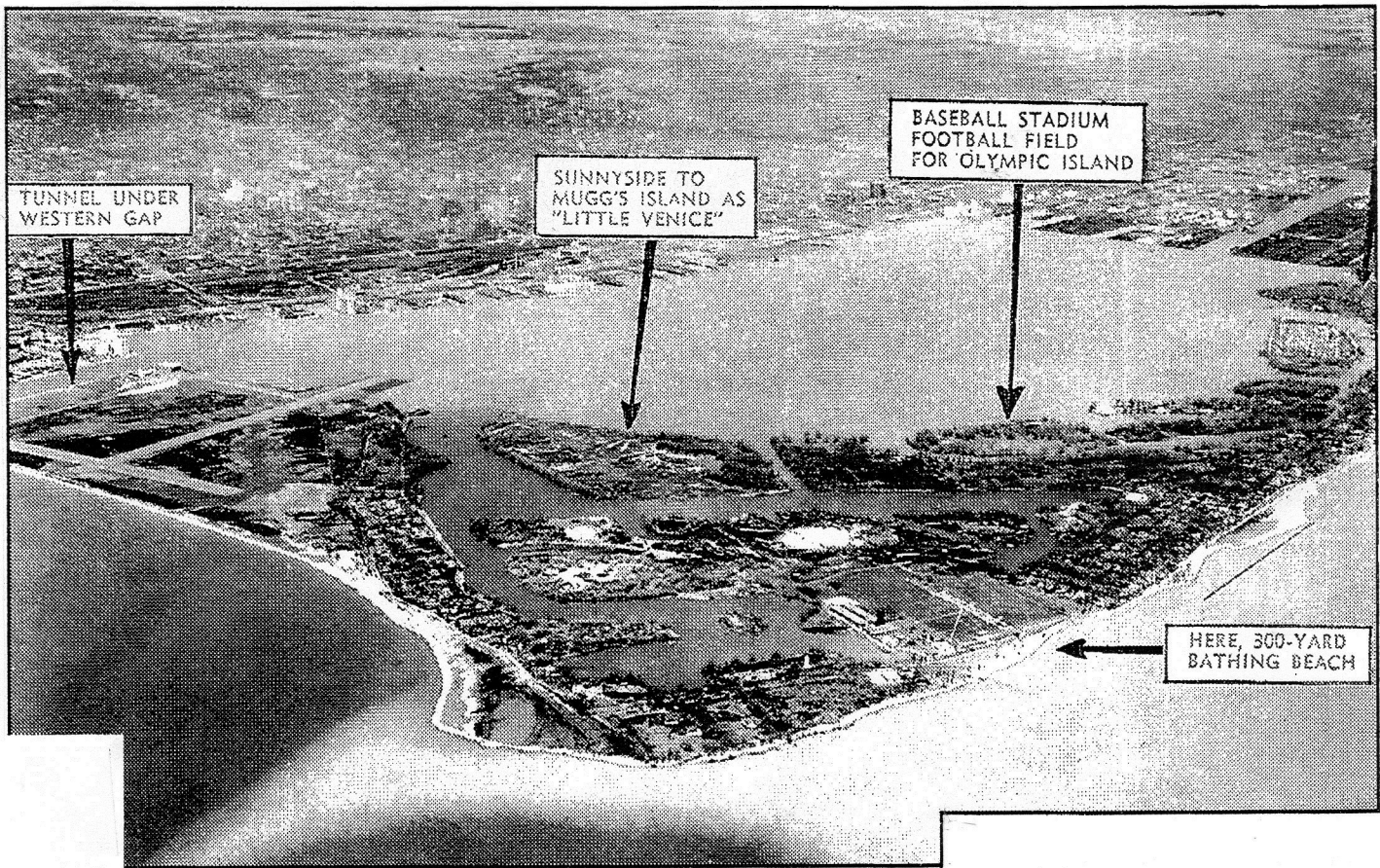


The Sunday Sun, December 17, 2000

Island airport bridge up in the air



BRIDGING THE GAP ... One of the many plans submitted over the years for Toronto Island. This one, from the 1950s, features that elusive tunnel under the 400-foot-wide West Gap and other Island "amenities." Right: At first, access to the airport was by this unnamed rope-ferry fashioned out of a converted scow. Though classed as temporary, it lasted 25 years until the present *Maple City* was acquired in 1964. A back-up boat, *Windmill Point*, arrived in 1985.

Guess what? I finally found something that's gone on longer than the recent U.S. presidential race.

Our debacle revolves around whether or not to build a bridge across the West Gap to serve the airport at the west end of the Island. Many believe this connection will greatly improve the viability of Toronto City Centre Airport, a name chosen a few years ago to replace the term Toronto Island Airport and to emphasize the proximity of the airfield to downtown Toronto.



Mike

FILEY

THE WAY WE WERE

For the record, it should be stated that the airfield has actually had three names. The first was Port George VI, Island Airport, a mouthful of words selected by city council to honour King George VI's first visit to Toronto in 1939, the year the first few aircraft began using the new Island facility. The monarch was accompanied by Queen Elizabeth, now the Queen Mother.

When the first of the Island airport drawings appeared in 1935, one of its major features was not to be a bridge, but a tunnel running south from the foot of Bathurst St., under the West Gap to a large parking lot adjacent to the runways. Work actually began on this tunnel well in advance of any construction on the airport itself.

Island airport bridge up in the air

The purpose of the tunnel was twofold: As an access way to the future airfield and, perhaps more importantly at the time, as a way of getting men who were still suffering from the effects of the Great Depression back to work.

In April, 1935, the federal government of R.B. Bennett set aside \$1 million for the project and, within six months, work on the city-side approach had been started. Steel piling was installed and dredging completed for the necessary coffer dam across the channel that would permit tunnelling to begin.

It was all in vain, however, for 1935 happened to be a federal election year. When Bennett's government was defeated by William Lyon Mackenzie King, one of the first things the new prime minister did was rescind all funding for the tunnel. No money, no tunnel.

Work did get underway on the airport however, and by 1939 it was fully operational. But the idea of that fixed link never really went away. Every few years, new plans for the future of the Island were released and almost every time a link was included, though instead of an expensive tunnel, officials were promoting a less expensive bridge.

That's not to say the tunnel concept was totally dead. In fact, as recently as 1979, a private Montreal aviation company proposed building a \$5-million pedestrian tunnel so Montreal- and Ottawa-bound commuters could "walk" to the airport. Seven years later, the new City Express airline predicted that by 1988 a vehicle tunnel costing between \$12 million and \$18 million would be in place. Needless to say, nothing happened.

Then, in 1996, the fixed-link proponents switched from the idea of a tunnel connection to a bridge connection, not unlike the street-car bridge over the old West Gap first proposed in the late 1800s. It would have permitted Toronto's less affluent citizen a "one-seat, one-fare" ride to the Island playground.

Even more recently, earlier this year in fact, city council finally approved a bridge connection, pro-

vided a few minor details were ironed out before work began.

One of the details was who would pay for the multi-million-dollar structure. This, plus a few other imponderables, eventually led council to ask that another "Future of the Island Airport" study be undertaken, this time to determine whether the airport has a future in the "new" Toronto. And if it has, would a bridge connection be necessary to ensure that future?

On the other hand, if the report states the airport has no future, a second vote will be requested and another report will be sought ... manual recount!

■ Here are a few ideas for that history buff on your gift list: *Rosedale* by Bess Crawford (Boston Mills Press, \$49.95), is a lavishly illustrated, entertainingly written pictorial history that recounts the origins and evolution of Toronto's most prestigious neighbourhood.

Music (Makes The World Go 'Round) is a fascinating new compact disc prepared by Bill Pratt and the Canadian Antique Phonograph Society. It features nearly 70 minutes of music by a variety of Canadian dance bands that were performing from 1922 to 1930. Do you remember Fred

Culley And His Royal York Hotel Orchestra, Romanelli's Orchestra or New Princes' Toronto Band? These and more are on this wonderful new CD, available at Dragonfly Music in the Don Mills Centre or for \$18 from the Society at 924-8207 (www.CAPSnews.org).

Oh, permit me one last plug for my two new books: *Toronto Sketches 6* (Dundurn Press, \$17.95) and *Toronto, Then & Now* (Magic Light Publishing, \$45).

