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JOHN CHARLES OLMSTED AND THE SPOKANE PARK CENTENNIAL

By the end of the nineteenth century, Spokane was a vital commercial and rail center for the flourishing inland region of the Columbia Basin. In addition to a scenic and healthful setting, the city had a group of progressive and ambitious citizens eager to see their municipality build on its advantages. None was more forward thinking than Aubrey L. White, the first president of the city's new park board, who arranged for John Charles Olmsted's first visit to the city in 1907. Olmsted was already deeply involved in his work in Seattle and Portland and elsewhere on the West Coast. He was familiar with the region and he could also arrange to pass through Spokane on his transcontinental train journeys. He did so several times between 1906 and 1908, once accompanied by James Frederick Dawson, an associate landscape architect of the firm. The Olmsted Brothers presented their report to the park board in 1908, although the commissioners chose not to publish it until 1913.

The Spokane report, like the Seattle report published three years earlier, is a mature statement of the goals and values of park-making that J. C. Olmsted learned from his famous stepfather in the nineteenth century, and then put forward anew for the twentieth. Working with younger associates and partners (Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. was almost twenty years younger), J. C. Olmsted had more extensive and personal experience working with the elder Olmsted than any other member of the firm. Above all J. C. Olmsted deeply believed in what he sometimes described as the "true purpose" of the large park—the country park—that was expansive enough to contain the broad effects of landscape scenery that could cause profound emotional responses, and therefore affect the emotional and physical well being of city dwellers. He also knew that park advocacy, as well as planning, was always required,

and that many members of the community would need to be convinced in order for such ambitious plans to be implemented. He therefore began the report with a classic statement of the need for parks, followed by another statement arguing specifically for the timely creation of four large parks, in addition to other small parks and playgrounds in Spokane.

Historian Sally R. Reynolds observes that both plans and advocacy succeeded, and that under White's leadership, the park board was able to implement most of the 1908 report's recommendations over the next twelve years. "Not only was the Olmsted Plan implemented with few exceptions," Reynolds concludes, "the park system has remained intact and has been added to, often in direct support of the original recommendations."

The complete 1908 report is available as part of the 1913 *Report of the Board of Commissioners* being reissued in 2007 by the Spokane Parks Foundation as part of their park centennial commemorations.

Ethan Carr, Reprints Editor



When the Park Board printed its 1913 Report, they drew the Olmsted Plan map to include five more years of park development. Printed on tissue, it was attached inside the back cover of each report.

Photo courtesy of the Northwest Museum of Arts & Culture

From the 1908 Olmsted Brothers report to the Spokane Board of Park Commissioners. John Charles Olmsted, author.

NEED OF PUBLIC PARKS

We have noticed that the need of parks is not greatly felt by the great mass of citizens in a city of this size, or at any rate it does not manifest itself so publicly as to attract attention. It should not be assumed, however, that the people do not need parks because they fail to clamor for them. The fact is that the great mass of the people are so engrossed in their daily work and domestic and social life that they do not feel the need of inquiring into those additions to municipal activities that a study of other municipalities would lead one to appreciate and to advocate in this city. In sanitary matters some progress has been made, yet, if we are to judge by what has been done in more advanced cities, additional provisions for the health of the mass of the citizens are needed. It is recognized that public baths and public gymnasia conduce greatly to the health, moral-

ity and well being of the people. They are mainly sanitary, but whatever increases the general health of the public also tends to improve the morality of the public.

It is well understood, by those who have studied the subject, that public parks, while ostensibly undertaken for the pleasure which their beauty affords the people, are also very important aids to the improvement and preservation of the health of the people. City life, with its confinement during long hours to stores, offices, factories and the like, has a decidedly depressing effect on the general health and stamina of the bread winners. Even the home-keeping members of families living in the city are apt to be similarly depressed. This comes about mainly from the lack of invigorating exercise in the fresh air. Confinement and sedentary life tend to weaken the system to the point where it yields to diseases such as consumption, heart failure, apoplexy and diseases of the digestive apparatus and secretory glands. What is needed as a counteractive is not stimulants, which sooner or later still further weaken the system, but exercise out-of-doors.

Parks constitute one of the best means of drawing peo-



Cannon Hill Park Sanitary Building, circa 1915.

Photo courtesy of the City of Spokane, Parks and Recreation Department



1911 planting plan detail for Cannon Hill Park, briefly known as Adams Park.

Photo courtesy of the City of Spokane, Parks and Recreation Department

ple out-of-doors. Mothers resort to parks with their little babies and children under the school age, because they can do so with a feeling of safety and pleasure. School children are attracted to parks mainly for active play. Young men and young women go to parks for tennis, baseball, sociable walking together, or even for solitary enjoyment of the beauties of nature. It rarely is a sense of duty that leads young people to take exercise and fresh air in the parks, but they get the exercise and fresh air incidentally to enjoying themselves. Older men and women find an inducement to walk in the parks for golf or tennis or to watch others play, or to see other visitors and their clothes and horses, automobiles, and the like, or to study birds, flowers, or other attractive details of nature, or for the more refined and artistic satisfaction to be derived from the contemplation of landscape and of the sky and clouds.

Then, again, city life involves a continual strain of the nerves, through the need of avoiding dangers of the factory and street and owing to the multitudinous harsh noises and the vivid and eye-tiring sights and through having to give attention to so many things and to talk to so many people. Even to the well, this is tiring to the nerves, but to those who are delicate, it often becomes a torture. After all, it is to those whose nerves are tired—and they are a large proportion of the dwellers in a city—that the parks are most immediately beneficial.

LARGE PARKS

When we have gone more often and more deeply into the enormous benefit which parks are to the health of the people of the city, we come to realize not only the importance of having parks conveniently accessible, which is a very obvious requirement, but also the reason why they should be large. For those who are going to play field games, the sport itself affords abundant exercise in the fresh air, but the vast majority do not care to indulge in these more or less vigorous games. They are content to look on, or they want to see or hear something else that is interesting—something that they don't see every day of their lives, things especially that will bear being seen frequently without losing all interest. All those who wish to play baseball want is a level field of a few acres, surrounded in case of match games, by rows

of benches and a high fence, and they want it handy to the street cars and to their homes. They do not particularly want a half mile of walk through beautiful groves and meadows. Therefore, from their point of view, a baseball field in a small park conveniently situated is better than one in the remote part of a large park two or three miles from the centre of the city. The same holds true of many other recreation features such as are commonly introduced into parks.

But those who take part in field games are a small minority. Parks are for the greatest good of the greatest number. The greatest good parks can do in the direction of exercise for the mass of the visitors, is to offer inducement for the people to walk reasonable distances amid agreeable, nerve-resting surroundings. In this respect large parks are much more worth while than small parks because in them the attractions can be more numerous and more varied and can be so scattered as to lead to nerve-soothing walks amid pleasing surroundings. The visitor need not see the same attractions at each visit, though many of the interesting features will bear being seen at frequent intervals. Also, a large park which is wide and varied in topography will offer several alternative routes to the more distant features, thus affording variety in the walks, and one route can be differentiated from another, not only in scenery, but in steepness, indirectness, and adaptation to hot, sunny days, when shade is a desideratum, or to cool days, when the sun is grateful, or to dull, cloudy days, when bright colored flowers are especially good for their cheerfulness.

But, aside from their direct relation to public health by inducing to exercise in the open air, outlying large parks are needed, in addition to conveniently located, numerous small parks, in order to preserve or provide landscape for the enjoyment of the people. Well-to-do people can go during the summer to the lakes and mountains or to beautiful country residences, amid woods, farms and pastures, for a change from the more artificial and nerve-tiring city life, but the majority of the people can hardly do this.

So long as the mass of the people are living in cottages on large lots, with plenty of land, temporarily vacant, scattered all about them, they do not so much suffer from not living out in the country in summer; but this condition is rapidly changing, so that large parks—which are in effect

reservations of country scenery—easily resorted to as often as desired, are becoming more and more necessary for the people who live all summer in the city.

It takes a long time for our people to learn to make full use of the large out-lying parks after they have them. This goes to show how difficult it is for the majority to realize that they really need large parks. In some large cities where the people have had large parks for several decades, there are ordinarily from 25,000 to 50,000 visitors in the parks of a pleasant summer afternoon or evening, and from 100,000 to 200,000 or more on pleasant holidays. The people of such a city could not be persuaded to sell its large parks and expend the money in public squares or small parks, much as they value these similar recreation grounds. The people of these cities, whether they realize it or not, are really in love with the landscape of their large parks. They find in the breadth and extent of the scenery in the large parks, a pleasure and satisfaction, a restfulness for the nerves, and a soul-inspiring quality, which they do not experience to anything like the same degree in a small park.

We therefore deem it our first duty to urge your Board to secure the land for several large parks as soon as may be, so that the existing opportunities for preserving beautiful natural landscape, conveniently accessible by the mass of the people, may not be lost by the spread of subdivisions and city improvements.



Liberty Park staircase, circa 1915.

**Photo courtesy of the Northwest Museum of Arts
& Culture**