JENS JENSEN—CONSERVER OF NATURE AND OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT

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On the western bluffs of Door County, accentuated by pine and cedar, stands The Clearing—a unique, informal, cultural center, offering varied courses which change weekly. In nearby Ellison Bay a village school, unusual in America because of its natural setting in a growth of white pine, epitomizes the philosophy of a famous landscape architect’s “school in a park” theory. In Racine, Wisconsin, that “little Denmark of America,” a city park system, beautiful because of its natural winding lay-out, stretches invitingly to the wayfarer—heritage of its Danish-American planner. At Madison, Wisconsin, Children’s Glen offers a delightful nature-retreat for the adventurous spirit of the playful young. Farther south, in the West Chicago park system, fatigued city-dwellers may find quiet spots of greenery in the confines of Columbus, Garfield and Humboldt Parks; and ringing the territory of Greater Chicago, along the waterways of the Des Plaines, Sac and Calumet Rivers, that same urbanite may discover a chain of wooded tracts, offering a country-like environment and known as the Cook County Forest Preserves. Circling the state of Illinois, particularly along the Mississippi, Rock River, and tributaries of the Ohio, there stretches a similar chain of state parks, instigated into being by a comparatively new organization—“Friends of Our Native Landscape.” In central Illinois, at Springfield, the Lincoln Memorial Garden spreads out in the open-hearted, prairie-like candor, befitting the liberal spirit of the Great Emancipator for whom it is named. In the neighboring state of Indiana, a seven-hundred acre tract of dune land has been saved for posterity to serve as a natural text-book for the science-minded.1

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1 Because the private papers of Jensen were destroyed in a fire at The Clearing in the late 1930’s, the researcher must rely largely on fugitive, secondary sources; but fortunately Miss Martha Fulkerson, Jensen’s private secretary for over two decades, is still available for information. Reference materials used for the factual, biographical data in this article were obtained from the following sources: Martha Fulkerson, “Jens Jensen, Friend of Our Native Landscape,” The Peninsula (June 1958), pp. 7–10; Martha Fulkerson, Letter to author of this paper of April 13, 1964; interview held with Miss Fulkerson at The Clearing, April 25, 1964; Clifford Butcher, “Jens Jensen Renews War on City,” Milwaukee Journal, June 9, 1935, II: 5: obituary articles in Madison Capital Times, October 1, 1951, pp. 1 and 3; Milwaukee Journal, October 1, 1951, pp. 1 and 2; Chicago Tribune, October 2, 1951, p. 20; and WHO WAS WHO IN AMERICA (Chicago, 1961), p. 448.
What have all these separate spots in common? What is their connecting link? In one way or another they represent either the creativity or the civic activity of a remarkable Danish-American landscape architect—who, up to his death in his ninety-first year, sought to preserve for his fellow Americans little retreats of natural greenery, where fatigued mankind could find moments for peace of mind and refreshment of spirit.

Although Jens Jensen grew up on the sea-tossed, history-drenched coastland of Denmark, receiving his training in landscape design at the agricultural college at Jutland, like many fellow Europeans who found the Continental political scene not to their liking, he fled to America—arriving in New York City in his early twenties with the proverbial “dime in his pocket.” After brief farming jobs in Florida and Iowa, Jensen came to Chicago, starting up the ladder of the Chicago park system in a landscaping career which brought him national fame and caused him later to be titled “Dean of American Landscape Architects.”

His rise to professional success parallels the typical progress of many a nineteenth-century American immigrant: Starting as a common laborer in Chicago’s Washington Park, he soon won attention from the neighboring citizenry by his creation of a little wild flower garden in the heart of the city. From there he worked his way up to become, in turn, head gardener at Garfield Park (whose world-renowned conservatory came into being largely as the result of his planning); foreman of Union Park; foreman of Humboldt Park—at the time Chicago’s largest park; and finally, general superintendent and landscape architect for the Greater West Park system of Chicago, a position he held until 1920.

In his Chicago park landscaping experimentations, Jensen is chiefly noted for his work at Columbus Park, which still exists today practically as it was created, relatively untouched by the political manipulators influential in most cities. Its open, sky-loving lagoon, with plantings of native hawthorn and crab-apple, stretches out restfully—exemplifying most concretely Jensen’s philosophy of natural landscaping.  

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For Jensen represented something new in the field of park planning, promulgating a novel, unconventional approach in landscape architecture: At a time when the Continental style of formal, geometric landscaping was very prevalent in public parks and private estates—influenced strongly in this direction by the Chicago World’s Fair exhibits of 1893—Jensen advocated a type of design more closely resembling the English country park: informal, non-geometric, patterned after Nature’s curving byways and making use of native plant materials. He used trees and flowers particularly indigenous to the region, rather than exotic, foreign plantings. His motif for this new type of landscaping he obtained by a careful study of the Illinois prairie country which his immigrant eyes had seen stretching all around him on his arrival in the Midwest. For Jensen came to love the prairie even more than he had loved his native sea-scape of Denmark. And the more he studied the prairie, the more he became convinced that the public and private grounds he was landscaping should contain only plants indigenous to that landscape; so he tried to recapture in his parkways the “feel of the prairie” as it must have appealed to the early settlers—using native wild phlox, blazing star, purple wild flag, swamp rose mallow, flowering shad, wild crab and hawthorne, beech, white oak, birch, sugar maple, and other trees belonging naturally to the region in which he was working. In fact, Wilhelm Miller, Professor of Horticulture at the University of Illinois, cited Jensen as the pioneer in this form of landscape design, noting that Jensen was “probably the first designer who consciously took the prairie as his leading motive.”

But in utilizing these native materials, Jensen felt he must always consciously take into consideration the personality of the plant, the personality of the landscape, and the personality of the owner of the estate on which he was working. Moreover, landscape architecture, as he once noted, was one of the most difficult of the fine arts because the designer was working with living, changing material. So he must consider not just how a certain tree looks now, but “must see the tree in its full beauty hundreds of years hence,” when it would have grown up to take in more of the sky line.

Living at a time in Chicago when there was a great interest in “freedom of form”—a governing member of Chicago’s Art Institute Board, and active in the Cliff Dwellers and other art groups—Jensen reflected in his landscaping that same “freedom of form”

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*Wilhelm Miller, “The Prairie Spirit.” pp. 2–3

*Jensen, Sittings, p. 19.
which was to be found in the creative work of some of his Chicago artist-friends in other fields: Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright in the field of architecture; Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, and Vachel Lindsay in poetry; and Lorado Taft in sculpturing.8

Speaking of Jensen’s creations—both in private and public gardening projects—Leonard Eaton, professor of architecture at the University of Michigan, appraises Jensen as—

perhaps America’s greatest landscape architect. In addition to being a superb artist in his own field, Jensen was native in Chicago at a time when the artists of that city were in an extremely active phase and his career shows a remarkable interaction between the arts of architecture and landscape design. . . . Jensen was a major American artist, one of the most distinguished this country has produced. His design concepts were as original and daring as anything developed by the Chicago School in architecture and with that school he had an intimate connection. Perhaps the central trend of the movement was the belief that the region had a cultural identity distinct from that of the rest of the nation. . . . The achievement of Jens Jensen must, then, be understood in relation to the work of his contemporaries. In his best moments none of them surpassed him.9

Believing that “form must follow function” and that “happiness and full self-expression can only be found by spreading one’s roots in the soil,”10 Jensen sought means by which the city-dweller could be emancipated from the urban bee-hive for at least short moments of respite—by furnishing him with natural woodland retreats in the heart of the great city or on the outskirts of that great city.11

For Jensen’s civic service did not stop with the West Chicago Park system. Loving the wide open prairie stretches with their native vegetation, Jensen noted the burgeoning out of Chicago in three directions and realized, foresightedly, that this native landscape would soon be swallowed up by city real estate developments unless steps were taken to preserve it. So, while still serving as the superintendent of the Chicago West Park system, he spent many Sundays surveying the areas along the Des Plaines, Sac and Calumet rivers, with the happy result that he soon forcefully advocated

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8 Eaton, pp. 145–50; Fulkerson, letter to author, p. 1; “Upbuilders of Chicago,” Chicago Magazine, 2:691 (September 1911); Madison Capital Times, October 1, 1951, p. 3.

9 Eaton, p. 150.


11 Jens Jensen, Greater West Park System (Chicago, 1919), pp. 13–4, 20, 38–9; Jensen, Sittings, pp. 80–88; 120–1; Clifford Butcher, “Jens Jensen Renewed War on City,” Milwaukee Journal, June 9, 1925. Note, too, Mertha Fulkerson’s quotation of Jensen’s comment in her Peninsula article (June 1925), p. 8: “Mass education, mass production and mass thinking is levelling the world into a monotonous sameness and totalitarianism is the result. Now we are in a struggle to prove whether the individual is of any consequence or not. At such times the little violet along the trail can lead the way to sound reasoning and proper respect for individual effort. Lessons in the soil give the key to wholesome growth.”
setting aside certain wooded areas—later to be known as the Forest Preserves of Cook County. To bring these Forest Preserves into being necessitated strong political action, but the genial Danish-American was skillful in finding backing among Chicago’s wealthy residents as well as its average citizenry. Although it took both city and county action and the passage of an entirely new law to enable the county to hold land for the purposes Jensen recommended, eventually Cook County was empowered to purchase all the lands Jensen had advocated.\(^\text{12}\) Even a casual glance at a map of the Greater Chicago area today will show just how wide-reaching and numerous are these county tracts—peaceful sanctuaries where today’s citizenry may find retreat reminiscent of the land our Midwest pioneers remembered. According to one noted Midwest architect and city planner, these Preserves are unique in being “still the largest wilderness area contiguous in any major American city.”\(^\text{13}\)

But Jensen’s civic-mindedness extended beyond the boundaries of Greater Chicago and Cook County. When that conservation-minded organization, Friends of Our Native Landscape, was formed in 1913, Jensen was its leading spirit and served as its first president—continuing in that office for over twenty years. During the first decade of its existence, the organization chose for its special project concerted action to save certain portions of natural beauty in Illinois for state parks. Their recommendations were published in a brochure entitled Proposed Park Areas In The State of Illinois, with Jensen serving as editor and chairman of the publication, as well as chief instigator to action. As he argued in the foreword:

Practically all the lands mentioned in this report are of little or no agricultural value. They bring to us more of the spiritual side than the material. They represent Illinois as the white man found it—a different world from the man-made one. . . . They offer refuge for native wild life and a place of escape for a while at least from the grind and care of daily life.\(^\text{14}\)

So today, largely because Jensen and his colleagues worked diligently through different community groups for their preservation, Illinois boasts such state parks as the Savanna Headlands of the

\(^{\text{12}}\) The legislation concerning the formation of Cook County Forest Preserves was quite involved. Sources that clarify the matter are the following: Cook County Outer Belt Park Commission, Forest Preserves (Chicago, 1905), pp. 3–31; John B. Morrill, “Forest Preserve District of Cook County, Illinois,” Landscape Architecture, 38:139–44 (July 1948); Daniel Burnham, Planning the Region of Chicago (Chicago, 1916), pp. 134–87; Harvey M. Karlin, Governments of Chicago (Chicago, 1958), pp. 271–83; John C. Bollens, Special District Governments in the United States (Berkeley, University of California, 1958), pp. 132–8; Leonard Eaton, p. 146; and Mertha Fulkerson, Letter to author, p. 2.

\(^{\text{13}}\) Eaton, p. 164. (Present acreage is 52,000 acres, according to recent article in the Christian Science Monitor, May 4, 1964, II:2.)

\(^{\text{14}}\) Friends of Our Native Landscape, Proposed Park Areas in the State of Illinois, (Chicago, 1921), foreword by Jensen, chairman and editor.
Mississippi, Starved Rock State Park, the Apple River Canyon, and Ogle County White Pine Forest—the only native white pine forest in the state. Of the twenty tracts recommended for preservation, only two failed to materialize. Of those which did become actualities, dearest probably to Jensen’s heart was that inter-state section between Illinois and Iowa, encompassing the Mississippi Palisades and known as the Savanna Headlands. Jensen himself wrote the sections of the report advocating their salvation, noting—

On these ancient cliffs of pre-historic time botanical and geological science, together with the early history of Illinois, vie with each other in importance of interest. The deep ravines are filled with forests of ferns and the crags and talus formations are full of interesting plants not found in the adjacent prairie country. . . .

The views from the Palisades up and down the Mississippi are both dramatic and inspiring. It is here that we of Mid-America may feel the greatness of the prairie country to the fullest.

It is well to consider the significance of our heritage of river and stream and prairie. . . . I have often thought what it would mean if every boy and girl, and the grownups as well from farm and city, would come to these bluffs to get a greater outlook of the world. If only once a year they could sit down on the edge of a steep cliff and watch the currents flow by. . . . In this way our Mid-American rivers become the highway of our thoughts.  

That people can now experience this quiet pleasure from the Mississippi Palisades is largely due to the efforts of Jensen and his colleagues.

And the same civic-minded zeal which brought into being these eighteen Illinois State Parks—just as it had earlier instigated the West Chicago parkways and the Cook County Forest Preserves—aided also the neighboring state of Indiana: For it was Jensen who took a committee of Indiana officials (including the director of the Indiana State Parks, the governor of the state, and several state legislators) to the Dunes area, spurred them to climb one of the highest dunes, and pointed out from its top the area which should be included in an Indiana Dunes State Park. As Miss Mertha Fulkerson, Jensen’s secretary for many years, notes—

The importance of the Indiana Dunes to Jens Jensen was that here was the meeting ground of plants from as far north as Hudson Bay and as far south as the swamps of Florida. . . . Jensen’s hope was to make this a natural textbook for the scientist . . . the botanist, the naturalist and the ecologist.  

Letters from Jensen to E. J. Parker, written March 24, 1911 and March 25, 1911, proposing plan for legislative action. (On file at Chicago Historical Society Library)

Jensen, “Savanna Headlands” and “Preservation of Our River Courses and Their Natural Setting,” in Friends of our Native Landscape, Proposed Park Areas, n. p.

Mertha Fulkerson, Letter to author, April 12, 1964, p. 2.
Although Jensen recommended purchase of all land from Chesterton, Indiana, to Fremont—some 3,000 acres for the Dunes area—and although the governor and State Director of Parks were in agreement, some of the legislators favored a smaller purchase. As a result, Indiana today has a Dunes park of some 700 acres, when she might so easily have had more.

During the latter part of Jensen’s life—in fact, after his sixtieth year—when the political machinery of Big Bill Thompson altered the Chicago scene, Jensen ended his long career as landscape designer for the city’s park system and entered private practice entirely—planning the estates of such wealthy Midwesterners as Ogden Armour, Julius Rosenwald, Henry and Edsel Ford. But these private estates, like his public parks, bore evidence, too, of his original philosophy of landscape architecture. Always he studied the terrain, the plants native to the area, and his patron, and then sought to bring about a happy compatibility of spirit of the three: For one person of nervous, high-strung temperament, who lived a life of tension in his work, Jensen planned a quiet retreat, with an open expanse facing the Western sunset, where the very landscape would suggest peace. For another patron, whose house was built in the horizontal planes of the Japanese influence, Jensen used native crab-apple as a compatible planning to carry out the horizontal lines.\(^\text{18}\)

Then, after some years of landscaping for private individuals, Jensen established residence in Door County, Wisconsin—becoming, as usual, one of its most public-spirited citizens during the last sixteen years of his life. On a 120-acre plot of naturally timbered landscape, he built from native stone, and utilizing the crafts of native workmen, that unique, informal cultural center known as “The Clearing”—so titling it because he felt that “one must have a clearing to appreciate the forest.”\(^\text{19}\) Patterned somewhat after the Scandinavian folk schools, The Clearing was conceived to draw together craftsmen and creative artists of kindred outlook and inspiration—the landscape architect, the painter, the dancer, the artisan in wood, metal and stone. Since Jensen’s death in 1951, Miss Mertha Fulkerson, his former secretary, and the Wisconsin Farm Bureau have continued the spirit of The Clearing with their summer cultural offerings which vary weekly: native geology, regional ecology, courses in modern drama and art, poetry, philosophy, and similar selections. In the beginning years, The Clearing also frequently served, during winter, as a craft-center for year-around residents of Door County—who took weaving, wood-carving, or

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\(^\text{18}\) Jensen, Sittings, pp. 67–9 and Eaton, op. cit., p. 149.
\(^\text{19}\) Milwaukee Journal, October 1, 1951, p. 1.
homecrafts; for both Jensen and Miss Fulkerson believed strongly in community service.20

Although The Clearing was Jensen's chief interest during these latter years of his life, the genial Dane also found time for his usual civic contributions: He served on the Door County Park Board for five years, and it is largely because of his foresight that community park tracts were bought at Door Bluff, Ellison Bay Bluff and Sugar Creek, as well as additional land at Cave Point. In fact, Door County pioneered in the United States in the forming of township parks.21 The Ellison Bay School also reflects his philosophy of a "school in a park setting", for the village bought land adjoining the school and Jensen also gave them a plot of white pine woodland, so today Ellison Bay school children may spread out in a woodland setting for their recess activities, or hold outdoor classes around their Council Ring in the spring and the fall.22 During these latter years, too, Jensen was one of the active promulgators— together with Albert Fuller, Emma Toft, and others—for the creation of The Ridges Sanctuary, near Bailey's Harbor, where rare swamp plants may be found in the wetlands formed by the retreating beaches of Lake Michigan. Here shy orchids, maiden hair fern, and a variety of swamp vegetation, have been preserved in their native habitat from the ruthless fingers of mankind.

Although Jensen is probably best known for his civic activities, yet it must not be forgotten that underlying his public service, and guiding the direction which it took, was Jensen's philosophy of the land. Loving the prairies, he found in them not only the motif for his own landscaping but also his deep-rooted belief in conservation. He felt there was something so precious in the native landscape, he wanted to save it for posterity. As Mertha Fulkerson summarizes his philosophy:

There was great thought given to tenderness expressed in a field of our native flowers, to strength expressed in mighty oaks, to humility expressed in violets, to peace expressed in the long shadows coming over the land from surrounding woodlands at the end of the day, of the daringness of pine and cedar clinging on the edge of a rocky cliff facing the elements. These were the motives of his work.23

Indeed, one might say that Jensen's public-service endeavors, such as the formation of the Cook County Forest Preserves and the State Parks of Illinois, are merely outward manifestations of that

20 Mary Ellen Goethberg, "The Clearing—from Vision, a Reality," The Peninsula (June 1958), pp. 11-12; Jensen, Sittings, p. 30; Clifford Butcher, op. cit., p. 6; Madison Capital Times, October 1, 1951, pp. 1 and 3.
21 Author's conversation with Mertha Fulkerson at The Clearing, April 25, 1964.
22 For Jensen's theory of school settings, see "Neighborhood Centers," pp. 45-51 in his Greater West Park System and pp. 84-5 of his Sittings.
23 Mertha Fulkerson, Letter to author, April 12, 1964, p. 2.
inner philosophy which drove him for most of his ninety-one years: his belief that the native spots of greenery must be cherished and preserved for refreshment of man's soul.

True, national acclaim came to Jensen for his public-spirited efforts: the Massachusetts and Minnesota Horticultural Societies gave him citations for his distinguished work in landscaping; the University of Wisconsin conferred on him an honorary degree in 1937; he was sought as a consultant in the formation of the Racine park system here in the Midwest and the Alleghany park system in the East; and he is accredited with saving Riverside Park in New York City at a time when commercial interests sought to destroy it. Theodore Roosevelt also called on Jensen's talents in helping to form the first national conservation program.24

Yet, in pre-occupation with Jensen's long career of public service, one must not slight his philosophy as a landscape artist. For, in the final analysis, the genial Dane was a singular blend of the artist-philosopher and the public-spirited citizen. And it was the artist-philosopher who guided the public-spirited citizen into the creation of those natural retreats of living greenery in Illinois, Wisconsin, Indiana, and other states of the Union. In a world where such green retreats are growing increasingly difficult to find, today's Americans owe much to Jens Jensen.

24 Mertha Fulkerson, "Jens Jensen, Friend of Our Native Landscape," pp. 9-10; Milwaukee Journal, June 20, 1937, p. 3; Milwaukee Journal, October 1, 1951, pp. 1 and 2; Madison Capital Times, October 1, 1951, pp. 1 and 3.