved into 64 teams in 1919.



Kew Beach Lawn Bowling Club, 1912
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