

Jens Jensen, Father of Prairie Style Landscape Design

Jens Jensen was born into a wealthy farm family living near Dybbol, Denmark on September 13, 1860. Growing up on the farm, Jens came to love the natural environment. But all was not idyllic. When he was only four Dybbol and the farm itself were invaded by the Prussian army. The fighting was close enough for Jens to watch the battles through the windows of his home, and when the battles ended, the area was annexed into Prussia. At the age of 19 Jens began three years of mandatory military service. It was during this time he traveled through Germany and visited a wide variety of parks making drawings, studying their designs, and cultivating his belief in the importance of parks.



Jensen as a young boy

After returning from military service and without his family's approval, Jens married Anna Marie Hansen. When it became clear that he would not inherit the family farm, Jens and Anna Marie made the decision to emigrate to America and arrived here in 1884.

The Jensens settled in Chicago, where Jens took a job with the West Chicago Park District as a



Jens and Anna Marie in front of their Chicago apartment, courtesy of Morton Arboretum Special Collections and Julia Bachrach

street cleaner, walking through parks and sweeping up horse droppings. But in his free time Jensen explored the natural environment of the Midwest. He spent hours walking or riding trains through the prairies noting the movement of the prairie grass, the bursts of color found in the native plants and both the color and the movement of the sky. Or he hiked through forests observing the architecture of the trees, the beauty of meandering streams and waterfalls and the peacefulness of light filtering through the foliage.

At age 28 Jensen was promoted to the position of Gardener at Union Park, one of the four parks included in West Chicago Park District. When asked to redesign a garden in the park, he took veered away from

traditional exotic flowers. Instead he introduced a wide variety of native plants laid out in pleasing irregularity to form what he called the *American Garden*. The plantings thrived and the garden soon became a favorite spot in the park.

Over the next decade, Jensen would work his way through the park system, becoming the Superintendent of Humboldt Park in 1895. But by the late 1890s the West Chicago Park District was entrenched in corruption and when Jensen refused to sign fraudulent invoices, he was fired. He would be reinstated and fired or promoted to meaningless positions several times over the next two decades, eventually becoming the Superintendent of the entire West Chicago Park District. His design work can be seen today in Union, Garfield, Humboldt, Douglas and Columbus Parks.

The late 1800s were a time of great industrial growth and wealth in Chicago. Yet there was also great poverty with people living in cramped and decrepit tenement houses. It was Jensen's belief that these city dwellers needed to experience nature and he believed that parks could provide this opportunity. He had been introduced to Jane Addams, the founder of Hull-House in Chicago who



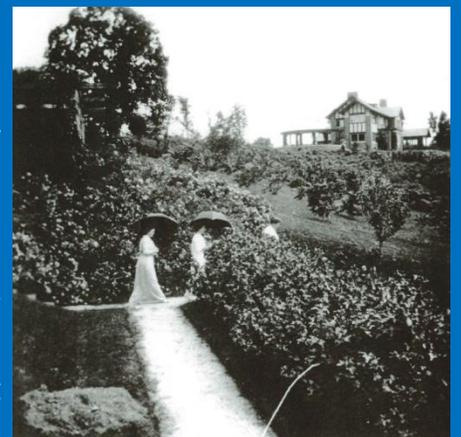
Jensen sitting at a stacked stone wall

was advocating for public playgrounds where children could engage in meaningful play rather than “passive standing around”. Recognizing this need, in 1905 Jensen identified areas across western Chicago that would be appropriate for small neighborhood parks. His designs for these parks included fieldhouses, showers, playgrounds, urban gardens, and swimming ponds. He championed the cause of setting aside a series of forest preserves encircling Chicago that would come to be known as the Emerald Necklace.

During these years Jensen would also assume the role of conservationist. The steel mills were coming to the Lake Michigan - Indiana shoreline and in the process, destroying the Indiana Dunes. A protracted battle ensued between those wishing to preserve the Dunes and a coalition of economic and political interests wanting to industrialize the entire area. Jensen would take an active role in this battle, founding a group of activists called the Friends of our Native Landscape, and speaking passionately at a hearing in Washington, D.C. arranged by his friend Stephen Mather, the first Director of the National Park Service. In 1917 he was instrumental in organizing the theatrical *Historical Pageant of the Dunes* that attracted 40,000 attendees to experience 1,000 actors portraying Indians, settlers, industrialists, waves, and wind nymphs coming together to tell the story of the Dunes. In 1917 a bill creating Indiana Dunes National Park was introduced, but then tabled. In 1923 the area was designated the Indiana Dunes State Park. It was not until 1966 that the area would be designated the Indiana Dunes National Seashore.

Public parks were always Jensen’s primary interest, but he did have a family to support and when he was fired from his Humboldt Park position in the late 1890s, he began a private practice as a landscape architect that would continue for decades. His client list was impressive including Henry Ford, Edsel Ford, Frederick Pabst, and the Armour and Florsheim families.

On April 2, 1909 Susanne Denkmann traveled to Chicago to meet with several architects. She was planning on building a home of her own in Rock Island on the 23rd Street hill. She wrote in her diary, “went to see some architects, liked Spencer & Powers best”. It is unclear when Susanne first met Jens Jensen, but on September 15, 1909 she writes “Mr. Spencer & Mr. Jensen came from Chicago to see my property. (I) went with the architects to the property”. In the coming months Jensen would make several visits to Rock Island to personally oversee the installation of the paths, streams, ponds, terraces, concrete structures and plantings he had designed for the estate. It was during the time that the home and gardens were being constructed that Susanne met and became engaged to John Hauberg and they often walked through the emerging landscape together. Both the home and gardens had been completed by the time the couple returned from their honeymoon in the summer of 1911.



Denkmann-Hauberg terraced gardens

In 1935 Jensen's wife Anna Marie passed away. It was time Jensen thought, to leave the city and find solitude in a remote 128 acre area near Ellison Bay, Wisconsin. Here he created The Clearing, a school of discovery in the arts, nature and the humanities based on the folk schools of his native Denmark. The school attracted a variety of disciplines including architects, painters, sculptors, blacksmiths and gardeners who learned not by classroom study, but by doing.

Jensen died at his home at The Clearing on October 1, 1951 at the age of 91.

Today, Jens Jensen is known as the father of Prairie Style landscape design in the same way that Frank Lloyd Wright holds this title in the world of architecture. Jensen used the sky, the wind, the movement of water, and even the seasons, along with native plants and materials, to develop landscapes that were beautiful, understandable and on-going. He understood that landscapes, unlike other forms of art, would mature...even die and regenerate. It has been suggested that this understanding of the natural progression of the designed landscape was his greatest strength. Jensen believed that our surroundings affect the way we think and live. He identified unique landscape characteristics in all parts of the country and he believed that understanding one's own regional ecology was "fundamental to all clear thinking". He valued the sunrise and sunsets and often incorporated a clearing in his landscape just for the purpose of viewing these daily occurrences.



Jensen seated at a council ring

Included in many of his designs was the council ring, a low circular bench or grouping of stones evoking both his native Viking past and Native American egalitarianism. A group sitting on these stones would be gathered in a continuous circle. There would be no head of the table, no hierarchy, but a simple affirmation that all members of a community are important. Just as each element of a landscape design has its own very important role to play. Jensen thought of himself as a "gardener". And clearly he was. But he was also an eloquent advocate for public parks and an environmentalist before being so was "cool".

When you visit the Denkamnn-Hauberg Estate, please explore the landscape, pick up a copy of a pictorial history of the gardens, and come inside to view copies of the original landscape drawings and planting plans.