

Lake Metroparks' First Naturalist,

Don Strock

By Karen Lakus, Historical Interpreter



A modest, unassuming, mild-tempered man, Don Strock tried to instill his love of nature in everyone, especially children. As Lake Metroparks' first Chief Naturalist, Don shared his endless knowledge and enthusiasm for the outdoors with the Lake County community for more than 20 years.

Donald Charles Strock was born in 1904 near Alliance, Ohio. His love for nature stemmed from summers spent on his grandfather's farm in Trumbull County. Don was a self-taught naturalist whose interest blossomed into a second career. He had previously worked as a foreman for the Westinghouse Corporation in New York and at Industrial Rayon Corp. in Painesville Township. After burns on his lungs took him out of the plants, he became a self-employed carpenter and married Luana Fredebaugh. Don and Luana settled in Grand River and had two sons, one of whom died in infancy. Don became a frequent presence at the Morton Salt plant near his home. As a teenager, he had taken an interest in geology and it became a passion throughout the rest of his life. Due to this knowledge, Don was hired as a Mine Timber Supervisor to oversee the timbering and building of mine supports and advise on geologic issues.

Don's career with The Lake County Metropolitan Park District, now Lake Metroparks, began with a post on the Citizen Advisory Committee in 1959. He also volunteered to lead walks and perform odd jobs for the parks and was later contracted to undertake construction and maintenance projects. He joined the park district full-time in 1967 and over the years held many positions, including laborer, maintenance foreman, naturalist, acting director, assistant director and chief naturalist.

Under Strock's guidance, the naturalist program grew from a part-time, mostly volunteer operation to the well-developed and diverse department it is today. He began the first nature walks, school and scout programs and day camps. Early on, Strock recognized the value of cooperation and developed partnerships with local organizations, many of which are still going strong. The Blackbrook Audubon Society and Burroughs Nature Club, among others, are relationships originally fostered by Don that are being carried on by the naturalists of today.

Don retired from Lake Metroparks in 1980. His wife Luana had died in 1974, and Don and his second wife Ruth continued to travel between their homes in Gates Mills and Big Pine Key, Florida. Don passed away in 1989 at the age of 84. Ruth died in 1994.

Lake Metroparks continues to honor Don's memory in a number of ways. The library at Penitentiary Glen Nature Center is named the "Don Strock Natural History Library" and provides resources regarding natural and cultural history. A memorial sundial sculpture designed by local artist Carl Floyd was created to honor Don and Luana Strock at Lakeshore Reservation in North Perry. The bird observation deck at Arcola Creek Park is dedicated to the memory of Don and Ruth Strock.

The staff and volunteers of today's Lake Metroparks work hard to carry on the ideals of park founders like Don Strock. Through conservation, education and recreation, we strive to provide opportunities for all Lake County residents to enjoy a variety of activities that enhance their quality of life. We

think Don would be proud of how far we have come and we are grateful to him for his many contributions to our park district.

Lake Metroparks extends thanks to John Strock and Donna Strock Fiske for their contributions to this article.



“His background in natural history and his love for the parks was extensive. Just a really impressive gentleman.”

– Paul Belanger, long-time volunteer and member of the Lake Parks Foundation

“One thing I always appreciated about Don is that he was really probably about one of the youngest people (I knew) even though he was already in his 60s when I met him.”

– Kent Scott, Retired Naturalist

A Lake County Legend



“ Don was a story in himself. He was probably acting director more times than you can count on a hand. He was always the one, that when things weren't going too well, the directors would go to for advice; the chief ranger would go to for advice. The world of things that he knew...the man was a walking encyclopedia. You could ask him questions on almost any nature-oriented subject and he had some knowledge of it. ”

- *Bill Brahler, Chief Ranger Emeritus*

“ His great hobby was geology. He was very well-informed and very good. This was a big help to the park in identifying lands and landforms and things that we should preserve. ”

- *Gretta Pallister, volunteer and former member of Citizen Advisory Committee*

“ My recollection of Don was that he was just a quiet, gentle man. I know he was a great resource. ”

- *Mike Burko, Chief Ranger*

“ He and his wife were both wonderful people, very laid back, very easy going, one of those guys that everybody that met him, liked him. He never rocked the boat; always had the best interest of the park district at heart; a hard worker. You can't say enough positive things about Don. ”

- *James Schwarz, Former Executive Director*

“ Don had many different jobs with Lake Metroparks. He was an instrumental part in the development and establishment of the park district. He was a visionary. ”

- *Joe Balog, Retired Department Head of Buildings and Grounds*

“ Don Strock was leaving Lake Metroparks just as I was coming on board. His gift to me was one week in the field together. He took me to some of his favorite park places, pointed out properties that still needed conservation, and tried to pour a master naturalist's lifetime of knowledge into my spinning brain. I still have my field notes from those days, and some wonderful memories. Don wrote to me from his retirement home in Big Pine Key, always asking when I was coming to visit. I wish I had. Such a wonderful, kind and gentle man. ”

- *Ann Bugeda, Chief of Interpretive Services*

“ He influenced me all the time. He was always someone who would share something new that he had discovered in the parks. He made me realize that every single day there was always something new going on outdoors and Don was someone who saw those things and shared them with everyone that he crossed paths with. ”

- *Art Burke, Former Naturalist*

