

“Friends of Jens Jensen” Dissolves

by Scott Mehaffey

This past January, board members of the not-for-profit organization, *Friends of Jens Jensen*, met to dissolve the corporation. Remaining funds were deposited in an account that will someday be used to restore the council ring in Columbus Park, Chicago.

The “*Friends*” was founded in the fall of 1992 with two specific tasks: 1) to preserve Jens Jensen’s studio at the original “Clearing” (his home) in Ravinia (Highland Park, IL) and 2) to raise public awareness of Jens Jensen and other “Prairie School” designers. Although the studio remains in private hands, its conversion to a guest house was done sensitively due, in part, to lobbying efforts by the *Friends*. Members met with the owner, as well as the City of Highland Park Preservation Commission and the Architectural Review Commission, to assure that exterior changes were minimal and new landscape plantings were made in a naturalistic style.

Through its newsletter, occasional meetings at Jensen-designed properties, and partial sponsorship of a re-enactment of a historic outdoor pageant on the Columbus Park Player’s Green, the *Friends* helped link Jensen’s legacy with a growing fervor for native plants and renewed appreciation for the design history of the Chicago region. A 1993 reception at the Garfield Park Conservatory, held during the meeting of the American Society of Landscape Architects, brought landscape architects from across the country to see Jensen’s magical “Fern Room” and to hear memories of Jensen from his protege, the late landscape architect

Alfred Caldwell, who passed away in 1998.

Members of the *Friends* held workdays cleaning up the waterfall in Columbus Park, prepared an historic landscape report for the managers of the Evanston, IL Arts Center (the former Harley Clarke estate), participated in landscape management discussions at the Abraham Lincoln Memorial Garden in Springfield, IL and at Jensen’s school, “The Clearing”, in Ellison Bay, Door County, Wisconsin. Foremost among the organization’s accomplishments was working with the Young Urban Preservationists Society (YUPS) to familiarize students in the Columbus Park neighborhood with Jensen and the history of their park, considered to be Jensen’s masterwork among his many projects for the Chicago Park System.

Landscape Legend: Jens Jensen

Jens Jensen was born 13 September 1860 near Dybbol, Denmark and was educated in the Danish Folk School tradition (which later influenced his conception of his school, “The Clearing” in Ellison Bay, WI.) In 1884, after completing a term of military duty, he left Denmark and came to the United States — surprisingly, not for economic reasons but because his family did not approve of his fiance. He worked for a short time in Florida, then Iowa, and arrived in Chicago in 1886 to land a job as a street-sweeper for the Chicago West Parks District. During the winters he worked for the Swain Nelson Nursery in Glenview, and began to “botanize” in the vast natur-

al areas that still surrounded Chicago at that time. In 1888, he was allowed to create a new “American Garden” in then-fashionable Union Park, which became extremely popular as a Sunday afternoon destination. Jensen was always there, dressed in his Sunday finery, to personally give tours and to identify and discuss the garden’s many native plants: considered a unique contrast with the Victorian fascination with exotic plants and geometric carpet bedding that typified garden design at that time. From this single opportunity, Jensen gradually became the leader of the naturalistic landscape movement in the Midwest, later called the “Prairie Style.”

Jensen’s role in the developing Chicago parks was often tempestuous, and in 1900, he left to concentrate on his private practice. His social contacts, many first made in the Union Park neighborhood and expanded as he rose through parks system positions of increased authority, now yielded impressive estate work throughout Chicago and around the Midwest. In 1905, Jensen returned to Chicago’s west parks, to oversee \$2 million in improvements. He redesigned most of Douglas, Humboldt and Garfield Parks, and was largely responsible for the great Garfield Park Conservatory, often referred to at that time as “Jensen’s Folly.”

In 1909, he changed his position from Superintendent and Chief Landscape Architect to Consulting Landscape Architect, and concentrated more on his increasing estate commissions. By 1915, he was hired by

JUNE CONFERENCE & TOUR TO HIGHLIGHT JENS JENSEN

Henry Ford and began a relationship that would last for decades and yield many prestigious commissions. His financial success allowed him to purchase a scenic tract of land in Door County, WI in 1919. After his wife's death in 1934, Jensen began to develop plans for a school to be built there, following the hands-on learning tradition of the Danish Folk Schools. Also at that time, Jensen was asked by the Garden Clubs of Illinois to prepare plans for the Abraham Lincoln Memorial Garden overlooking Lake Springfield. Until his death in 1953, Jensen devoted much of his time to these two efforts.

The two best resources on Jensen are:

Jens Jensen: Maker of Natural Parks and Gardens by Robert E. Grese (1992, The Johns Hopkins University Press).

Landscape Artist In America: The Life and Work of Jens Jensen by Leonard K. Eaton (1964, The University of Chicago Press — out of print.)

His archives may be accessed at The Morton Arboretum in Lisle, IL; the Bentley Historical Library in Ann Arbor, MI; and the Chicago Park District, Chicago, IL. Another collection is being organized at The Clearing Visitor Center.

For more information on the Friends of Jens Jensen or the Columbus Park Council Ring Fund, contact Julia Bachrach at (312) 747-0551.



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The 16,000 square foot, 30 room "Pleasant Home" mansion in Oak Park, Illinois, will be the site of an historic, two-day symposium and tour entitled, "Prairie 2000: Jens Jensen and the Prairie Garden" to be held June 26 and 27.

Prairie Home Foundation director Mary Beth Blatner and historian David Wendell are organizing the event, which they say focuses on the contributions of Jensen to the Chicago region. They feel that Jensen's work deserves far greater recognition: hence, this national symposium. Landscape plans drawn by Jensen but never before exhibited will be unveiled. One such plan, drawn with ink on linen, is Jensen's version of a Chicago "Lakefront Plan"—a response to the famous "Burnham Plan" created by Daniel Burnham and the Commercial Club of Chicago.

Nationally known speakers such as Robert Grese, author of *Jens Jensen: Maker of Natural Parks and Gardens* will take part in the Saturday symposium. On Sunday, a bus tour of Jensen and Jensen-inspired sites ranging from Riverside, Illinois to Lake Forest, Illinois will be offered to registrants.

A Saturday evening reception will feature noted Chicago architect Walter Netsch, who will discuss Jensen's vision and contribution while guests tour the exhibition of Jensen's work. Many of the drawings will focus on Oak Park and Columbus Park in Chicago.

"Pleasant Home" is also known as the Farson/Mills residence. The mansion,

located at the corner of Pleasant and Home Avenues (217 S. Home) in Oak Park, was designed by George Mayer and completed in 1887. Its original owner, John Farson, was an investment banker and lawyer who enjoyed life: he was often seen roller-skating around Oak Park.

The mansion is a national historic landmark which sits on 4.5 acres of land. Jens Jensen designed a plan for the property, but Blatner says that she is unsure whether the plan was installed or whether it was installed and later removed.

You may receive more information about the conference by calling the Pleasant Home Foundation at (708) 383-2654.

TWG Editor: Ooo, ooo! Also, note that a fantastic book, *Reading the Landscape of America*, has been reprinted. This book was written in the 1950's by naturalist May Theilgaard Watts, who lived in Highland Park, IL and worked at The Morton Arboretum. The book records Watts' account of the ecology of the forest, the bogs, the dunes, and the streams she visited around the country but primarily in the Midwest. It's a great book for understanding the Indiana Dunes and the north woods of Wisconsin, for example. Jens Jensen would have loved it! Contact *Bridget Watts (May's granddaughter)* at *Nature Study Guild Publishers (800) 954-2984, PO Box 10489, Rochester, NY 14610* or e-mail: *naturebooks@worldnet.att.net*. The book can also be ordered via *weedpatch.com* and its link to *amazon*.