

Jens Jensen and the Prairie School Campus of Luther College

by J.R. Christianson

Traveling from Chicago to northeastern Iowa in the spring of 1909, Jens Jensen passed through the heart of what he and his friends, Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Sullivan, thought of as the "prairie region." They had taken this region for their own and had already achieved considerable fame as the Prairie School of design. Jensen was a landscape artist, not an architect like the other two, and he was particularly sensitive to the natural ecology of the region.

To Jens Jensen and his friends, the word "prairie" referred to the natural clearings in the woodlands of the midwestern landscape which stretched roughly from Indiana to Minnesota. A wide, rolling country of luxuriant open grasslands mixed with hardwood glades, lakes, and rivers, it was a region of four seasons, with intense autumnal colors, snow-filled winters, poetic springtime awakenings, and bountiful summers. This was the "prairie region." Although there was a basic unity to the area, it was a region of considerable variety and beauty. Proponents of the Prairie School saw it as the heartland of America, where a powerful new civilization was in the very process of emergence.

Two of the great symbols of the prairie region were Chicago, its metropolis, and the Mississippi River, its lifeline. The train on which Jens Jensen traveled west from Chicago

in 1909, traveled for several hours across the cultivated land of northern Illinois, then wound through the hills along the Mississippi River. Suddenly the "Father of Waters" lay before him, flowing majestically through a deep gorge of immense natural beauty. On the far shore lay the state of Iowa.

An hour or so later, Jensen arrived in Decorah. There his Norwegian-American hosts took him by open automobile through a quiet landscape of gentle hills and dales. They drove him along the banks of sparkling, spring-fed streams, then up rugged, unpaved roads to the limestone palisades above the Oneota Valley. Jensen was anxious to capture the essence of what he called the "immediate environment." He snapped pictures with a little box camera. He took notes on the native vegetation.

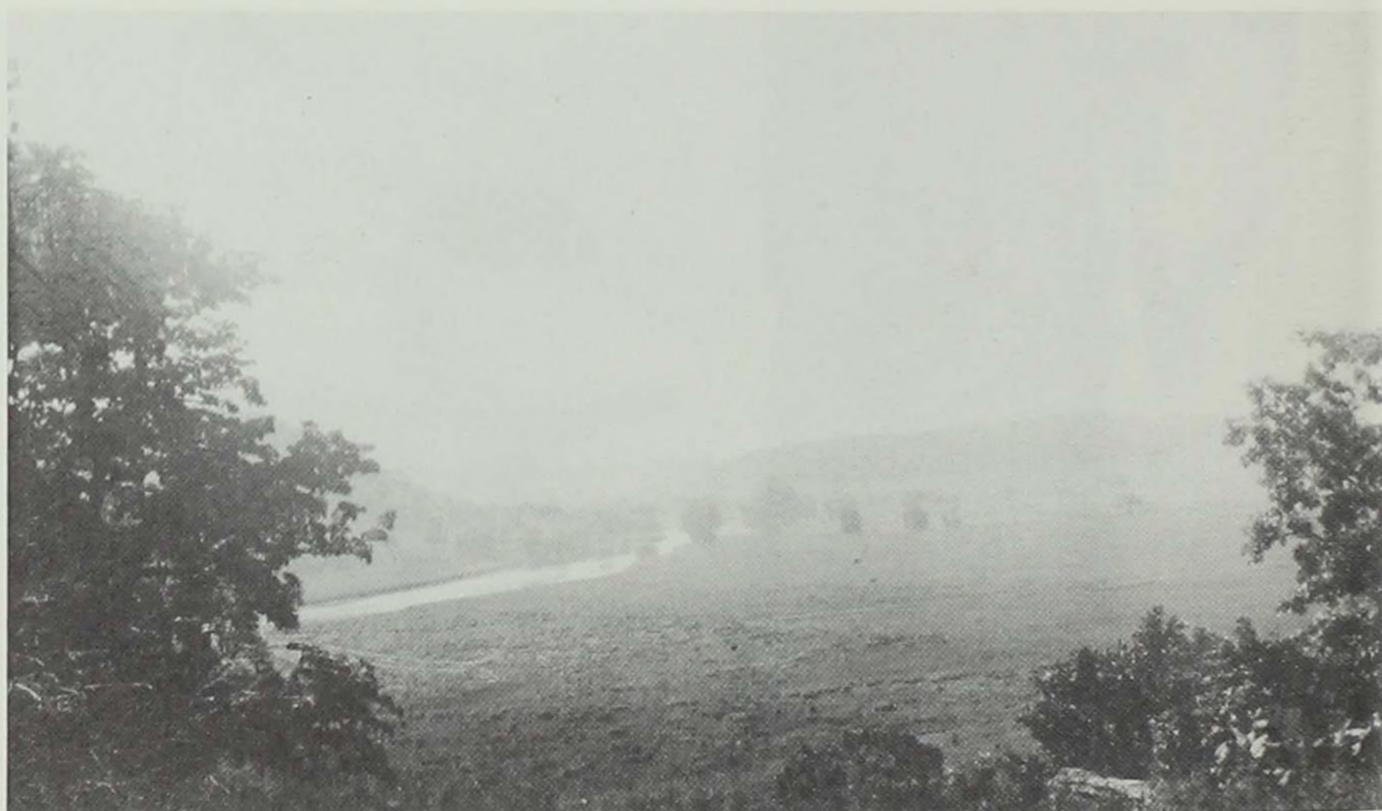
Wild plums were in bloom. Their delicate aroma and color stuck in Jensen's memory for years to come and became his symbol of Iowa's springtime. The blossoms of the plum, he later wrote, "appear like clouds of snow drifting through the shady bottomlands. In the woodlands its blossoms appear like fleeting notes in a mighty symphony."

They drove to the campus of Luther College. Here Jensen saw many large burr oaks, just coming into leaf. At Luther College, Jensen found a deep old-world sense of the past set in a new world landscape. His amiable Decorah hosts told him tales of pioneer days. Others spoke of a more distant past, when Oneota



*Jens Jensen, landscape
artist. (courtesy Jens Jen-
sen Collection, Luther
College Archives (LCA),
Preus Library).*

When Jensen visited in 1909, the view from the campus bluffs had changed little since the 1860s. The Upper Iowa River curved through an open valley flanked by wooded hillsides. (courtesy Stephen F. Christy Collection, LCA)



peoples had roamed the valley. And finally, he heard anecdotes of life at Luther College during the half-century since it had been founded in what was then a wilderness. Watching students stroll under the oaks, Jensen mused on the links between past and present and future, as well as those between human life and physical environment.

He had come to reshape this landscape in ways which would allow traditions to remain strong and the campus to remain in harmony with its prairie environment. What could be more appropriate than a "prairie campus" located amidst such trees; what could be more appropriate than a college which each spring, as the oaks sent forth their tassels and leaves, also sent forth its graduates — children of the prairie region itself?

Approaching the age of fifty, Jens Jensen was at the height of his powers in 1909. Born in the Danish province of South Jutland, he had been four years old in 1864, when Bismarck's successful attack on Denmark suddenly made him a subject of the German kaiser instead of the king of Denmark. Dybbøl parish, where he was born, remained solidly Danish in

language and sympathy under Prussian rule. Jensen was sent across the border into Denmark for his secondary education, but he also learned to speak fluent German. Drafted into the Prussian army, he served two years in an elite guards regiment in Berlin. A tall, courtly individual, he always retained the gallant air of a guardsman.

Jens Jensen was heir to the largest farm in Dybbøl parish. In the year 1884, however, he turned his back on his inheritance and emigrated to America. It was love, not money, that led him to do it. His childhood sweetheart, Anne Marie Hansen, came from a family of poor cottagers, and Jensen's prosperous parents would not allow him to marry her. Jens and Anne Marie thus traveled to America where they were married.

During their first two years in America, they wandered about, looking for a new home. Finally, they settled in Chicago. Jensen found work as a common laborer in the West Side parks. Within four years, he had risen to the position of superintendent of Union Park. By 1905, Jens Jensen was superintendent and landscape architect for the West Parks System, with a multimillion dollar budget and a mandate for expansion and reform. He laid out the

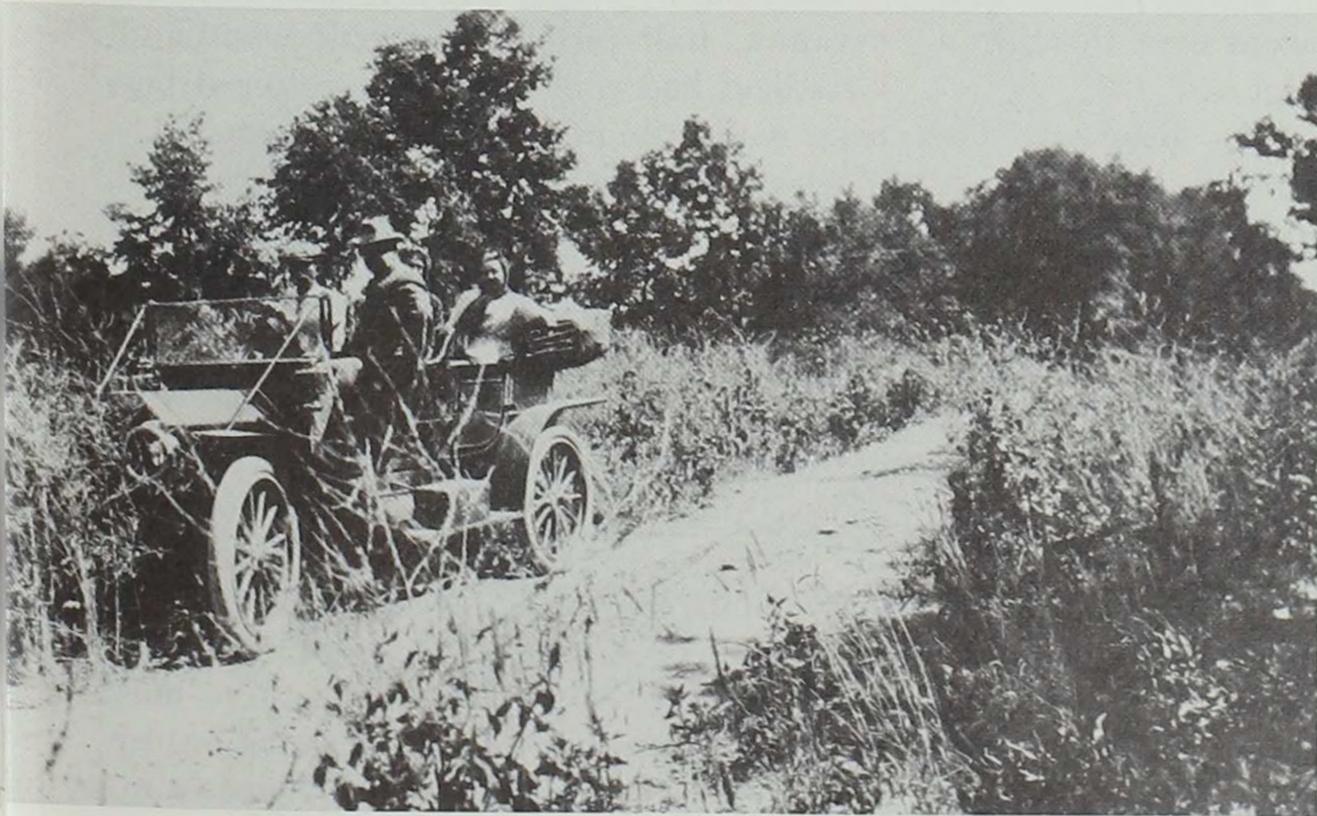
large parks under his jurisdiction in great symbolic prairies, rivers, bluffs, and woodlands, asserting that he intended to bring the spirit of the Illinois prairie into the very heart of Chicago.

Meanwhile, Jensen also began working on private projects with some of the most prominent architects in the city. In 1905, Jensen and Robert C. Spencer, Jr., collaborated on a large house in Winnetka for August Magnus. Inspired by Jensen's landscape plan, Spencer used stylized hawthorn designs in the house and its stained-glass windows. The Magnus house was widely publicized and became a prominent example of Prairie School design. The hawthorn, with its free but strongly horizontal branches, was a powerful symbol of the prairie region, and Jensen, the creator of this symbol, now became the leading landscape artist of the Prairie School. Soon he developed new symbols of the prairie region: the wild rose; the crab apple; and the spreading oak. Jensen moved his studio to Steinway Hall, close to the famous architects with whom he now shared so many commissions. His designed landscapes incorporated natural arrangements of native plants with symbolic

prairie landforms. In 1908, Jens Jensen landscaped Frank Lloyd Wright's famous Coonley house in Riverside. The following year, when he came to Luther College, he also landscaped Louis Sullivan's Babson house in Riverside.

The fiftieth anniversary or "semicentennial" of Luther College was the occasion that brought him to Iowa. Although Jensen's circle of Chicago friends was quite cosmopolitan, he and Anne Marie still lived in a predominantly Scandinavian neighborhood near Humboldt Park, and Jensen had strong ties with the city's Scandinavian colony. In Chicago, he knew many graduates of Luther College, the oldest Norwegian-American college. Among them were the Torrison brothers, Judge Oscar M. Torrison, and Dr. George A. Torrison of Rush Medical College. A third brother, Pastor I.B. Torrison, formerly of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Wicker Park, Chicago, was living in Decorah in 1909.

Around 1909, the Luther College Club in Chicago formally recommended that the college engage Jens Jensen to landscape its campus in time for the college's semicentennial in 1911. Jensen agreed to visit the campus, and he was subsequently engaged for the project by



Jensen photographed his hosts as well as the countryside when they toured the Decorah area in 1909. (courtesy Stephen F. Christy Collection, LCA)

The south wing of Main Building, added in 1874, and in right front, the clay pit called the Brick Yard, source of bricks for construction. Roughly filled in, the Yard still sloped toward an abrupt bank when Jensen saw it in 1909. He ordered it leveled and graded. (courtesy LCA)



the club in Chicago. On his first visit to Decorah, he probably traveled in the company of Judge Torrison. While in Decorah, he met still another former Chicagoan, C.K. Preus, the president of Luther College. It was on this trip that Jensen had such a splendid time, touring the area by automobile, taking photographs and making notes. He went over the thirty-two-acre campus with great care.

Then as now, the majestic burr oaks and undulating shape of the surrounding hills gave the Luther College campus its character. The land had been untouched wilderness when Pastor Vilhelm Koren had purchased it in 1860 from J. Gibbons, a Quaker, for the sum of \$1,500. In 1909 the topography was little changed. The campus rose gradually towards the west and ended in a bluff with limestone outcroppings, overlooking the Oneota Valley. Irregular, wooded hills surrounded the site on all sides in 1909, as they do today — mixed hardwoods underlain with woodland wildflowers. At one time, immense white pines had risen here and there above the hardwoods.

Towards the setting sun, the Oneota Valley below the campus remained open prairie in 1909, with the sinuous curve of the river winding through it. Mixed hardwoods on the far hillside gave way to oak savanna and then prairie in the valley.

The campus proper had originally been oak savanna, half prairie and half woodland. Grassland had run under the scattered burr oaks, with little underbrush. In Jensen's day, much of this original character still survived, though footpaths and playing fields could be seen as well as unmown prairie grass.

Fifty years earlier, between 1863 and 1865, the old Main Building of Luther College had risen on the heights of the bluff above the river. Under the oak savanna, workers had discovered clay. A German brickmaker had fired almost two million bricks within thirty yards of the construction site, and from these bricks they had erected the huge, three-story building. Oaks had fallen to the axe to furnish lumber. Limestone had been quarried on cam-

pus, burned into lime, and mixed with riverbed sand to make mortar. Building stone for most of the foundation had also been quarried on college land. Old Main at Luther College had literally grown out of the campus land, and when it was finished, landscaping was needed.

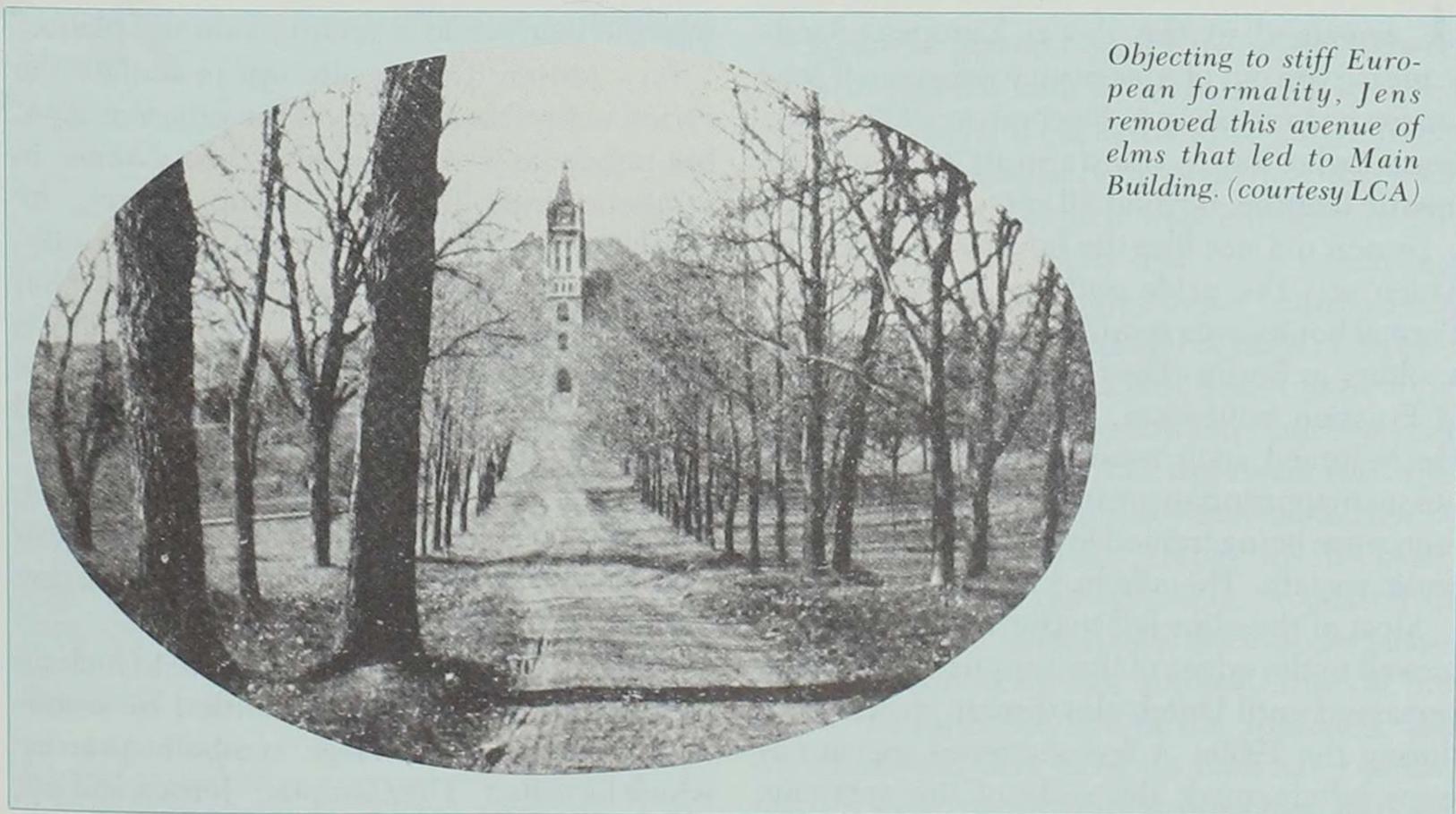
The founders of Luther College had been European immigrants, and so had most of the early students. They all had a European sense of order, and they had wanted to see this order imposed on the landscape of their wilderness campus. Most of them had come from Norway, a land of deep fjords, isolated valleys, and towering mountains, where people had long carved patches of ordered landscape out of the immense, imposing wilderness. The immigrants set out to do the same thing in the wilderness of northeastern Iowa. Under their hands, the campus of Luther College had gradually been transformed from a wilderness to a European landscape.

Their model had been the European country estate, not the school. European schools were in cities, but country estates stood by them-

selves, surrounded by their own grounds — like an American college. Geometrical order and regularity differentiated the grounds of these estates from the surrounding wilderness.

In the early days of Luther College, athletics were not a prominent part of the college scene. The students got their exercise by splitting firewood or clearing brush on campus. In 1874, after a south wing had been added to the Main Building, Professor Jacob D. Jacobsen put them to work cleaning up the building site and landscaping parts of the campus. A row of spruces was planted in a regular diagonal line, from the southeastern corner of the Main Building to the southeastern edge of the campus. An *allé* of elms was planted to shade the lane that cut directly across campus to the front entrance of the Main Building. Elm and spruce were common to both America and Norway, and they were often similarly employed in European landscaping.

These regularly spaced rows of trees enclosed an open meadow of natural prairie, roughly triangular in shape, mown once or twice a year. This was the only landscaped part



Objecting to stiff European formality, Jens removed this avenue of elms that led to Main Building. (courtesy LCA)

of the Luther College campus when Jens Jensen arrived there in 1909. Professor Jacobsen's student crews had roughly leveled out the old clay pit, called the Brick Yard, and sown it in grass, but the Yard still ended in a rather precipitous bank near the northeastern corner of the Main Building. At the campus entrance, a portal with Ionian columns had been erected in 1903. The northern part of the campus was still dotted with the remnants of the original oak savanna, and many of the burr oaks were quite old when Jens Jensen first saw them.

Visitors from Europe must have felt quite at home on the Luther College campus in the very early years of this century. Approaching it in a horse-drawn carriage, then riding through the portal and down the long, arching avenue of elms towards the Main Building must have been much like arriving at a stately manor house or larger rural parsonage in Norway. To immigrants, it must have been a comforting landscape, one that helped to bridge the gap between their old homeland and their new.

The Luther College campus might have remained to this day a European landscape carved out of American wilderness if Jens Jensen had not come to Decorah in 1909. It was Jensen who was to transform its most characteristic features beyond all recognition.

Jensen did not like the long avenue of elms which was the pride and joy of the college. Formal boulevards reminded him of his days as a soldier in Berlin. They represented the spirit of Prussian militarism, not the prairie spirit. He believed such tendencies towards militarism inappropriate on a campus where young men were being trained for life in a free, democratic society. The *allé* had to go.

Most of the elms fell to the axe. A few were moved to the edges of the campus, where they remained until Dutch elm disease struck them during the 1980s. A few scattered specimens were left to mark the scale of the symbolic

prairie which Jensen began to carve out as the center of the new campus.

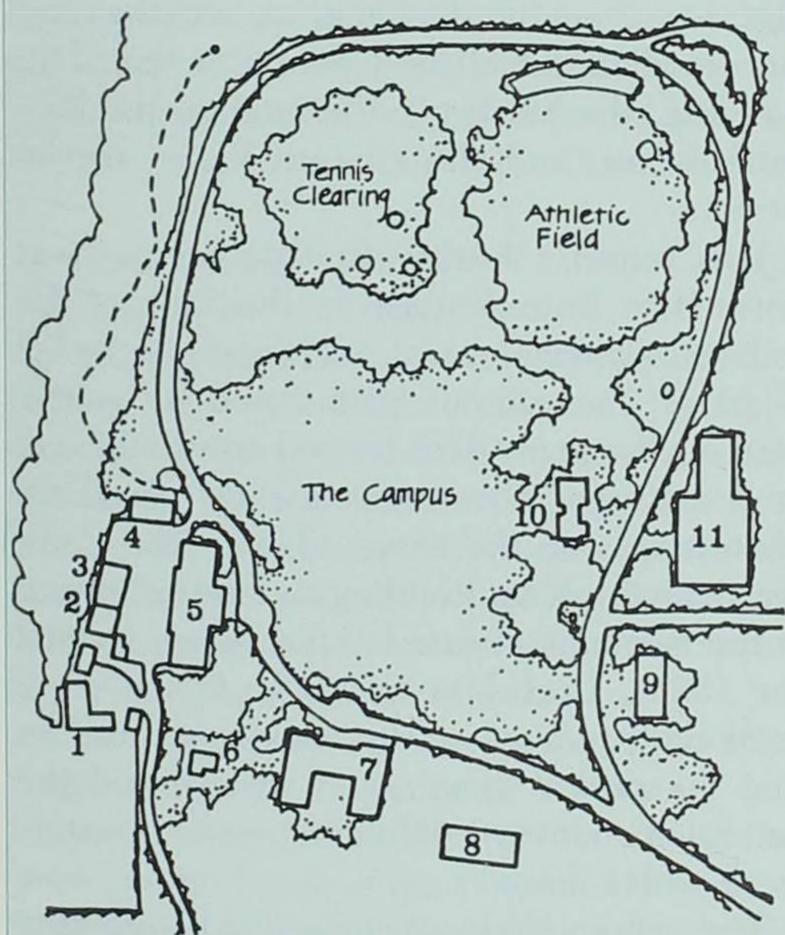
When the elms were gone, a large, long knoll, several hundred feet east of the Main Building, broke the sweep of Jensen's symbolic prairie. This knoll was just northwest of a smaller building called Prestegaarden (now Campus House). The old, half-leveled pit of the Brick Yard also marred the open space. Jensen ordered a gradient plan of the whole campus. During the spring and summer of 1910, extensive grading was carried out according to his orders. Students were sometimes given days off so that they might join the grounds crew in some of the work. The knoll was removed. The excavated soil was used to fill and level the slope of the old Brick Yard. When the grading was completed, the open campus rose gradually and evenly westwards towards the Main Building as it has ever since that time.

As a sentinel for this symbolic prairie, Jensen selected a lone cottonwood east of the Main Building. Some trees, he wrote, "speak much more forcefully alone, as, for instance, the cottonwood with its gray branches stretching up into the heavens as a landmark on the plains."

Jens Jensen did not attempt to imitate the varied natural landscapes of the prairie region, but rather he tried to capture their essence in symbolic forms. "Man cannot copy nature," he proclaimed. At the same time, he had a lofty, almost mystical view of his profession. "Art has its roots in the soil," he wrote. "Landscaping is a composition of life that unfolds a mysterious beauty from time to time until mature age. All other arts are founded on dead materials." Again, he wrote, "Nature cannot be copied; man cannot copy God's out-of-doors. He can interpret its message in a composition of living tones."

His plan for Luther College came to include three sunlit clearings surrounded by woodlands. North of the large symbolic prairie, which he called "The Campus," Jensen laid out

PLANTING PLAN:
 GROUNDS OF LUTHER COLLEGE,
 DECORAH, IOWA



KEY

1. Stable
2. Cook House
3. Power House and Heating Plant
4. Museum
5. Main Building
6. Hospital
7. Laur. Larsen Hall
8. Music Hall
9. Library [now Koren Hall]
10. Cottage [now Campus House]
11. Gymnasium/Natatorium

Jensen's planting plan (dated July 1910) shows three clearings, or symbolic prairies, separated by hard maples and burr oaks. (courtesy Jens Jensen Collection, LCA)

two smaller openings called the "Tennis Clearing" and the "Athletic Field." Hard maples scattered among native oaks separated these clearings from The Campus.

Along the bluff on the western edge of the campus, Jensen laid out a scenic trail leading to a Council Ring above a natural limestone outcropping, where there was a commanding view of the valley. Low native shrubs covered the steep bank behind Old Main. These shrubs attracted birds and small wildlife, provided some seasonal variety, yet allowed an open vista to the setting sun. Jensen clustered a few spruces near the Main Building and the Council Ring to mark the ends of the trail.

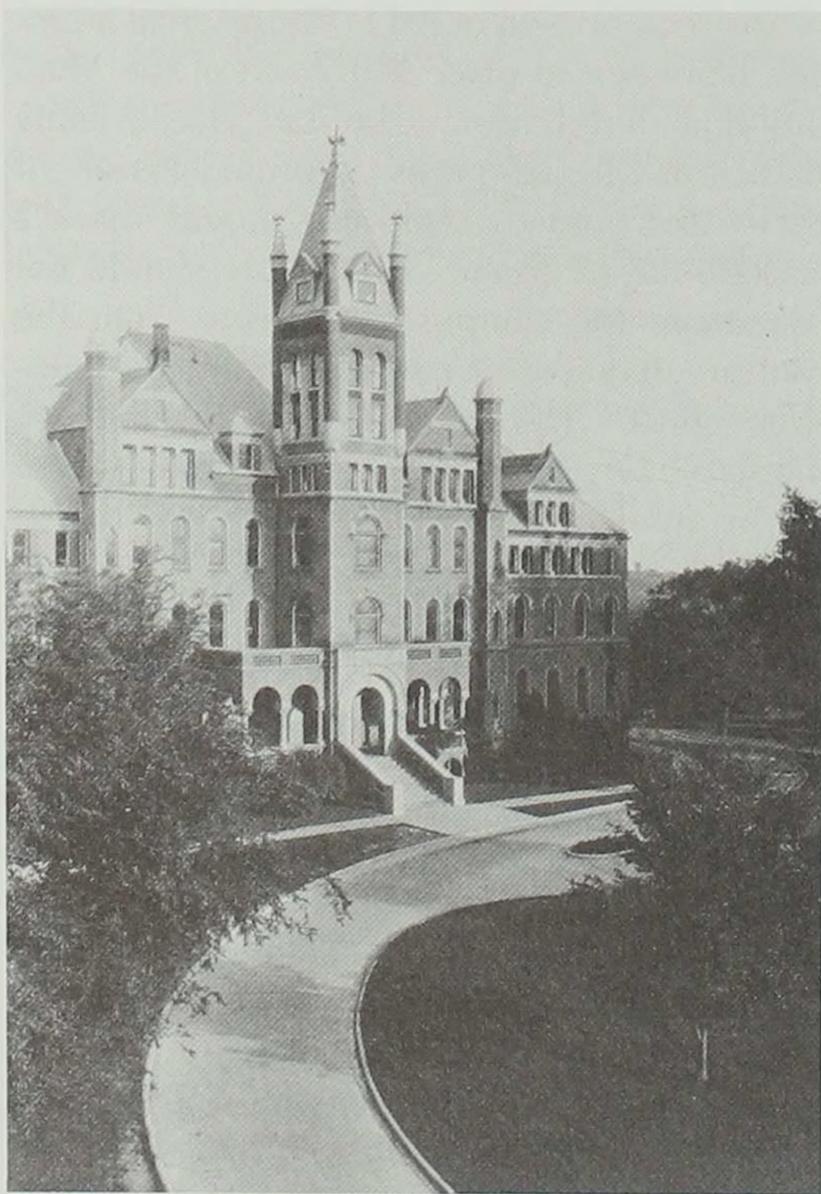
A large new statue of Martin Luther was to be dedicated during the semicentennial anniversary celebration in 1911. The original intention had been to place it in front of the Main Building, but Jensen, who had placed many statues in Chicago parks, informed President Preus that outdoor sculpture should "have a background of green." The statue should not "dominate the campus," he wrote. "On the contrary, it ought to be subservient to the landscape effect." Thus Jensen recommended that the statue be placed east of Larsen Hall, where he surrounded it with honeysuckle, hawthorn, and crab against a background of native oaks.

Finally, Jensen's plan provided for new roadways and a dramatic new entrance to the campus. The old roads had been linear and straight, with right-angle curves, approaching the college through a tunnel of elms. Jensen's new approach was from Hill Street (now Leiv Eiriksson Drive) at the lowest, southeastern corner of the campus. The approach road followed a low, sloping hillside below an old country house, Sunnyside. Along this hillside, Jensen planted a rich symbolic woodland of evergreens and hardwoods, with underplantings of flowering shrubs, and wild roses at the edges. Towards the end of the approach, the woodland was very close on both sides of the road. As the visitor thus approached through

the woodland, the campus remained hidden from view.

Then suddenly, the road curved upward and the prairie campus came into view. Ever-changing vistas appeared as the road continued to curve and rise; one could see across the sunlit campus towards the Main Building, or towards the half-hidden smaller clearings in the distance. Finally, there was a splendid view of the whole Oneota Valley in the direction of the setting sun.

Jens Jensen's Luther College campus in its final form was a masterpiece of Prairie School landscaping. Three large, open areas of prairie grasses were bordered by shady woodlands with a rich variety of regional trees and flowering shrubs. Roadways curved and rose in the



Jens changed straight, right-angle roads to curved roads that wound through woodland and dramatically emerged into clearings and campus buildings. (SHSI)

dappled sunlight along the margins of the clearings, without violating the open spaces. Views of the Oneota Valley and the hills beyond brought the surrounding countryside into the campus, reinforcing the regional identity of the designed landscape. So did the footpath along the bluff, where one looked down on the river from natural limestone outcroppings. The views from the shaded margins of the campus woodlands had focal points in the Main Building, the Martin Luther statue, the lone cottonwood, and the Oneota Valley to the west.

Jens Jensen's Luther College campus was finished in its essentials by the time of the college's semicentennial celebration in the fall of 1911. The campus maintained its serene harmony for many decades and grew in beauty as it matured. Groups frequently posed for photographs on the lower edge of The Campus, with the Main Building and the full sweep of the symbolic prairie behind them. During the 1920s, President Oscar L. Olson often reminded students not to "walk on a path," so that the prairie grass could survive and the natural open areas would not have to be interlaced with sidewalks.

The campus landscape looked so natural that many of the younger generation failed to realize that it was a masterpiece of American landscape design — or even that it was a designed landscape at all. Finally came the time when no one had seen the original oak savanna of the campus wilderness before 1861, and few could even remember the European landscape of the years before 1909. Gradually, Jens Jensen's work in Decorah slipped from many memories. It had been a major work at a key point in his career, but Jensen's Luther College campus never achieved the fame of his Chicago parks or his other urban landscapes. Part of it had been left unfinished. Short-lived smaller trees and shrubs were not replaced when they began to die out in the 1930s.

Yet such was the power of Jensen's work that

it put its stamp upon the expanding campus even after most people had forgotten Jensen. Few realized the extent to which the "natural" look of the Luther College campus was the result of a master landscape artist's planning, but everybody agreed that the "natural" look should be maintained. It was. The campus grew to 119 acres and came to include much of the floodplain below the bluff. In addition, the college acquired some eight hundred acres of land, including all the distant wooded hillsides that frame the campus view of the Oneota Valley.

After the semicentennial of Luther College came the centennial, and with the approach of the 125th anniversary, the Luther College Women's Club of Decorah brought forth a plan for further landscaping of the college lands. The club commissioned a new campus landscape plan which would recapture the essence of Jens Jensen's design for the Luther College campus and extend it to the much larger campus of the present day.

Two young landscape architects, John Harrington of the University of Wisconsin and Robert E. Grese of the University of Virginia, were put in charge of the project. Harrington has a special interest in the midwestern prairie region, while Grese is an authority on the landscape designs of Jens Jensen.

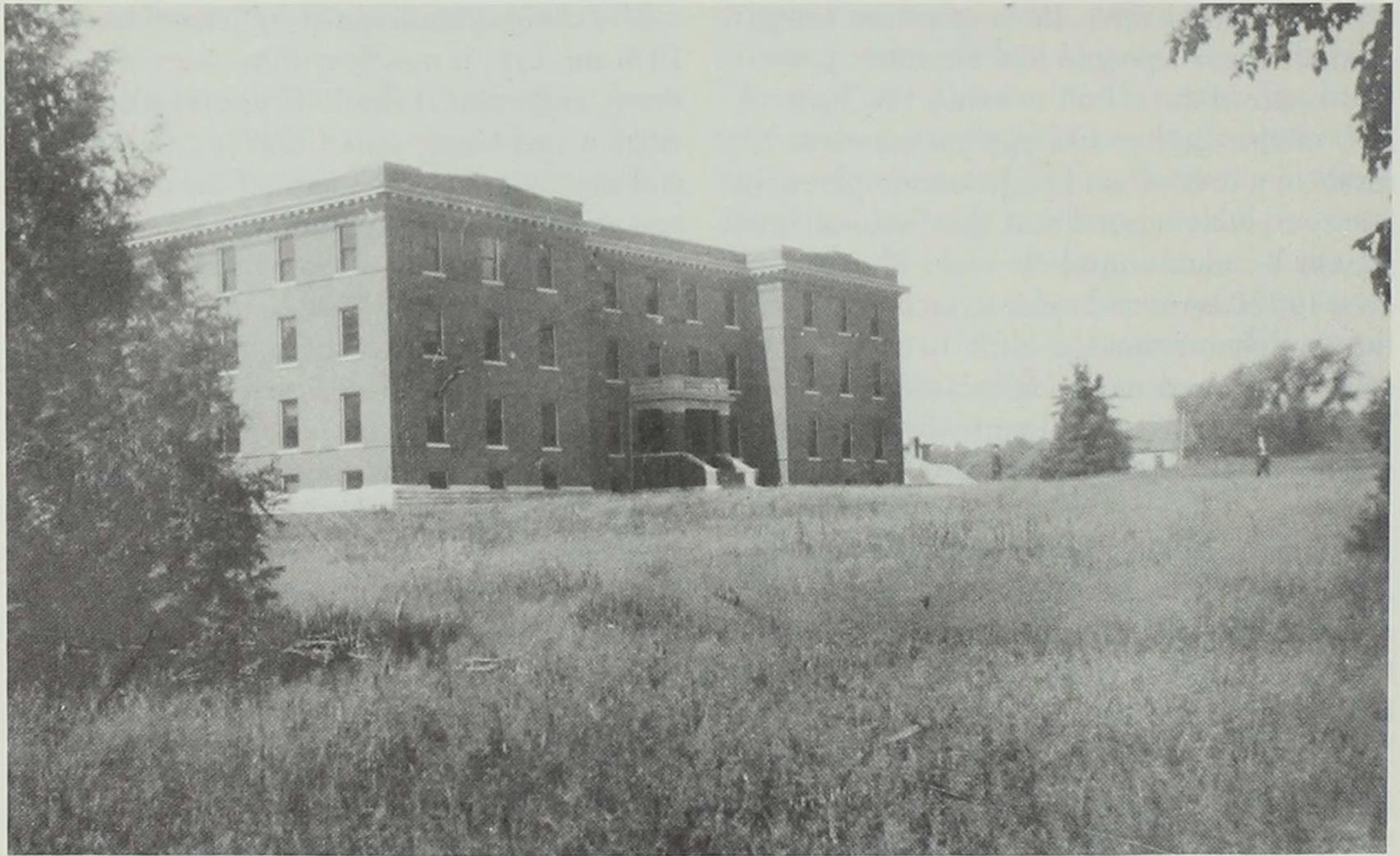
During the summer of 1985, Harrington and Grese conducted a thorough evaluation of the Luther College campus landscape. In the autumn, they submitted a detailed "Landscape Master Plan for the Luther College Campus." Their plan included an analysis of both Jens Jensen's philosophy of landscape design and his work at Luther College. In their plan, they divided the existing campus into eleven zones, ten above the bluff and one in the floodplain. They described the current state of each zone. They presented a master plan for the development of each zone, together with lists of recommended plant species for each zone of the campus.

The campus landscaped by Jensen between 1909 and 1911 is mostly within zones one, two, three, and eight of the 1985 master plan. Harrington and Grese noted that Jensen's shrubs and elms were gone, many of his other trees had reached maturity, and the small cottonwood sapling in front of Main had grown into an immense and "highly visible focus of the central campus." Many of the old burr oaks were still there, having added seventy-five annual rings to their girth, but very few young oaks had sprung up. Along the bluff, a ragged mixture of box elders, elms, maples, and other trees obscured views towards the Oneota Valley and the setting sun. Two buildings in succession had been erected in the Tennis Clearing, where the Center for Faith and Life now stands. The other open spaces in Jensen's plan, The Campus and the Athletic Field, were strewn with young trees, obscuring the vistas which had once unified the campus. Moreover, many of these trees were exotics that did not fit into the regional character of Jensen's campus design.

Despite the changes of seven decades, however, Harrington and Grese concluded that Jensen's campus design was still an important "historical and cultural asset to Luther College." They asserted that the majority of the "design elements that Jensen initiated at Luther College over 70 years ago are still applicable and can be recognized as existing on the campus today."

Beyond the zones of the campus once landscaped by Jens Jensen, Harrington and Grese found much of the newer land to be in harmony with Jensen's basic design. Newer buildings had been located along the edges of the openings as Jensen had thought they should be. A good deal of the native woodland and oak savanna still survived in the new, northern parts of the campus. Many of the campus roadways continued to curve around the open spaces.

The master plan of Harrington and Grese



Some campus buildings (here, Larsen Hall) are set in natural, prairie-like expanses. (courtesy Stephen F. Christy Collection, LCA)

was accepted by the college and will be implemented by stages in years to come. Detailed planting plans for zones one and two were presented in the spring of 1986, together with proposals for relocating some trees in Jensen's Campus and Athletic Field areas. A plan for establishing a small trial zone of prairie, across the road from the northern entrance, was presented at the same time. The initial stages of implementation began in 1986.

Jens Jensen's Prairie School campus of Luther College will take on new life in the years to come, restored and expanded as the Prairie Woodland campus designed by John Harrington and Robert E. Grese. Renewal of small trees and regional shrubs will introduce color and attract songbirds back onto the campus. Council Rings as outdoor classrooms or places for quiet conversation will be found in shady, wooded coves around campus, with views across the sunny open areas to the

wooded hills beyond. In all seasons, this campus, designed both to symbolize and be integrated into the surrounding region, will offer a beautiful, serene, and harmonious environment for higher education. □

Note on Sources

The primary sources on Jens Jensen's work at Luther College are in the Luther College Archives in the Preus Library. They include Jensen's photographs of Decorah and Luther College, one of his 1910 landscape plans for the Luther College campus, and other photographs of the Luther College campus. John Harrington and Robert Grese in their "Landscape Master Plan for the Luther College Campus, Decorah, Iowa" (1985) summarize Jens Jensen's philosophy and his work at Luther College. Robert E. Grese, "A Process for the Interpretation and Management of a Designed Landscape: The Landscape Art of Jens Jensen at Lincoln Memorial Garden, Springfield, Illinois" (master's thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1984), is a major study of Jensen's work. Other works on Jensen include Leonard K. Eaton, *Landscape Artist in America: The Life and Work of Jens Jensen* (Chicago, 1964). Jensen represented his own ideas in rather poetic language in *Siftings* (Chicago, 1939).

CONTRIBUTORS

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