

Bert Szabo, Summit Metro Parks' first naturalist, dies at 101



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Akron Beacon Journal

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Bert Szabo, the first naturalist for the precursor to Summit Metro Parks who helped start the park district's Fall Hiking Spree more than a half-century ago, died Tuesday at age 101.

A Lorain native who also had lived in Hudson, Szabo lived in Munroe Falls for the last 45 years. He earned a bachelor's degree in agriculture and a master's degree in plant pathology, both from Ohio University. He also served in the U.S. Army during World War II, from 1942 to 1946, as a typist in Europe.

Szabo spent several years managing Evamere, the dairy farm at Western Reserve Academy, before starting his career with what was then known as the Akron

Metropolitan Park District in 1957. He was one year older than the park district, which was established Dec. 31, 1921.

"It's in my blood, the nature part of it," he said in a 2019 interview with the Beacon Journal.



Helped start Fall Hiking Spree

He served as the area manager for Goodyear Heights Metro Park before being appointed as the first chief naturalist in 1963. The idea that would become the annual Fall Hiking Spree was the vision of then-director Arthur Wilcox, but Szabo helped get it started in 1964.

The Fall Hiking Spree continues today — and Szabo participated in the spree for more than 50 consecutive years, only stopping a few years ago.



Along with regularly leading nature walks and speaking to schools and other local groups, Szabo also designed exhibits at the F.A. Seiberling Nature Realm Visitors Center, created the unique millstone portal sign at Deep Lock Quarry Metro Park and helped launch Green Islands newsletter, now a magazine.

Szabo "helped shape how naturalists connect people to the parks," the park district said in a [2021 post](#). Many of the methods used by Szabo and naturalists he hired to work with him through his nearly three decades as chief naturalist are still being used today, with some modifications."

His favorite parks were Virginia Kendall, now part of Cuyahoga Valley National Park, "for variety" and Deep Lock Quarry and Firestone Metro Parks "for history."



7,000 volunteer hours with Summit Metro Parks

An avid birder, Szabo was also an official compiler for Greater Akron Audubon Society's annual Christmas Bird Count from 1970 to 1992, according to his obituary.

Szabo retired from the park district in 1991 but continued to volunteer, contributing 7,000 volunteer hours by 2018, including organizing the park district's photographic and historical archives.

"I never left," he said in 2019. "Everybody thought I [still] worked there."

Sand Run Parkway was temporarily renamed "Bert Szabo Parkway" in December 2019, and Summit Metro Parks celebrates Dec. 4 — his birthday — as "Bert Szabo Day."



His reaction? "What's all the fuss about?" he said in 2019.

Bert Szabo Day: Summit Metro Parks celebrates 'Bert Szabo Day'

“Bert has indeed left an enduring mark across the park district and beyond that will be felt for decades to come,” the park district said. “We send peace and love to Bert’s family during this time, and hope all those who knew Bert will honor his legacy by being kind, being curious and celebrating the wonderful world around us.”

Szabo served on several boards, advocated for national park

Szabo became a member of the Association of Interpretive Naturalists in 1958 and served as president from 1969 to 1971. It became the National Association for Interpretation in 1988, with Szabo a founding member.

Szabo also helped to establish and grow the Friends of the Metro Parks, a nonprofit cooperative organization that provides financial support to the park district, as a board member from around 1991 to 2002.

Szabo served on several boards, including a governor-appointed position on the Ohio Department of Natural Resources' Natural Areas & Preserves Council (1970-1983, 1987-1994), the Old Woman Creek National Estuarine Sanctuary Council (1981-2004), ODNR's Recreation Resources Commission (1990-1994) and Audubon's representative on the Pittsburgh Plate & Glass Advisory Panel (2002-2006).



He was inducted into the Ohio Department of Natural Resources Hall of Fame in 2007, the Ohio Senior Citizens Hall of Fame in 2018 and the Ohio Veterans Hall of Fame in 2019.

In the early 1970s, he was an advocate for the establishment of the Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area, which was established in 1974. It was renamed Cuyahoga Valley National Park in 2000.



According to his obituary, a few years later, the Beacon Journal wrote, “His grassroots campaigning in the early 1960s on behalf of the National Park in the Cuyahoga River Valley is generally recognized as the force which kept the political ball rolling.”

According to his obituary, the last paragraph of his last article in Green Islands from 1991 states:

“The pollution of our planet, the loss of forests, plants and animals must be our major concern. They are biological time clocks ticking off the time when man may no longer persevere. We cannot separate natural history from human history — each is dependent upon the other. Protecting our environment is essential for the health and

welfare of future generations. It is my hope that I have contributed somewhat to this endeavor.”

Bert Szabo services information

Szabo is survived by four children: Judy (Floyd) Aprill, John (Rosario) Szabo, Suzi (Phillip) Gard and Mark (Vianna) Szabo; nine grandchildren; and fourteen great-grandchildren.



According to his obituary, many of his family members followed in his naturalist footsteps: his oldest son Dr. John Szabo is a retired chairman of the Geosciences Department of the University of Akron; his son Mark Szabo is a retired naturalist from the Huron-Clinton Metroparks in Michigan; grandson Howard Aprill is a naturalist with Milwaukee County Parks; grandson Dr. Michael Aprill is a science teacher in Sheboygan, Wisconsin; and grandson Shawn Szabo is a wildlife biologist attending graduate school at Oregon State University.

Visitation will be from 4 to 8 p.m. Friday, March 25 at Dunn-Quigley Funeral Home, 3333 Kent Road, Stow. A funeral mass will be at 9:30 a.m. Saturday, March 26 at Holy Family Catholic Church, 3179 Kent Road, Stow.

The family has requested remembrances be made in the form of contributions to the Seiberling Nature Realm, Summit Metro Parks, 975 Treaty Line Road, Akron, Ohio, 44313.