

# ISLANDERS' LAST STAND

## The bitter battle between Metro and Toronto islanders flares next week in court

By JOHN SPEARS  
Star staff writer

The battle over the eviction of Toronto Island's 800 remaining residents is a struggle between romantics.

There's the romanticism of Albrecht Schoeborn, a gentle German immigrant who couldn't find a place to live when he arrived, penniless, 27 years ago until the Island opened its arms to him.

But there's also the sentiment of former Metro parks commissioner Tommy Thompson, who helped create a vision of a lush green island where any citizen could while away a summer's afternoon "under the willow tree."

There's no romance in the bitter political debates and the court battles over legal technicalities that have marked the 20 years of tug-of-war over these scraps of land in the harbor.

Next week, the islanders ask the Supreme Court of Ontario to quash the eviction notices Metro issued in 1976.

It won't be the first "final" battle over the homes, but this time some islanders are pessimistic.

Although they have planned a campaign of civil disobedience to resist eviction should their legal avenues of appeal run out, in the words of one islander: "If Metro is determined enough, they're going to win."

The issue before the courts is whether, under recent amendments to Ontario's Landlord and Tenant Act, Metro's writs of possession should have been issued without Metro proving a need for the properties.

### Heartbreak

If the writs are declared invalid, the islanders hope to be able to force a discussion before the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB) of the fundamental issue whether Metro needs the Island homes for park space.

The atmosphere of foreboding didn't hang over the islanders when Schoeborn moved there 27 years ago. In fact, it was the only neighborhood in the city that seemed to welcome him.

Soon after arriving in Toronto in 1951, he wrote to his wife and three children not to follow him from Germany. He couldn't afford accommodation for them on his \$35-a-week salary.

He had lost all his family possessions once in a World War II air raid, then again when his family escaped from East Germany into West Germany. A few years later they sold everything they had to buy passage to Canada.

Then he discovered the Island. "It wasn't beautiful," he recalls. "It was gorgeous."

It was also inexpensive. With his wife and three sons he moved into a house at Hanlan's Point, and a few years later bought his present home — "the only one I ever owned" — on Algonquin Island.

Schoeborn, now 73 and retired from his job as a photographer for Imperial Oil, leads a visitor to a small shed in his back garden. There, amid a clutter of ceramic and ironstone dishes and figures, stand a potter's wheel and a small kiln.

"This is my real heartbreak," he says,

fingering a sculpture. "If I lose this I don't know if I can find somewhere else to continue."

There's no other place where he can expect to be able to live in his own home for \$750 a year — \$500 in taxes and a \$250 lease — on a pension income that's below the minimum taxable level. And he'll get no compensation for the value of his house if he's forced to move out, even though he purchased the dwelling, though not the land it sits on, 20 years ago.

"That's why we're fighting so desperately," he said. "People ask me where I'm going if they throw us out. I still don't know. No idea. But the islanders make no bones about it — we've decided that if the bulldozers come, we'll resort to civil disobedience. We will not go until we are taken out by force."

There's no doubt, from the conviction in Schoeborn's voice, that he loves the Island and the way of life it offered him for a quarter century.

But there's also a note of emotion in Tommy Thompson's voice as he describes his dream to turn all of Toronto Island into a park open to everyone in Metro, a dream conceived in his boyhood.

### Escape city

"I was born at 336 Walmer Rd.," he said, "and the only thing I knew about picnicking and summer was the Toronto Islands."

It was an age of steam ferries, street vendors hawking fruit at the docks and blazing summer days at Hanlan's Point or Centre Island, which Thompson remembers with unashamed nostalgia.

By the time Thompson became Metro parks commissioner, the city had ceded all 612 acres of the Islands to Metro and, in 1956, Metro council had voted to clear them of private dwellings. For Thompson, it was a chance to let his romantic instincts run free and to create a park with green open spaces



Albrecht Schoeborn will hate losing pottery shed

where even the poor man could go to escape the city.

"At least once in a while, everyone deserves the opportunity to have a summer's day under a willow tree," he explains. "You can kick a ball, watch the gulls, feed the geese. That may be romantic, but it's the kind of thing not many cities can offer. And all that you can do on Toronto Island."

So why, with a total of 612 acres on the Island, does Metro need to expel the residents of its 250 remaining homes, occupying about 29 acres?

Now that he's no longer parks com-

missioner, Thompson concedes that he doesn't have hard answers buttressed with statistics and consulting reports.

"I take the romantic view," he says. "It's like writing a book with 20 chapters that needs a twenty-first to finish it."

### Demolished

"If I went to the Ontario Municipal Board and said that," he adds with a chuckle, "they'd say 'Fine, what other reasons do you have?'"

Taking the issue to the OMB is exactly

what the islanders have in mind, and for exactly the reason Thompson himself states.

So far, the struggle over the Island homes has been a courtroom battle over legal fine points. It began in earnest once Metro Council decided to make a concerted effort to get the houses off Ward's and Algonquin Islands in 1973. (The houses at the other end of the Islands had been demolished soon after Metro took over.)

It took a Supreme Court of Canada decision in 1976 before the islanders' leases were finally declared to have expired.

But when Metro applied for writs of possession to evict the residents from their homes, the islanders fought back once more. Next week's case, in which the islanders have hired lawyer John J. Robinette, will decide whether the writs are in fact valid.

Ron Mazza, 31, a lifelong resident of the Island and a spokesman for the Toronto Island Residents Association, said that if the islanders win, they hope to force the issue before the OMB for a decision on whether Metro really needs the space.

"If we can finally get that kind of rational forum, we're away," he said. "We're dying to get to the OMB."

Mazza says the city doesn't need more parkland, and it does need low-cost housing. But his commitment to the Island goes deeper.

"It's home, eh?" he says. "It's unique, and if you did lose the Island you just wouldn't find another way of life like it anywhere. It's the only one I've known, and I'm going to fight damn hard to keep it."

"I can't imagine losing the Island, because so much of what I am is here."

Other residents, who chose the Island later in life than Mazza, have their own reasons.

"They're personal, psychological things," says Robert Kolyk, an English teacher at George Brown College who

moved to the Island seven years ago. "It's like a village; you can get a sense of identity and self-worth. We have to make out own activities, too; it's not packaged for us."

Carol Hollywood, 27, moved to the Island a year ago to live with her common-law husband. It's a relationship which she thinks might be frowned on in other communities, since both are still legally married to other partners, but on the Island "you don't have to worry about what your next-door neighbor thinks."

Those arguments don't impress Scarborough Controller Gus Harris, the only member of the current Metro Council who also sat on the 1956 council that ordered the islanders off. At the time, Harris said in an interview, he thought the islanders would all be gone in five or 10 years.

### Promoters

The people who live there now, he says, are largely a "small group of professional promoters" who are exploiting Metro because of the low rent they pay for their properties under the terms of the now-expired leases.

Because their land-rent is so low, Harris said, — about \$30 or \$40 a month — it's easy for them to round up enough money collectively to hire top legal talent to fight back at Metro.

"No one would want to put them off if they were poor people who couldn't go anywhere else, but they're not," he said. "It's not a question of lack of housing any more either. There's 48,000 units in Metro available right now."

Metro Council itself is split over the Island issue, with city politicians generally backing the islanders and the majority of borough representatives backing Harris's position.

Toronto Alderman Allan Sparrow, whose ward encompasses the Island, sees the struggle now as "almost a personal thing" between the islanders and some Metro councillors.

He also sees resentment on the part of suburban politicians toward the city's stance of defending neighborhoods from expressways and through traffic. In retaliation for the city policy, he says, Metro is attacking the one city neighborhood in the Metro domain.

"There's an absolute glut of parkland in that general area," Sparrow said, pointing to the Leslie spit, the new Crombie Park in the soon-to-be-developed St. Lawrence community, Harbourfront, and Harbor Square parks.

"In any case, there's no parkland rationale for destroying neighborhoods," he said.

Not much in the way of romance at the political level, perhaps — but then the islanders have incorporated even the bitter elements of the conflict into their way of life. Part of the routine of life on the Island has become struggling to stay there.

"If we got a 20-year lease now, I'd be disappointed," says Ron Mazza with a laugh.

Lease or no, he's determined to stay. "I've been here 30 years," he said, and "I intend to be here another 30."

## Metro's 22-year fight to capture Island

By MICHAEL BEST  
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It's a 10-minute ferry ride from the docks at the foot of Bay St. to a place of soft lake breezes, shady parkland walks, clean beaches to swim and sunbathe — and a silence that's a tonic after the city's din.

The return fare to this Shangri-La is \$1 for adults, 25 cents for children, and already in this year — the year of the long, hot summer — over 1.1 million people, the equivalent of half Metro's population, have made the trip.

This is Toronto Island, which Metro Chairman Paul Godfrey calls "the brightest jewel in our whole parks system."

It is also the subject of Metro's longest struggle to carry through a civic program.

Twenty-two years have passed since Metro Council set out to transform Toronto Island (610 acres, exclusive of the Island airport) park.

Only one member of that 1956 council remains on the job. He's Scarborough Controller Gus Harris.

"We were all pretty proud of that decision," recalls the controller.

The program was to take a few years to complete.

But the general goal was that by the start of the 1970s, the last of the private cottages would have disappeared.

The land level would be raised by filling — to prevent flooding in times of high water and storms on the lake. And most of the island would be devoted to the "grass and trees" open space favored by former Metro parks commissioner Tommy Thompson, now director of the Metro zoo.

But this goal is now eight years overdue. Visitors have the full run of the western end (Hanlan's Point) and of the Centre Island section, with its formal gardens and model farm and "funland" amusements for children.

But the eastern end of the park — commonly called the Ward's Island section — is still basically unchanged from when Metro launched its over-all plan nearly a quarter century ago.

A series of Lake Ontario storms in the 1850s created the Island in the first place. Before that it was a peninsula, favored by the Indians for fishing and hunting birds, and was joined to the mainland near the mouth of the Don River.

The City of Toronto took formal ownership from

the Crown in 1867, and an era of land leases for private cottages — and for a while tents — began.

After Metropolitan Toronto was created in 1953, a federation of the city and boroughs, the City of Toronto was eager to give up ownership of the land to the new Metro government — on condition that all the private leases be cancelled, the private buildings cleared, and the entire space opened for general public use.

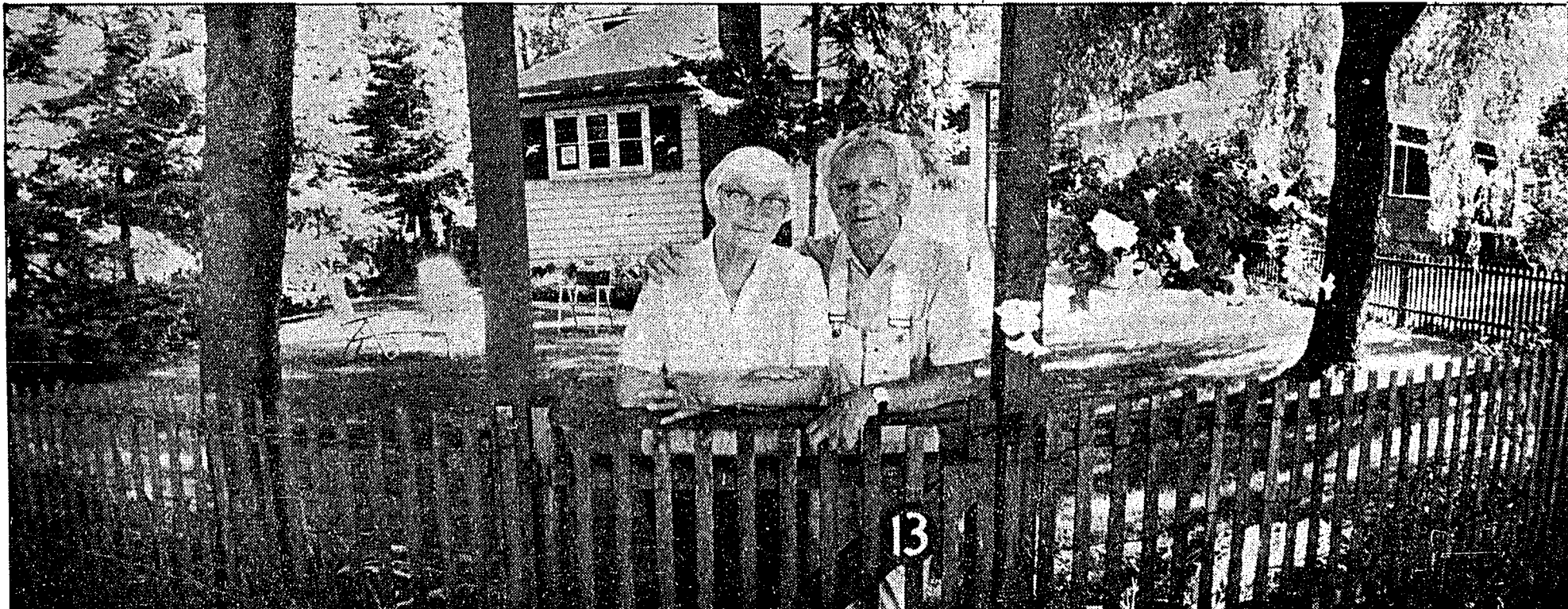
The deal was made in 1956, with the stipulation that if Metro should not proceed with the park plan, the Island would revert to city ownership.

At the start there were approximately 650 cottages on the whole Island from Hanlan's Point to Ward's Island. By 1968, some 400 of them had disappeared, and the land converted to park.

That's when the remaining tenants dug in their heels.

They won several brief extensions of stay.

Metro's decision to lower the boom once and for all came in December, 1973. Most of the time since then, the fate of the old dream of an Island-wide park has been in the courts.



"We will not go until we're taken out by force," says Albrecht Schoeborn, who's lived on Toronto Island 27 years

— Star photo by John Maher