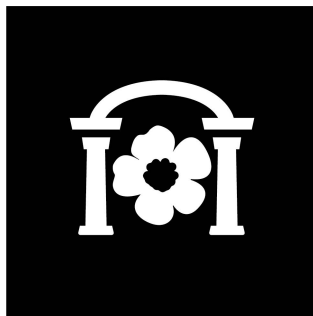




O.C. SIMONDS:

**His Works and Cultural
Influence in the Heart
of the Rock River Valley**

Dean R. Sheaffer



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Cover Photo:

Sinnissippi Farm Estate, native white pine trees growing on a rock outcropping
between the Rock River and Flag Pole Hill. Lowden Family Collection courtesy of
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INTRODUCTION

Introduction to *O.C. Simonds: His Works and Cultural Influence in the Heart of the Rock River Valley* by Dean R. Sheaffer

The legacy of design work by the landscape gardener Ossian Cole Simonds has often been little recognized and underappreciated. His carefully planned outdoor rooms, quasi-natural landscapes, and carefully framed views have been vulnerable to being filled or blocked by structures or deteriorated through neglect. His landscape designs have been thought to be unfinished places waiting to be improved by later generations.

I love the story of his work at the Michigan State University campus (at the time the Michigan Agricultural College) where he drew a red line around the open spaces of central campus, noting the area as a “sacred space from which all buildings must be forever excluded.” In his letter to the State Board of Agriculture in 1906 he continued:

This area contains beautiful rolling land with a pleasing arrangement of groups of trees, many of which have developed into fine specimens. This area is, I am sure, that feature of the College which is most pleasantly and affectionately remembered by the students after they leave their Alma Mater, and I doubt if any instruction given has a greater effect upon their lives.

Fortunately, this core area of Michigan State University remains one of the most treasured spaces on the central campus.

Despite being one of the founders of modern American landscape gardening or landscape architecture (Simonds preferred the term “landscape gardening”) in the late 1800s and early 1900s, few people are aware of the breadth of his work and the notable parks and park systems, college campuses, institutional landscapes, cemeteries, golf courses, and residential designs that were shaped by his creative vision. Finding out what work he did is challenging as records were largely lost when his Chicago design office closed in the 1930s. While he completed landscape designs across the U.S., the largest concentration of projects was in the Midwest. In this extended essay, Dean Sheaffer provides an excellent glimpse of his work in the Rock River Valley of Northern Illinois.

Why the Rock River Valley? As Sheaffer aptly notes, Simonds appreciated the quiet beauty of the Rock River valley and was able to tap into the “happy coincidence” of both political and financial support for his wide variety of projects found in the area. The work in the Rock River Valley included public parks, a greenway, a public high

school, private residences, and farm estates. Collectively these projects have been valued by the hundreds of thousands who have enjoyed the natural beauty of the area and used these landscapes for active recreation or as places for quiet escape.

Simonds grew up on a farm in Grand Rapids, MI, and attended the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor where he studied a combination of architecture and what we would now call civil and environmental engineering. As Sheaffer notes in his essay, Simonds's career took a major turn when he became involved with surveying Graceland Cemetery in Chicago and eventually accepted the position of superintendent. Graceland would serve as a laboratory for Simonds's evolving ideas about landscape design and led to his wide-ranging career as one of the pioneers in the field that would become known as landscape architecture.

He became active in the American Park and Outdoor Art Association and was the only Midwesterner among the founding members of the American Society of Landscape Architects in 1899. He encouraged the establishment of educational programs in landscape design at several universities in the Midwest but was successful in creating the program at his alma mater — the University of Michigan — in 1908. He would serve as a part-time faculty member there throughout the remainder of his life. Most of the other early faculty members came from Simonds's office in Chicago.

Simonds frequently wrote about his work in various publications although the most extensive exploration of his design philosophy can be found in *Landscape Gardening*, originally published in 1920. *Landscape Gardening* is largely based on lectures he gave in the landscape design program at the University of Michigan. In my own role as a professor of landscape architecture at the University of Michigan, I had the pleasure of directing Nichols Arboretum — one of his designs from 1906. When the Library of American Landscape Architecture decided to re-publish *Landscape Gardening* in 2000, I was fortunate to be able to write the introduction.

In writing that piece, I relied on research done by many others, including Mara Gelbloom who had researched Simonds while a grad student at the University of Chicago, Julia Bachrach with the Chicago Park District, and Dean Sheaffer who has long researched Simonds's work in the Rock River Valley around Dixon and elsewhere. Later, I was able to interact with Barbara Geiger whose thesis at the University of Wisconsin-Madison further documented Simonds's career and led to her book *Low-Key Genius: The Life and Work of Landscape-Gardener O.C. Simonds*, published in 2011.

Sheaffer's essay here, *O.C. Simonds: His Works and Cultural Influence in the Heart of the Rock River Valley*, is the result of his many years documenting and piecing together Simonds's work in the various communities along the Rock River in northern Illinois. He provides an incredibly insightful analysis of Simonds's approach to design, the influences and natural landscapes that shaped his work, and the network of people and events that both enabled and constrained these projects. The result is an amazingly rich story about Simonds, the history of communities along the Rock River and how designs by Simonds helped to preserve and enhance the beauty of the region. It is an inspiring tale that will hopefully encourage greater appreciation of this scenic area and

continued stewardship and care of the places Simonds worked to protect and enhance through his designs.

I am grateful to the Esta Barrett Manor and Gardens, Inc. for supporting Sheaffer's valuable study here and working to share his diligent work with the broader public.

Bob Grese, Professor Emeritus
School for Environment and Sustainability
University of Michigan

Esta Barrett Manor and Gardens, Inc. board member

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O.C. Simonds: His Works and Cultural Influence in the Heart of the Rock River Valley

by Dean R. Sheaffer

In the early decades of the 20th century, landscape architects practicing their art in the upper Midwest were on a mission. In addition to bringing beauty and structure to the sites where people lived, worked, and played, they sought to introduce to everyone the appreciation and benefits of natural scenery, specifically Midwestern scenery.

The leading practitioners in this young design profession, those who had the most influence on their peers and on the public, were members of the first generation of settlers to the Great Lakes States. They were born and grew up in the Midwest in the latter half of the 19th century before nearly all of the pre-settlement natural landscape had vanished under the assault of agriculture and industry. They saw European landscape models, imported first to the Eastern States and from there to new public and private landscapes in the Midwest, becoming popular. The mounting use of showy exotic plants, pattern carpet bedding, and the prevalence of geometric, formal designs disturbed them, and they mourned the loss of human contact with nature in the vanishing native landscape.

At the turn of the 20th Century, Midwest-born artists and writers were developing their own endemic styles that would celebrate rather than ignore the distinct culture of the Midwest. Concurrently, a handful of landscape architects sought to design in ways that would harmonize with, conserve, and even restore the local landscape as they had known it to be. They felt a strong attraction to the plants and patterns of native ecosystems and to the emerging science of ecology as taught at the University of Chicago in the early 1900s. These pioneer landscape architects sought to preserve the distinct nature of the native Midwestern landscape. Leading the public to an understanding and appreciation of the native landscape for its benefits and beauty became their design priority.

Perhaps the earliest to develop a design approach that was credited with having a major influence on what came to be known as the “Prairie Style” was Ossian Cole Simonds (1855-1931). In his lifetime Simonds would create a large body of landscape design work in the Midwest and nationally. In the Rock River Valley region, Simonds’

work was prominent throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century, until his passing and the emergence of other local landscape architectural design firms. His projects included public parks and park systems, gentleman farm estates, and private residential grounds.

Simonds and His Design Approach

O. C. Simonds, born on a farm in Grand Rapids, Michigan, explored the fields and forests where he learned the wild plants and trees in his youth and developed a love and aesthetic sensitivity for nature in all its aspects. He studied civil engineering and architecture at the University of Michigan and then migrated to Chicago with the intention of working as an architect in private practice for William LeBaron Jenney, his former university teacher. His first assignment for Jenney was a drainage and expansion project at Graceland Cemetery just north of the city. There he met the president of the cemetery, Bryan Lathrop, through whose influence Simonds became interested in landscape gardening, “the fine art of creating a landscape *in situ* instead of on a canvas.”¹ This naturalistic approach was in clear contrast to the more formal engineering and architectural design that Simonds knew, and it appealed to him.

Lathrop introduced Simonds to the fundamentals of landscaping, to Adolph Strauch, superintendent of Spring Grove, a renowned park-like “rural cemetery” in Cincinnati, and to the core writings of landscape-gardeners abroad and in America.²

As he continued to work on projects at Graceland, Simonds learned to apply “the idea of creating landscape pictures with natural-looking scenery.”³ He designed landscapes with groups of trees or shrubs including species, such as the native hawthorn and crabapple trees, not available in nurseries. Simonds transplanted those natives from the wild and from nearby farms. His design process was guided by natural patterns of plants he saw growing in nature and by memories from his youth.



Graceland Cemetery roadway and mature landscape, date unknown. *Graceland Cemetery collection*

In 1883 Simonds accepted an appointment as full-time superintendent at Graceland Cemetery. He also started a private practice located in a building next to the cemetery. As his reputation in cemetery, park, and residential landscape design grew, the increasing number of commissions in his private office demanded more of his time. In 1897 he resigned his position at Graceland and was immediately re-hired as the cemetery's consulting "landscape gardener." Throughout his career this was the title, not "landscape architect" or "landscape engineer," that he preferred to be known by in all of his design work. He felt the title "landscape gardener" better reflected the informal, artistic nature of naturalistic design, whereas most architects and engineers at that time employed drafting tools that often resulted in formal geometric design.

In practice, Simonds was also an *architect* in the sense that his designs were notably spatial. He used naturalistic plantings such as shrubs planted in masses to articulate sequences of "rooms" and "doors;" ornamental trees including the native hawthorn to frame views through "windows;" and shade trees, shrubs, or ground level herbaceous plants to create the feeling of "ceilings," "walls," and "floors" within the landscape spaces. The result was that his landscapes typically led the viewer's eye to explore spaces while they visually concealed portions of the total composition, as viewed from any one vantage point, adding an element of mystery. This technique enticed visitors to enter and explore all of the garden rooms.

By increasing the number of spaces and the total length of their planted edges, he had more opportunities to introduce landscape diversity and visual interest. His designs "borrowed" neighboring and distant landscape spaces by selectively opening views to them, further expanding the total extent and variety of the landscape to be enjoyed. These attributes were vital to giving the experience of each Simonds-designed landscape a unique personal identity, a distinct sense of place. Simonds was not a self-promoter. Rather, as indicated when he described his design philosophy in his book *Landscape-Gardening*, he felt that the designer's place, should be to work with and enhance the spirit of a place, thereby to "open the eyes of those who fail to see such beauty as already exists."⁴ Just as he sought to conceal the hand of the designer in his naturalistic landscapes, he often downplayed or omitted taking personal credit for his own designs in public.

His landscape design work took its authenticity from his own observations of nature. For example, he would visit a little-disturbed remnant of some woodland nearby to see what grew there. He frequently used native shrub roses as symbols of the prairie region to frame the front doorway of a home or the gateway of an expansive landscaped site. Simonds' designs were meant to harmonize with and incorporate into each project the character of the regional landscape. By principle, his work did not stand apart from the native landscape, and he did not resort to attention-grabbing exotic plants or ornamentation.

Simonds family collection*O.C. Simonds, about 1900*

In addition to Bryan Lathrop, his acknowledged mentors were Adolph Strauch, landscape gardener and superintendent of Spring Grove Cemetery in Cincinnati, and Frederick Law Olmsted, the originator of landscape architecture in America and designer of New York's Central Park. Olmsted's work, in turn, was inspired by the designers of 18th-century English estate gardens with their pastoral and imposingly wild and natural scenery. Simonds believed, as did Olmsted, that contact with nature supported and was necessary to human health and happiness.

He also became familiar with the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and other East Coast transcendentalists.⁵ In his foundational essay,⁶ Emerson referred to nature as the "Universal Being." He believed that there was a spiritual sense of the world around him, and that humans, distracted by the demands of the world, did not accept fully the beauty of nature.

During the time young Ossian was growing up, leading an active outdoor life on the Michigan farm, his parents joined the Seventh Day Adventists, a religious sect. The Adventists advocated a vegetarian diet, cleanliness, fresh air, clean water, and sunshine, all of which his father and mother practiced. They held a lifelong belief in the importance of nature. The influence of their beliefs, his boyhood explorations, and of Emerson's transcendental views would become evident in Simonds' maturing approach to landscape design.

Why is the work of O.C. Simonds important? How did he exert influence on the public taste and attitudes toward landscape historically? Does his approach to landscape design have enduring influence on our lives a century later? To find answers, we can look at his work in the Rock River Valley corridor of northern Illinois. Here, Simonds and the firm bearing his name that survived him were represented by designs of rural private estates, urban residences, public parks, and by his consultation on layout of the scenic Illinois Rt. 2 highway hugging the Rock River.

Projects known to have been designed by Simonds date from Long View Park, Rock Island, Illinois, at one end of the corridor in 1903, to the campus of Beloit College, Beloit, Wisconsin, at the other end in 1905, to Dixon High School Riverfront Park, midway between in 1931, the last year of his life. Actual documentation of work bearing the Simonds name is generally spotty. Simonds & Company archives were destroyed, along with the building his office had occupied, after his successor closed the doors about 1956. It has taken years for independent researchers to accumulate

project lists. Sometimes existing Simonds drawings and plans may be found at their historic sites. References to Simonds' work in correspondence, newspapers, and oral tradition, have been found in scattered archives, museums, libraries, and private collections.⁷

An Experience of Nature

Among Simonds' projects in the Rock River Corridor were public parks that have been frequented and enjoyed by generations. Two of these, Lowell Park on the Rock River a couple of miles north of Dixon and Sinnissippi Park in Rockford, also overlooking the river, serve as examples of Simonds' application of his signature design principles.

Simonds first became involved with the development of **Lowell Park** in 1911. At that time the Lowell Park Commission retained him "to visit the park...several times during the year 1912, to lay out work necessary to be done and take general supervision for the year..."⁸ Earlier that month Simonds with the commissioners made an inspection tour of Lowell Park to discover the nature of the place and was so charmed by the various aspects of the bluffs, views, ravines and river that he agreed to direct the work of development from time to time at a very small fee "...instead of making an expensive plan..."⁹

The property had been offered to the city of Dixon in 1907 for use as a park by Carlotta Lowell of Boston, in memory of her parents. Her father, Charles Lowell of Boston, had visited the property in 1860 while he was employed by the Burlington & Missouri River Railroad at Burlington, Iowa, and was "so taken with the beauty of the place that he bought it, planning to come here and live."¹⁰ After the death of her father in the Civil War, her mother, Josephine Shaw Lowell (1843-1905) of Boston and New York, a philanthropist who has been characterized as the Jane Addams of her time, had viewed the property in 1868 and was aware of its potential.

Josephine had long held the idea that Charles' property along the Rock River should become a rural park for the people of Dixon. It would appear that she held a belief in the important social benefits of public parks that were espoused by landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted in his design of New York Central Park.¹¹ When she offered the land to Dixon as a park, Carlotta engaged John Olmsted of the Boston landscape architectural firm Olmsted Brothers, himself an influential designer, to visit the site and prepare a report on its development as a park. His recommendations included limitations on the cutting of trees and banning of all buildings except those necessary for the park; the exclusive use of native limestone quarried and trees cut on the site to build park structures; and a border planting of evergreen trees as a windbreak to encourage the restoration of the native forest that had been cut for oak railroad ties and then grazed by cattle.

One outspoken advocate of the proposed city park was Edward Nelson Howell, a Dixon merchant who was a lover of nature and natural beauty. He had visited the site many times and knew its wealth of wildflowers. When the Dixon city council voted to accept

Lowell's donation of the 200-acre site, Howell was promptly appointed president of the new Lowell Park Commission.

The commissioners then hired a young man, Arthur Comey, who had studied landscape architecture at Harvard under Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., the son of Frederick Law Olmsted. For a period of two years, 1908 and 1909, his duties were those of landscape engineer, superintendent, caretaker, and laborer. Before he left, he completed his plans for the park including several structures. His final report stated that "among the valuable results of habitual use of the park will be the cultivating of a love for nature, which is a refining influence, both because it underlies an appreciation of art and because it gives people an added interest, thus bringing [people] out of their surroundings and into a healthy outdoor life."¹²

From the outset, not only Comey and Howell but all those connected with the development of Lowell Park clearly were of one mind: Keep it natural. Retain the natural beauty. Simonds in his book stated that "the main purpose of a park is to preserve, restore, develop, and make accessible natural scenery." At a time before the recreational movement had taken hold in city parks, he argued that a park is "not necessarily a place for play, but rather to feed one's soul." F. L. Olmsted, Jr., Comey's teacher, had written, "The essential characteristics of a well-designed and well-managed rural park are that all the numerous other objects which it may serve are substantiated to the provision of beautiful scenery and to rendering this scenery accessible and enjoyable by large numbers of people...and that the subordinate objects are met only in such ways and to such a degree as will not interfere with the simplicity and the rural and natural quality of the scenery."¹³

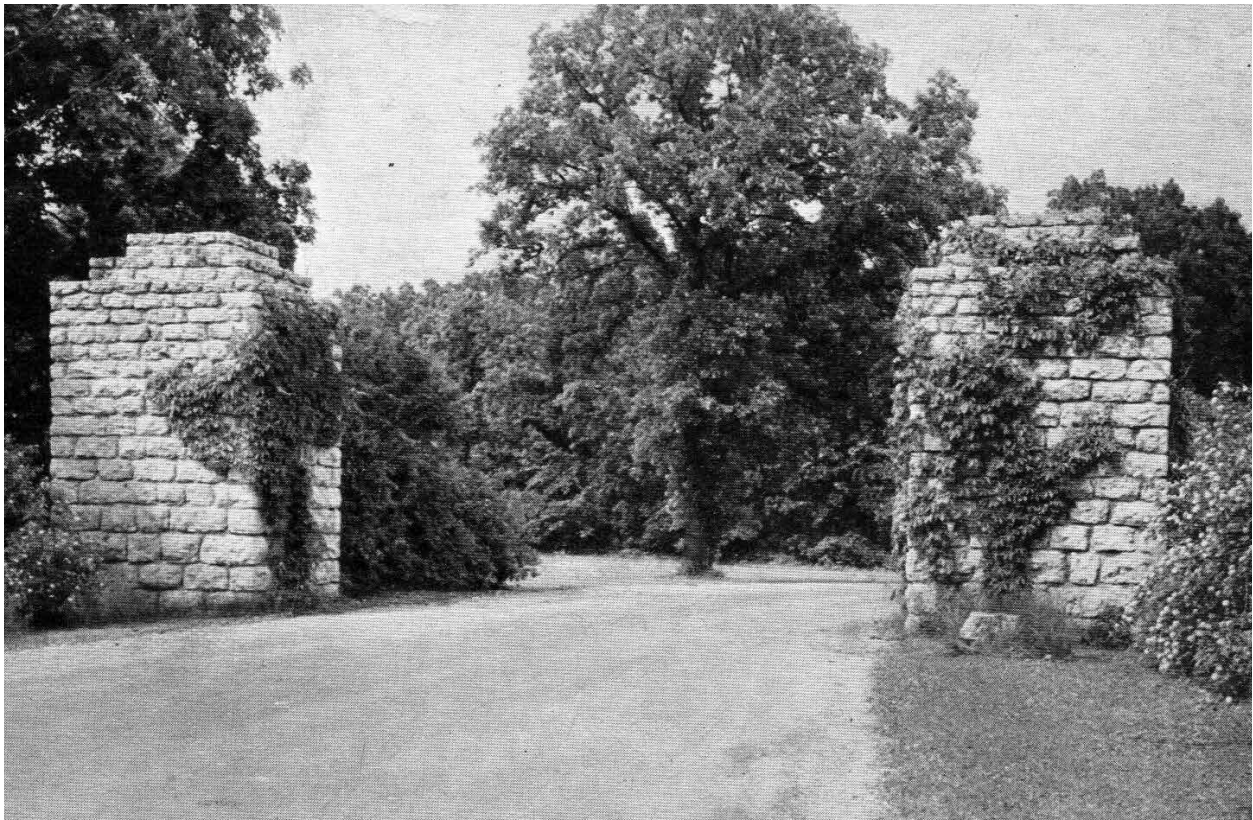
Among his first acts as general supervisor in 1911, Simonds laid out a new drive leading from the entrance of Lowell Park to the riverfront. His South Road descended along a winding route that exploited the steep topography of the bluffs. Within a few years he also created a new plan for the park entrance. It featured two massive native stone piers or gate posts set back from the public highway. He redesigned the turnoff from the highway as two gradually curving roadways, one from each direction, separated by an island planted with native rose shrubs. This style of entryway, creating a passage featuring massed plantings of species of shrubs that symbolized the native landscape and integrated the gate posts with nature, was a signature feature of many Simonds' projects.

Just beyond the gateway was a clearing in the woods with a drive that led to the riverfront. Branching off either side of the main drive, north and south, were two scenic drives that included overlooks. Entering the park, choosing a road, and traveling slowly through the forested terrain to finally arrive at the riverfront multi-use area could be a memorable and transformative experience.

Simonds himself often chose to describe with words — and sometimes drawings — an imaginary trip that would create for his audience a vivid picture of the beauty of naturalistic "scenery" with native vegetation. The description might be of a trip along

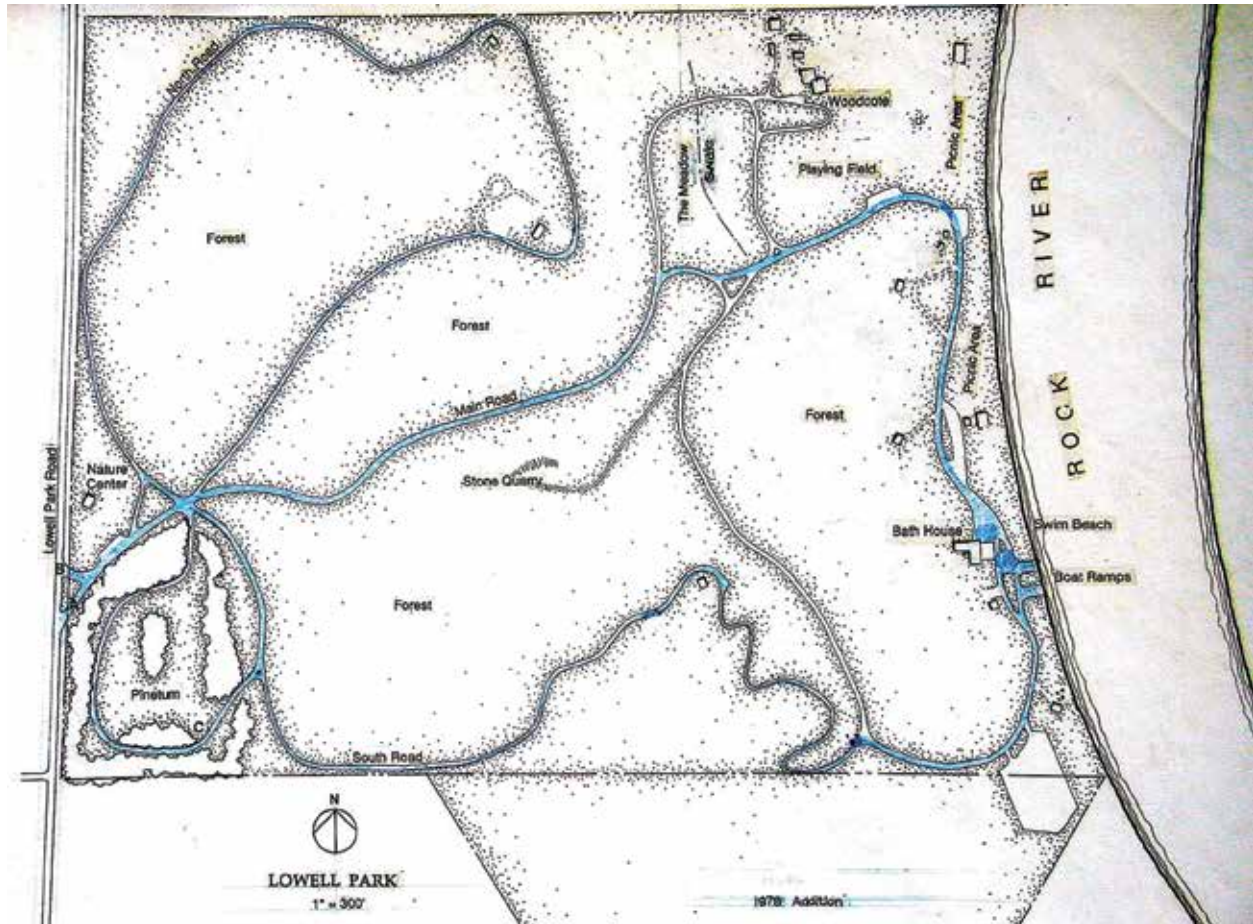
a winding road offering a succession of experiences. Such an imaginary trip would illustrate both the qualities of a well-designed road and its surrounding landscape. What follows, rather than an objective description of the scenic and natural features brought to your attention by Simonds' design of the drives in Lowell Park, is the author's account of the subjective experience that anyone may have enjoyed when visiting the park in the years that followed:

Traveling to Lowell Park on the highway, you are surrounded by the familiar geometry and nearly flat terrain of subdivisions or farm fields. As you approach the entrance and turn off of the highway, your movement slowing on the curve but continuing smoothly, your eye is drawn to two massive stone piers framed with wild shrubs. When you pass through the gateway, the view ahead is of a sunny space, an entry room, enclosed on all sides by forest. The main road branches, offering a choice of three drives — the North Road, Main Road, and South Road — each plunging immediately into the shaded woods. You are struck by the contrast between the manmade landscape behind and the natural setting all around. The suddenness of the shift intensifies your sense of arrival. As you move ahead you are about to be immersed in a wild environment. Only by first taking one of these slow, winding drives through the forest will you find the active recreational benefits the park offers at the riverfront below.



The Lowell Park entrance featured two great piers of limestone quarried on site. Simonds positioned the gateway well back from the highway and framed it with native shrub roses planted in masses.

Photos: Collection of Esta Barrett Manor and Gardens, Inc.



Map of Lowell Park with drives laid out by Simonds: the North Road loop and overlook from the bluff top, the Main Road directly to the river along a ravine, and the South Road and overlook zig-zagging down the bluff face. *Drawing: Dean Sheaffer*

Turning left onto the one-way North Road, you at once find woodland vegetation pressing up to the pavement on both sides. Enticing forest smells, organic scents found only in the living presence of biology, flow in through open car windows. It is a sensual experience that wipes away thoughts of the everyday world and plunges you into this natural realm. On a turn in the road you are cast into a small clearing in the woods. On the right is a native stone picnic shelter, and on the left, through an opening carved into the woods is a long view from the top of the bluff. Pausing to enjoy the long view, you gaze on a bend of the Rock River far below with more woods and more fields visible beyond. Within minutes as the drive has unfolded you have been transported from the familiar domestic scenery of farmland to the wonderland of a nature park.

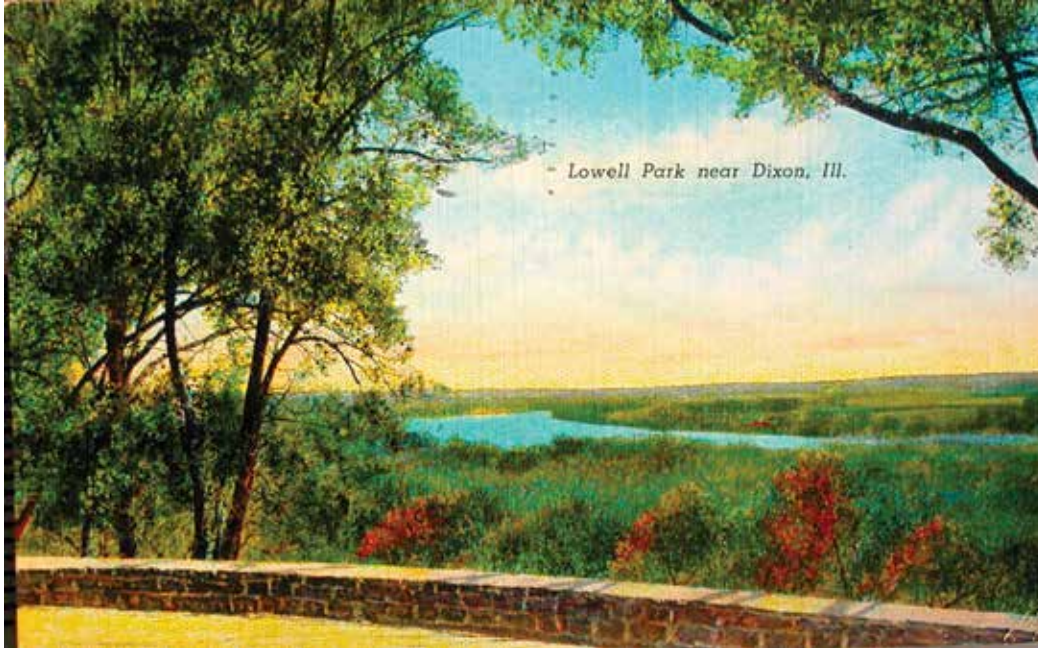
The North Road loops back to the clearing at the park gateway, at which point you choose the central Main Road. A two-way drive, it will take you to your destination more quickly than the alternate South Road yet still transport you through unspoiled woods. It follows a ravine and affords a close-up view of a large bed of bluebells and the

ephemeral woodland flowers that blanket the forest floor in spring. In fall the splash of rich color of the oak leaves surrounds you. As your immersion in nature unfolds, the continuing descent of the drive reinforces your feeling that the unexceptional, everyday landscape that is so familiar has been left above and behind. What will come next?

The Main Road makes a strong right turn and suddenly you have left the forest's embrace. On your left is an open meadow, and beyond it you see a small stand of woods, an "island" of nature that separates the drive and the playing field. On the right now is the continuing border of the native woods, set back a bit from the drive. The sunny edges of the woods historically were home to colonies of native crabapples. Bursting into flower in May, the crabs blanketed the roadside with pinkish-white blooms. Their intense fragrance, delighted the multitude of visitors who returned to the park year after year to see this wild wonder of nature.¹⁴

The view from the road directly ahead, framed left and right between the borders of the island and the forest, captures your attention. The riverfront destination is in sight! Up close, the river looks so broad. Stirred by wind and by boats, the surface sparkles in the sun. Between the forest and the riverbank lies a transition zone of native trees, a shady natural park. You have left the forest and are entering a separate environment with compelling attractions. The profound contrast between the serenity of the forest and the bustle of social activity ahead strikes your senses. In front of you powerboats are speeding on the river, players running and shouting, children racing to playgrounds, smoke rising from grills. The road swings right, following the river, and continues out of sight.

Starting again at the park entry gateway, the remaining choice is the winding South Road. The beauty of a winding drive is that your focus tends to be on the journey, not on the destination. You engage with the landscape around you more than on a straight road. As you travel around each curve the scene in front sweeps slowly from right to left, or left to right, a moving picture.¹⁵ As laid out by Simonds, the South Road offers its own unique sequence of views, variations in vegetation, topography, light and shade. A stretch of forest scenery leads to a tight turn, opening surprisingly to a panoramic overlook. Spread out before you is a pastoral vista of the Rock River valley undisturbed by traffic, industry, or buildings. It is an iconic picture, framed by the forest. It begs to be photographed and remembered.



Overlook on South Road, as depicted in an historic, hand-tinted picture postcard, offers this broad scenic vista of the Rock River and native woods. *Collection of the author.*

The sight of the broad river below reflecting the sky heightens your anticipation of arrival at your destination, but the beach, playgrounds, and picnic areas remain out of your view under dense tree canopy. Leaving the clearing and plunging back into deep forest, you feel the steady decline of the roadway as it snakes down the face of the bluff, melding with the natural contours. Sometimes the road takes you on a tight turn carved into the bluff, the steep slope pressing so close to the pavement that you might reach out the car window as you pass and touch the vegetation, perhaps catch a columbine flower or a seed hanging from a stem of a bladdernut shrub. Now, through the woods ahead you see the drive dropping toward a ravine, there to make a final switchback and turn toward the river. In the forest below, the road levels out and you enter a broad, blind curve. As you round it, there appears a picnic shelter with a large fireplace, distinctive in its construction of quarried native limestone and similar to others found on the riverfront. You welcome the sight as a signal that you have arrived. Past the shelter the view ahead is transformed instantly from deep woods to open space lying under a canopy of oak and hickory trees. Greeting you are the sound of boat wakes slapping the shore. On the breeze is a distinctive smell you may associate with the river and the motor boat traffic. The busy boat launch and a sandy beach crowded with bathers will catch your interest. On the left you may observe that the dense, green border of forest undergrowth has been pushed far back creating bays for park structures, openings for social activity. You see more hip-roofed stone picnic shelters, a spacious timber shelter with dozens of tables, swing sets, slides, the park concession stand and bathhouse. The drive winds on through this expansive gathering place, eventually to turn away from the riverfront and pass out of sight. Refreshed by your experience of the forest journey, your day-to-day concerns forgotten, you hasten

to park, pile out and join the fun.

In the heyday of the early 20th century and until the early 1950s, the Lowell Park riverfront was packed on weekends with thousands of active visitors, with the sights and sounds of children at play, the roar of power boats, the smell of wood smoke and barbecues, the metallic squealing of swings and merry-go-rounds, the clank of horseshoes, and the thrashing of water by bathers in the roped-off swimming area. On one weekend in 1934 Lowell Park was reported to be “about the most popular spot in northern Illinois, with an estimated 5,000 people visiting, all day long and far into the night. The achievement of transforming this site into a nature park capable of accommodating thousands of users in a single day took fully three and a half decades. Begun in 1907, development progressed with the guidance of Olmsted, the plans of Comey, the vision and skill of Simonds’ firm, and the assistance of the WPA, until in 1942 it was at last completed, faithful to the dream “that the people of Dixon and vicinity should have this beautiful place for the refreshment of body and spirit, for all time.”

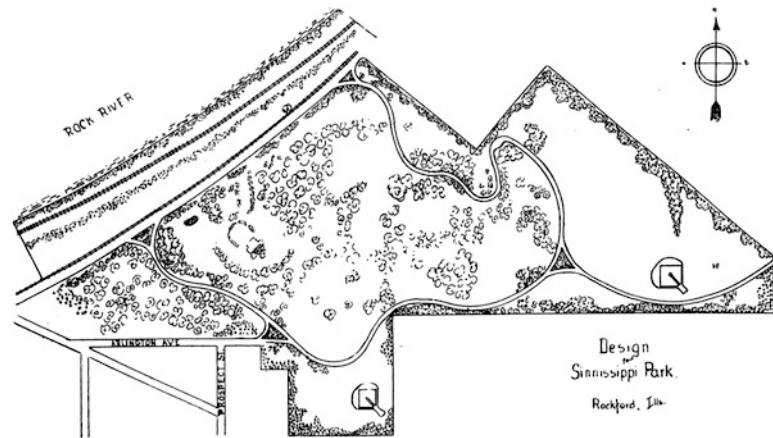
Sinnissippi Park in Rockford, Illinois, was founded in 1909, the same year the Rockford Park District was established. In a special election held that spring, the park district was formed due to a push by the Rockford Club. Some members of this influential organization had realized that no adequate provision was being made in Rockford for places where children could play other than in the streets. They noted that all woods and open places in the city were rapidly being closed to the public by private development. The city was in a period of rapid growth — from a population of 31,000 in 1900 to 45,000 a decade later.

One of the park board’s first acts was the purchase of a 75-acre tract of beautiful hilly woodland on the east side of North Second Street and the Rock River, known as Rood Woods, and an adjacent 50 acres of open land. The name of the new park, “Sinnissippi,” was chosen by the board “to keep alive the beautiful Indian name for Rock River...”¹⁶ It was also an acknowledgement of the scenic value of the new park’s location, even though at that time the property was separated from the river by a swath of land bearing railroad tracks next to the river as well as streetcar tracks adjacent to the street.

The board then secured the services of O.C. Simonds, “an eminent landscape architect, who has made a complete working plan for the future development and improvement of this park.”¹⁷ The master plan he drew (below) is complete, but only to the extent that it shows the main drive through the park, location of playfields for team sports, and the location and configuration of a grand pavilion on a high point overlooking a horseshoe-shape formal garden area and the river. Simonds sketchily depicted the existing wooded and open areas of the park. Around the periphery of the park he indicated proposed massed plantings of shrubs with naturalistic, undulating edges facing the open lawn spaces. At the two entrances from North Second Street and at other intersections of the drives, the plan includes Simonds’ characteristic split, flared roadway. This design created a broad, triangular space between the two sides of

the split road to be planted with shrubs. Everywhere on the plan the drives are shown continuously curving in winding routes, presumably intended by Simonds to exploit the natural and scenic beauty of the site.

It is probable that Simonds personally staked out the main drive through the park. The alignment of the road largely conforms to his plan, and typically he took control of the field work to achieve the optimum scenic benefit and visual appeal of the roadway curves. Within the time period of 1909 to 1910, the roadway, about one mile in length, was constructed. The commissioners chose to use brick pavers on a concrete



Simonds' plan of Sinnissippi Park, published in the first annual report of the Rockford Park District, showing proposed roads, trees, and massed plantings of shrubs.

foundation, intended to accommodate automobile traffic. They built a rustic bridge over a dry run along the route from boulders and concrete. The run, “formerly a very unsightly feature...has been changed into a thing of beauty by putting in a cement bottom and hardhead sides” set with boulders. From a photograph in the annual report, it is clear that this is not likely to have been Simonds' work. It is the work of a Mr. Heffran, “under the guidance of the Park Board, especially [commissioner] Mr. Robt. H. Tinker, who is widely known for his ability as a landscape architect.” Tinker had all dead trees and limbs removed and a number of picnic tables and grates built for outdoor cooking. The commissioners also installed playground equipment. There is no mention of Simonds' involvement in any of the improvements or in oversight of any actual planting of trees and shrubs to further develop his vision of a naturalistic park. “As far as possible” the board reported, “Sinnissippi Park...has been kept near to nature.”

Early in 1910 the board created the position of superintendent of parks and employed Paul B. Riis, a landscape architect, to fill the position. Bids for nursery stock to be planted in all parks that spring were accepted, which suggests that Riis and the board, not Simonds, were making planting decisions in Sinnissippi Park and other properties. Plans for Fair Grounds Park and South Side Park were prepared by a Mr. Stowell and superintendent Riis, respectively. A subsequent plan drawing in the third annual report for the year 1913, captioned “Diagram of Sinnissippi Park as it Stands Complete,” bears superintendent Riis' signature.¹⁸ The latter plan has an additional drive loop that passes behind the pavilion. The formal garden at the foot of the pavilion is delineated in some detail, as well as a proposed lagoon and naturalistic swimming pool with extensive landscaping between North Second Street and the railroad tracks. Riis

differentiates between the existing woody vegetation and the trees planted to fill voids between the shaded areas. On the east side of the park in the open area is a diagram of the 9-hole golf course built in 1911. The Riis plan shows the location of the playground and tennis courts. His plan differs from Simonds' in that on the border with Arlington Avenue as well as on the south, adjacent to Scandinavian Cemetery, Riis shows trees planted in single rows, uniformly spaced, rather than shrubs massed in natural patterns. However, on both plans the winding main drive is the same.

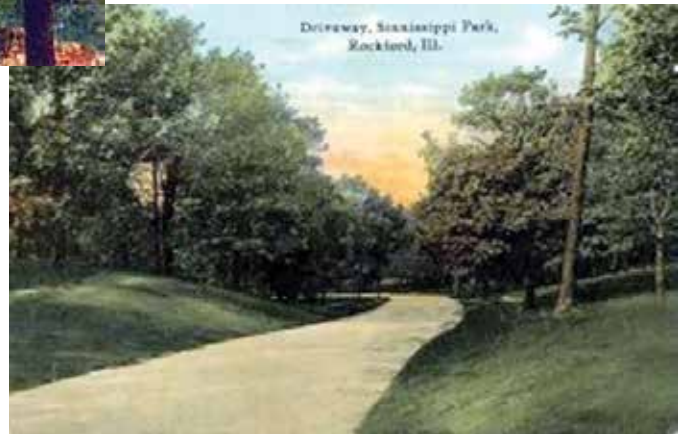


Two historic views of Sinnissippi Park:

The postcard view (left) features the new park's natural scenic beauty with shade trees, sunny meadow, a rustic bridge on a footpath, varying topography, and the river in the background.

Undated postcards in author's collection

The postcard (right) illustrates Simonds' handling of a curve in the main drive and the grading of elevations at the sides of the drive where the road is depressed into the earth.



Aside from the initial master plan drawing and the very important matters of the location and configuration of the main drive and entrances, no other contributions of Simonds to the development of Sinnissippi Park and the golf course can be documented. Typically, he would have specified the trees and shrubs, laid them out on site, directed the planting and any further site development in person or with additional drawings. Without his personal direction, can Sinnissippi Park truly be called a Simonds design? More accurately, it should probably be thought of as a Simonds-Tinker-Riis design incorporating the visions of all three. In comparison to Simonds' initial plan, the result was a greater emphasis on active recreational benefits throughout the park. As such, it filled the perceived needs of the park district at that time. The first annual report claimed that Sinnissippi Park was "visited on every day in the summer by hundreds of people, on Saturdays and Sundays and holidays by thousands, and it has furnished a vast amount of healthful amusement for all classes."

Evolution of a Greenway

Dixon sprang up in the 19th century with its commercial district and a large portion of its industrial areas situated along the south bank of Rock River. However, factories were also built on the north bank below the dam, where it provided power. Above the dam, the north side of the river became a residential area. Eventually the shoe factory on the north bank was demolished and the stone rubble used to stabilize the bank below the dam.

When O.C. Simonds visited Dixon in 1907 to prepare a site and planting plan for a north riverbank lot that E. N. Howell had purchased for his new home, he would have seen the derelict condition of the banks on both sides of the river. His view of the land along the Rock River, as he would express to parks commissioner Louis Pitcher some years later, is that it was “the ‘front yard’ of the community.”¹⁹ The appearance of the riverfront, for better or for worse, surely would leave an impression on the minds of all who visited as well as those who lived in the town.

Howell, too, would have noticed the condition of the banks everyday as he traveled on foot the distance from his present home to the bridge, crossing it to his store downtown, and back home again. No doubt he had attended and been influenced by a lecture and stereopticon presentation given in 1901 to a packed crowd interested in the “beauty of our city” and home grounds.²⁰ The program, which had been prepared by O.C. Simonds, was presented by community leaders and hosted by the Phidian Art Club of Dixon. Two papers full of suggestions for civic improvement were read, the local newspaper reported the next day. The first, a plea for landscape gardening, was written by Byran Lathrop, Simonds’ influential mentor. The other was written by Simonds, giving suggestions for improvements and “authoritative advice as to the best trees and shrubs to plant in certain localities and for certain effects.”

The showing of about 75 stereopticon views illustrating “arrangement and choice of vegetation for parks, gardens, and roadsides, as well as the proper building of the roadway itself” followed the readings. Some of the pictures shown “were in colors and were so true to nature that the beholder could readily imagine he was driving through an ideal park as view after view flashed upon the canvas.” Towards the end of the presentation, according to the newspaper, some views showed the striking differences between Europe and America. In Europe the traveler would see almost everywhere evidence of a sense of beauty. In America almost everywhere he would be “struck by the want of it...not because the American people have no sense of beauty, but in... the struggle for existence here...the practical side of life had been developed while the aesthetic has lain dormant.” Within just three weeks, a joint committee of the women’s societies of Dixon launched a campaign to clean up and improve the south bank of the river on the four blocks fronting the commercial district.

In 1913 the Lowell Park Commission, led by E. N. Howell and renamed the Dixon Park Board, assumed responsibility for maintenance of the north river bank, which in time would become what is now known as **Howell Park**. Two years later, at the height of the

nationwide City Beautiful Movement, Howell gave a talk listing the highest priorities of the “Dixon Beautiful” initiative. He emphasized the importance of beautifying the riverbanks and marking the site of the historical blockhouse on the riverfront where young Abraham Lincoln had been mustered into service.²¹ That same year Simonds and Co. conducted a survey of the north riverbank and improvement began on the steep bank upstream from the dam with plantings of low shrubs. They were of a species commonly used by Simonds to stabilize banks and to “harmonize with the scenery and surroundings.” But below the dam, continuation of improvements was delayed.

Finally, in 1923, following the recommendations of the government Waterway Commission and Simonds’ plan for the one-block length of the park between the dam and the bridge, a seawall of salvaged native limestone blocks was placed at a new harbor line in the river. The filling of the bank behind the seawall began. Simonds’ plan²² called for two terraces with paths on each level linked with stone steps. The main pathway was on the upper level. It led to the bridge crossing. The lower level was a platform for the fishermen who gathered daily to fish from the bank below the dam. The parkway on the slope between the terraces was to be planted with shrubs, grass, and ornamental trees. One species included was red haw, a native hawthorn tree with a distinct horizontal branching habit, often used by Simonds to frame scenic views and to harmonize with the prairie landscape. Actual beautification of the sloped area, however, was delayed until dredging below the dam could remove a small island and reduce the risk of damage to the river bank from flooding and ice jams.



Curving pathway and riverbank terraces in Howell Park from the dam to the Galena Avenue bridge.
Photo by the author, 1988.

Simonds' plan for the four blocks of the linear park that lay upstream from the dam, between the riverbank and adjacent street, extended the upper-level walkway. On the street side, he planted native shrubs in masses. The installation of tall, unclipped shrubs such as hazelnut provided food and habitat for squirrels, birds, and other wildlife. This planting screen reinforced the linear space of the pedestrian park, giving users the sense that they had stepped out of the urban environment and into the river's natural world. Never straight but always curving, the direction of the pathway helped focus attention, upstream or downstream, on the natural quality and beauty of the Rock River. All park users could now enjoy the river colors and changes in mood with the passage of day and season as Howell had for the past decades.



HOWELL TRAIL - DIXON, ILLINOIS

Vintage postcard view looking upriver from the trail in Howell Park above the dam. *George Dixon Collection in Loveland Museum, Dixon*

The design that Simonds developed for this riverwalk park and the two adjacent parks that follow is remarkably simple and straightforward. The river itself is the focus of attention. The bordering park does not try to compete. It aims to restore a truer sense of the nature of the river. However, as with anything that is natural, the native shrubbery that Simonds used and its placement made the park appear as anything but simple. Instead, with daily and hourly

changes in the light and with seasonal changes in foliage, with flower, fruit and color, each park was complex and endlessly interesting to visitors.

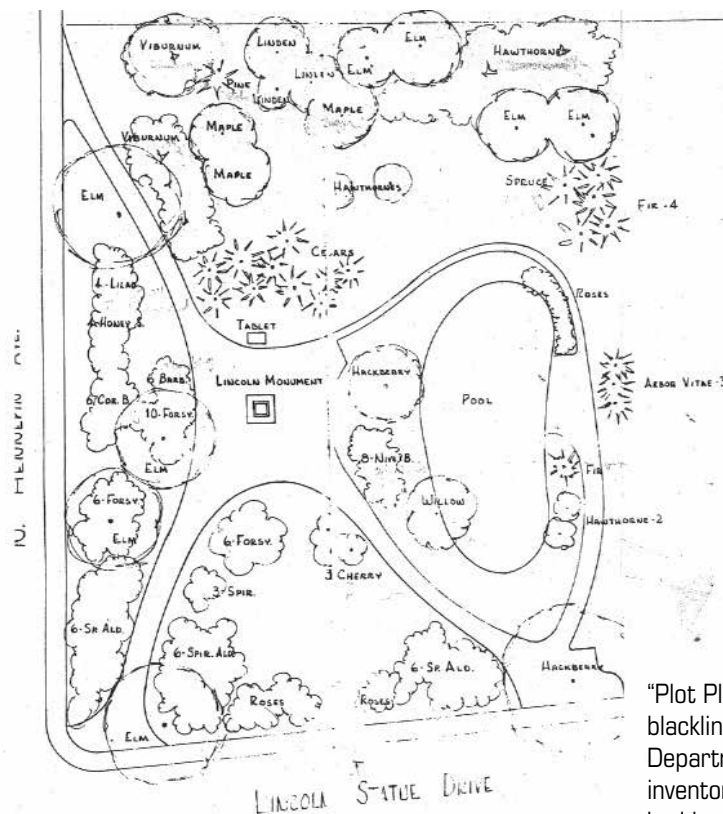
In 1939 when the new Galena Avenue bridge was built, the walkway on the lower level was extended to pass under the bridge. There it joined the North River Bank Park (now Presidents Park), a uniform terrace sloping gently from the street to the top of the riverside retaining wall. The wall is built of large, coursed, squared limestone, the same as Howell Park. It creates the natural, native stone



North River Bank Park historic scene, with the trail passing under the bridge. The Lincoln monument is located to the left across the street. *Dixon Park District archives*

appearance that Simonds preferred. The wall is quite high, and when the river is low it becomes a prominent visual element. The wall was backfilled with dredged river sand topped with soil to create a single, broad terrace. This linear park was landscaped with grass, masses of shrubs, and shade trees. A paved pathway wound the two-block length between the two bridges. There were benches but no introduced structures or attractions and, most importantly, no obstructions of the river view.

The park met Simonds' requirement to beautify the riverfront in a naturalistic design with native riparian plants and with a pathway from which to experience these pleasures and the views. Completed in 1931, it also satisfied another of Howell's Dixon Beautiful priorities: to improve the bank with a retaining wall. In addition, it created a suitable foreground for the Lincoln Monument State Memorial developed the same year. Long a local community objective, the memorial was located just across the street on the historic site of Fort Dixon, the blockhouse where 23-year-old Abe Lincoln was stationed during the Black Hawk War of 1832 when he served in the Illinois militia.²³ A statue depicting him as a soldier, to be facing south over the riverfront park toward the river, was commissioned by the state. Installation of the statue and grading of the site were completed in 1930 in time for the unveiling ceremony during Dixon's centennial celebration. Simonds designed the memorial site including its paved walks, a reflecting pond, and extensive plantings to provide a naturalistic background for the statue and to harmonize with the park landscape along the riverfront.²⁴ The Dixon Park District assumed care of the site.



Further downstream beyond the second bridge was the new high school building facing the river. On the land between the edge of the river and the road passing in front of the high school, was a slough. Although most people saw this bottomland as an unsightly collector of refuse, Simonds saw its potential for beautification. He declared the "former dump susceptible of development as a most unusual park."²⁵ In 1930 the Board of Education asked the city for help improving the site, and a year later it was transferred to the park board

"Plot Plan, Lincoln Monument, Dixon, Illinois," from a blackline print dated May 1941 in the files of the Ill. Department of Transportation, Springfield. Essentially it inventoried and mapped the original plantings Simonds had installed 10 years earlier.

to take over the improvements. The board immediately announced Simonds' plan to extend the riverfront greenway.

The work on Dixon High School Park began with dredging the river to fill the slough to create a new river bank and a low terrace between the river and the road. At the park's lower end, the plan featured a restored 50-foot by 275-foot lagoon, that had previously filled with silt, and the installation of three public tennis courts that could serve the school and function as an ice-skating rink in winter. The straight street in front of the school was extended west, with a southerly curve skirting the lagoon, "to a point where a beautiful view of Rock River" could be seen.²⁷ At the west end of the park the road turned north and continued past the school stadium until it connected with the east-west Lincoln Highway, U.S. Hwy 30. Simonds' design and choice of plant materials recognized that the lower parkway near the river must be able to accommodate flooding for a few days in the year.



Simonds' plantings for the memorial created a setting that complimented but did not distract from or compete with the desired view of the statue.²⁶ Also it can be said that his design of a naturalistic landscape may represent the most authentic setting for that place and time, 1832, when Lincoln was at Fort Dixon. *Photo: George C. Dixon Collection, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library*



Simonds transformed bottomland between the high school campus and the north bank into a functional extension of Dixon's linear greenway and trail along the Rock River. In this historic aerial photo, the north end of the tennis court can be seen at left. Not visible are the pathway and river bank, below, and the bridge, at right. *Photo courtesy of Lee County Historical and Genealogical Society*

At the east end of Dixon High School Park, Simonds placed an asphalt walk on the park terrace and linked it under the Rock River bridge to the existing walk at North River Bank Park. Park benches were placed along the grassy river edge. Newly planted shrub masses were included to visually set back the massive concrete bridge abutment, and scattered trees and shrubs were



This view from the road at the west end of the park features the lagoon, with the curving drive located at the top of the bank. Also visible in the distance is the Peoria Avenue bridge over the river. *Photo by Arnold D. LaCour, c. 1935*

installed on the riverbank. On the upper bank the site was no longer dominated by the imposing structures of the four-story school building or the bridge; now its most apparent connections were to the river and the other two riverfront parks. In the lawn space on the lower terrace Simonds' design provided a large open area, aligned with the high school entrance, for annual flower beds. The garden would serve as a focal point that reinforced the identity of the park as it would be seen from the viewpoints of both the high school and the bridge.

Construction of the project, it was reported, was to be done under the personal supervision of Simonds, "who has taken an unusual interest and pride in the beautification program in this community."²⁸ Unfortunately, he did not live to see the park constructed; his partner C. Roy West and son Marshall Simonds, both of Simonds and West, took charge of it.

Within a year Dixon High School Park was completed, true to the intent of Simonds' plan. This four-block section of the greenway in front of the school building stands as representative of a type of work that had brought Simonds renown: the conversion of "wastelands" into places of great beauty and utility. Together with the other two riverfront parks and their continuous pathway on the river edge, which now extended to 12 city blocks with no street crossings, it is one of the earliest examples in the nation of the creation of a riverfront *greenway*. This was decades before the term *greenway* came into common usage.

Revelation of a Scenic River

In 1922 Simonds was asked by E. N. Howell and the Citizens Association, the precursor of the Dixon Chamber of Commerce, to advise engineers in the new Illinois District 2 state highway office on the layout and development of a scenic drive on the west side of the Rock River. The route would follow an existing dirt road known as the Black

Hawk Trail along a particularly scenic 30-mile stretch of the river between Dixon and Rockford. Here the Rock River country, much of it forested, was the pride of civic-minded citizens not only in Dixon but also in Oregon, Byron, and Rockford. The unusual towering outcroppings of St. Peter's sandstone, white-tinted with shades of blue or green, attracted seasonal tourists from as far as the Chicago area. The grand scenery had been a great draw to many from eastern cities since around 1840 when the area opened to settlement after the Black Hawk War and the relocation of Sauk and Fox Indians.

Local residents hoped the new state **Scenic Rt. 2 Black Hawk Trail** would preserve and enhance the route's scenic qualities. They wanted to ban the billboards and roadhouses that otherwise might follow the the development of a new state highway.

Simonds' credentials could not have been better. At that time, he had gained a national reputation as one of three recognized authorities on scenic drives.²⁹ His design approach to the planning and layout of a river road centered on the same naturalistic features, the topography and the geology, the beauty and benefits of nature, that he advocated in all of his landscape design work.

Late in 1922 or early in 1923 he traveled the route in company with the state engineers and advised them on the layout of the new highway.³⁰ The result was a route that wound in curves, reflecting the course of the river and the rugged topography along the majority of its length. The route closely approaches the river again and again, and in those places, the land between the river and the road was acquired by the state. They include several rest areas with picnic tables. At other selected locations there was now public access to the river for scenic viewing and fishing. Where possible, the road bends toward the river. In each such location recommended by Simonds, the silver maples and other trees that lined the bank have been removed, thereby opening and framing "long views" of the river, the forest, and the stone bluffs. For travelers in either direction, these scenic views are among the most memorable experiences on the route. They reveal and define the wilderness quality and the beauty of the Rock River.

In other stretches, beneath overhanging tree canopies, the road squeezes by bluffs or steep hills to cling to the river bank; alternatively, it moves through open farmland with a broad view to the distant timbered hills or bluffs bordering the fields.

Scenic Route 2 passes through Castle Rock State Park where Illinois Department of Natural Resources maintains a turnoff and parking area. For those who leave their car and take the flights of stairs to the top of the rock, the broad view up and down the river adds immeasurably to the enjoyment of the scenic drive. As far as the eye can see, the riverbanks and islands below appear to be virtually as natural and untrammled as the river surely must have appeared to the indigenous Americans who lived here before settlement. And at two points just north of Oregon, the road captures a view of sculptor Lorado Taft's 48-foot-tall concrete sculpture, a monument to the American Indian, standing high above the river on the bluffs at Eagle's Nest, the figure overlooks the Rock River valley.



Two-lane Black Hawk Trail with a scenic pull-off between Byron and Oregon, Illinois. *Photo by author*

Throughout its length, except in two small towns, the highway passes through scenic countryside mostly within sight of the river. That it reflects the influence of Simonds can be documented by pointing to the nature of the road's layout, the exploitation of opportunities for scenic views of nature, and the quantity and quality of curves. The daughter of one of the surveyors

on the construction team later recalled how her father returned home after working all week on the new road, excited to tell how the surveyors had finished yet "another beautiful curve."³¹ The beauty and experience of traveling the route have become so endeared to locals that on occasion they have turned out by the hundreds along the route to protest major alterations that might affect the driving experience.³²

Gentleman Farm Estates

In the Rock River Valley in the early part of the 20th century a cultural phenomenon was emerging: the acquisition of working farms by wealthy businessmen, industrialists, and professionals to be turned into gentleman's farms and estates. In general, it can be said that the estates, whether just one or two farms or swaths of more than 1,000 acres, were working farms with livestock and poultry, producing milk, meat, and eggs for markets as well as for the owners. They were not necessarily intended to earn a profit. Most of the owners were absent from their farms except on weekends, but some built new homes and made, or intended to make, the farm properties their new principal residence. Four such "gentleman farmers," on properties that bordered the Rock River, are known to have retained the services of O. C. Simonds to plan the development of their own estates.

Sinnissippi Farm Estate, the holdings of Frank O. Lowden and Florence Pullman Lowden, became widely known from local newspaper accounts and in 1913 from a feature story in the national publication, *Country Life in America*.³³ These articles undoubtedly influenced the subsequent landscape development of the other three gentleman farms.

Lowden, a Chicago attorney, rose to prominence, married a daughter of railroad sleeping car magnate George Pullman, entered Republican politics, served in the

House of Representatives, and in 1916 was elected Governor of Illinois. In 1920 and 1928, he was an unsuccessful candidate for the Republican presidential nomination. With inherited wealth, he and Florence had begun purchasing contiguous pasture and forested land fronting the Rock River south of Oregon in 1899. Their holdings eventually grew to comprise sixteen farms on 4,400 acres.

At first, with the help of Pond and Pond architects of Chicago, Frank and Florence Lowden remodeled an existing house on the farm near the northern end of the property. When they were ready to undertake further development of the estate, J. K. Pond and O.C. Simonds met with them at the farm on July 7, 1900 to discuss plans. Before the two consultants left at 6 p.m., having suggested their ideas for improving the grounds, building stables, servants' quarters, and a guesthouse, the Lowdens adopted their proposals.³⁴

Soon Simonds laid out the locations of all of the proposed modern farm buildings, a cluster of three houses for farm managers, and a proposed new mansion for the Lowden family. He laid out the entry roads and the gateway. Simonds planned how to approach the mansion on the primary driveway "where visitors can first see it to the best advantage." He planned "how much of each building to reveal and how much to hide (with landscape plantings); how to get the full benefit of sunlight; how to get shelter from the wind; how to manage the vistas, so that each window of the most important rooms has a different picture; how to have stables and other subsidiary buildings near at hand, yet screened." Florence, the eldest daughter of Lowden, recalled that "My parents liked to work with him very much, and they liked his ideas."³⁵ Simonds' plans, which required the planting of thousands of shrubs as well as trees, were promptly implemented.

Eventually Simonds developed an organic system of drives and horseback trails that connected house, river, hills, and farm fields. The placement of the drives exploited the topography and the scenery to frame vistas and views of notable features: the river, the islands, sandstone headlands, and cattle grazing in the pastures. He used curving pathways and the vegetation to offer glimpses of just one feature at a time, hiding the others from view, so that each came as a notable change or surprise to the rider. On the drive along the river, no two features competed with each other for attention. Each individual view invited a good, long look and full appreciation. Where a drive entered the woods, Simonds found characteristic features, such as a mature stand of one of the oak species. He would then thin out the other mixed species of trees to create a distinct look and feeling to greet the rider who came to it. One such spot at Sinnissippi Farm was named "Hickory Grove."

The new "big house" on Sinnissippi Farm was built in 1904 and positioned to take in the best views to the river from many rooms.



View of the Rock River from the front yard in front of the big house.



Fork in the long entry drive led on left to the house (as pictured) and on right along the river to the stables near Flag Pole Hill.

A view of the still-new gravel drive illustrates the extensive plantings of shrubs, counted in the thousands, that gave the Simonds landscape its distinctive character.



All photos on the following pages, taken in the early 1900s, are from the Lowden Family Collection courtesy of Warren Miller and the Chicago History Museum, 2002.0259

Typically, Simonds would optimize long views or broad views with careful placement of curving drives, framing the views with plantings, or opening windows in the forest by selective tree removal. On the high ridge drive, in order to open a view of a broad vista of the river or a panoramic view of the farm without cutting a long gash in the forest, Simonds would find a steep drop-off or a deep ravine on one side of a hilltop. These vantage points required less cutting of trees to open the view. He always framed a broad view with two prominent similar trees or perhaps two masses of a shrub species that he thought would symbolize the native landscape. At that first meeting, Simonds had spotted a few white pines clinging to a prominent sandstone outcrop on the east bank of the river near the house. Knowing that the native white pine species was rarely seen at this southern limit of its range, he proposed to place generously-planted groupings of the species along the winding entry drive.



Entry gateway at the main drive, framed by long masses of shrubs with ornamental trees. The design of the gate posts is similar to the columns at the front entrance to the "early house," remodeled by Pond and Pond architects.



Native white pine trees growing on a rock outcropping between the river and Flag Pole Hill.



From the pergola built in 1911 on top of Wolf Hill, the highest point in the area, Lowden family members often enjoyed a wide vista of the countryside or a colorful sunset. The two-story big house and the laundry building are seen at the right in this photo, the flag pole in the center, and the farm buildings on the left.



The first white pine plantings did well, and over the following twelve years, Simonds followed up with tens of thousands of more pines on the Lowden farms for a total of 130,000 seedlings.³⁶ Seventy percent of them were white pines planted mostly on bare, sandy knolls in scrub woods. There they complimented the native deciduous forest growing nearby on deeper soils.

Lowden's initial purpose for planting so many evergreens was to enhance the beauty of Sinnissippi Farms. He also wanted to experiment with conifers on sandy soil and steeply-pitched hillsides, to give evidence for urging reforestation in Ogle and Cook counties and elsewhere in Illinois.³⁷ Both of these interests almost certainly reflect the direct influence of Simonds.³⁸

During World War I the tree plantings halted. With tremendous increases in the cost of

White pine reforestation at Sinnissippi Farms documented in this photo published in *Famous Gardens, Selected from Country Life*, Country Life-American Home Corp., New York, 1937.

Shrub massing in front yards of (left to right) the maid's house, the coachman's house, and the stable. Large, unclipped shrubs are in scale with the natural landscape setting. Their placement assured that the manmade structures would not dominate the scene.



Simonds' development of spatial articulation by massing large shrubs to create outdoor rooms and passages is illustrated in this photo taken behind the big house in early 1900s.

seedlings after the war and the spread of white pine blister rust, reforestation did not resume again until 1939. Under a 1938 agreement with the University of Illinois' new department of forestry,³⁹ Sinnissippi Farm had begun to serve as the state's northern forestry experiment station with a university forester in residence.

Simonds' relationship with the Lowdens and Sinnissippi Farm was to continue from 1901 until his death in 1931. For the most part, however, his associate J. Roy West attended to the work on site. On these visits West stayed with the Lowden family while he completed his landscape tasks.⁴⁰

None of this large-scale site and landscape planning of a farm estate by a landscape architect, or the design of a mansion and working farm buildings by prestigious architects, the winding drives and scenic vistas, the development of prize herds, and the professionally managed woodlands, was entirely unique to Sinnissippi Farms. During the Gilded Age of the late 19th century, there were a number of famous gentleman farm estates owned by elite, wealthy individuals in eastern states that served as showplaces. Lowden was familiar with some in Arkansas as well, where he traveled extensively to observe and consider agricultural opportunities for investment.⁴¹ But this farm venture of the Lowdens differed in the respect that it can be said to have served as the fulfillment of Simonds' ideal, as expressed in his writings, that all farms could be and should be places of natural beauty.⁴²

Of even greater importance, Simonds continued, was "that the farmer and his family shall see and appreciate this beauty." Attention to farm landscapes, he believed, was more important than to almost any other. At the time that he expressed his values, half the population of the U.S. still resided on farms. Regarding the effect of living and working there on the quality of life, he wrote that when the farmer "sees the beauty of nature; when he realizes the comfort that he enjoys, the satisfaction of breathing pure air, of having freedom beyond that of most men, the pleasure of listening to the songs of birds, looking at the expanse of sky, the beauty of woodlands, of sunrises and sunsets; when he takes a philosophical view of life; when he solves the various farm problems with intelligence and wise foresight, his declining years may be postponed far beyond those of the average man."⁴³

This ideal farmer's life was possible in the Midwest in the early 20th century, an era of diversified farms that raised livestock and poultry as well as field crops. It was a time when men of influence were not afraid to use the word "beauty" in their speech and place great value on aesthetic considerations. Lowden bought 320 acres of forested land right across the river from his residence just to protect the view.⁴⁴ He had his land designated a state preserve to protect the wildlife he enjoyed. Lowden is known to have kept a list numbering more than 80 species of birds he observed on his property.⁴⁵ It is probably accurate to conclude that while Simonds did not form Lowden's values, his philosophy of landscape gardening and the importance of nature to living a full life meshed with Lowden's own views. At Sinnissippi Farm, Simonds' plans helped translate Lowden's desires into a living reality.

A clear example of the profound influence Simonds' landscape philosophy had on Lowden, and by turn on the Rock River Valley community, occurred while Lowden was running for governor. In the spring of 1916 Lowden invited the public to visit the estate to witness the beauty of the thousands of wild crabapples in bloom, large drifts of pink and white against the border of the woods. A public road cut through the center of his forest and provided public access to see the display close up. In a newspaper account, Lowden was quoted echoing the words of O. C. Simonds and serving as the model of someone whose eyes were open to the beauty of nature and native plants.

The wild crabapple groves in full bloom continued to be an attraction for decades. Twenty years later in May, a local newspaper ran a piece describing the impressive display of lilacs at the country estate.⁴⁶ They had been planted in masses of all varieties and shades of color on a scale with the large estate grounds, framing views from the front of the house to the river. Blending with them were plantings of white-blooming mock orange shrubs and pink honeysuckles and, set apart, a mammoth bed of blue-flowering iris. But the most interesting floral display, the newspaper article suggested, was found not in the flower gardens near the mansion but in "acre after acre of wild blooming crabs." The newspaper encouraged the public to see the annual event, saying "real nature lovers will find it well worth their while" to drive toward the river through the center of the farms before the wealth of blooms faded. So many weekend sightseers came during spring and summer and roamed about the gardens and the mansion lawns that the size of the crowd began to intrude on Lowden family life.⁴⁷

Although Simonds advocated the use of local native plant species, he was not a purist. He also specified the planting of many non-native species, especially in garden beds near the residence as exemplified by the lilacs at Sinnissippi Farm. He chose them for their seasonal color display, fragrance, or foliage and to imitate or compliment the seasonal attributes of native species. Often, he chose non-natives with horizontal branching habits or flowering habits that harmonized with and accentuated the horizontal nature typical of the "prairie" landscape, as found in the distant tree lines, the branching of hawthorn trees, and the flowering of viburnum shrub species. Always his selections of non-natives were species that were suited to the same conditions as those favored by the plants he found growing wild in the woods.

As a newcomer to rural Ogle County, Lowden was thought of as a wealthy city man living in the country who dabbled in farming with no need to earn his living from the farm operations. In response Lowden sought to convince his neighbors of his genuine concern for the welfare of the Rock River valley community and his intention to live there permanently. He chose to do so through his scientific farming initiatives and their possible benefits to all farmers, such as his experiments planting white pines on erodible sandy soil. He also sought acceptance through the engagement of both himself and Florence in civic activities. In time the "dirt farmers of the area" did come to recognize the sincerity of his interest in agriculture and "came around more often to admire than to scoff."⁴⁸

Florence died in 1937 and Frank O. Lowden in 1943. After Frank's death, the heirs

divided the Sinnissippi Farm estate between the families of Florence Miller and her sister, Harriet Madelener. The Millers “tore down the big house. The old house was too big and not very practical for us...the big barns have all been taken down, and it’s like park land...A great deal of the planting has very much changed. The shrubbery all got thinned and peoples’ taste changed, and the trees grew...Power mowers came in and so we had bigger lawns...”⁴⁹ Although other structures in the original cluster of buildings near the residence are gone, the native deciduous and planted evergreen forest bordering the river remains, having been given to the state to be preserved as Lowden-Miller State Forest. With its wildlife and wealth of native woody species and wildflowers, it now continues to be accessible for the enjoyment of the public.

The **La Roche Verte** estate, located eight miles downriver from Sinnissippi Farms at Grand Detour, was in important respects a direct descendent of Lowden’s estate. It lies on the elevated north bank where the Rock River curves to the west below Grand Detour. The site includes Green Rock, a 100-foot-high St. Peter sandstone landmark said to be the most photographed rock in Illinois. The new owners, Edward J. Brundage and his wife of French birth, Germaine, selected the 205-acre farm “for its inaccessible location as well as for its beauty of scenery.”⁵⁰ One of their first acts was to engage the services of O.C. Simonds.



Green Rock. *Courtesy of John McLane*

Brundage, who had practiced law in Chicago, was the Attorney General of Illinois for two terms from 1917 to 1925. He had first run for the office on the Lowden-Brundage ticket, and he served with Governor Lowden’s administration. Undoubtedly he had visited and become familiar with Sinnissippi Farm before he ventured into owning his own gentleman’s farm.

The French name given to the estate, *La Roche Verte*, translates as “the green rock” or “stony outcropping”. Brundage bought the farm including the farmhouse and existing farm structures in late 1923.⁵¹ Shortly thereafter, on November 13, Simonds and an assistant, most likely J. Roy West, met with Brundage to plan improvements of the farm. At that time Brundage expressed his intention to build a “handsome residence on the river bank, affording views up and down the stream, and...otherwise beautify the grounds of his future summer home.”⁵²

Simonds recommended his former partners in Chicago, Holabird & Roche, as architects. Within six months Holabird’s office produced a complete set of drawings for a French Chateau style residence. The drawings, now in the Holabird archives,⁵³ show a stone mansion with a square tower, round turrets, radial topped dormers on the roof, even shutters each made of three vertical boards identical in appearance to those seen on chateaus throughout rural France. The palatial residence would have had a dining

room and tower terrace facing the river. There would have been a ballroom, sitting room, separate veranda for servants, and cook's and butler's pantries on the first floor. The second-floor plans show a spacious living room overlooking an upper terrace and four bedrooms. The attic plan had additional bedrooms, baths, and a dormitory.

As late as spring of 1929, after selling his estate in Evanston, Brundage still considered building the chateau. The architects came to the farm to study the topography of the building site.⁵⁴ Apparently something intervened, either the Depression, or his other interests in Chicago, or perhaps a change in heart by himself or by Germaine, who was a prominent Chicago socialite, and it was never built. In 1924 he had built a "cottage on the riverbank," downriver from the rock outcropping, as a summer home.⁵⁵ It was large enough to accommodate as many as 60 at a party. But Brundage never took up permanent residence in Ogle County as Lowden had, and he seems to have made little effort to connect with the rural community. Even his farm products were marketed primarily in the Chicago area.

The farm operations must have prospered. In 1929 Brundage contracted to have the 14 existing buildings on the farm painted. By then La Roche Verte was comprised of the modernized farmhouse, two new modern barns, poultry houses and sheds. After he had taken possession of the farm, Brundage at first specialized in raising blooded Jersey cattle, marketing their milk and butter under the "La Roche Verte" label. From there he expanded



Contemporary view of La Roche Verte entry drive (as posted on a realtor's website).

into purebred hogs and poultry, selling meat and eggs.⁵⁶ He bought adjacent farmland and the estate swelled to more than 300 acres with a full-time farm manager.

To capitalize on the views, Simonds laid out the long drive, which entered the estate from Edgewood Road at a 45-degree angle, leading into a long, gradual curve through open fields before plunging into the woodland. There it forked, the left drive to the farmstead buildings and the right directly to the cottage. Presumably he planned additional vistas from a drive as it passed through the 40-acre woodland upriver to Green Rock, but no documentation of that proposed drive is known to exist.

Unexpected and traumatic changes occurred in the story of La Roche Verte Farm when, in January of 1934, E. J. Brundage took his own life at his new home in Lake Forest. At the time of the incident, his wife and three of their four children were at the cottage at La Roche Verte.⁵⁷ Before year-end, Germaine Brundage sold the bulk of the farm estate including the initial land and buildings to a neighbor.⁵⁸

Henry J. Babson had purchased a farm just upriver and contiguous to La Roche Verte in 1926.⁵⁹ A founder of Babson Bros., a Chicago mail order company and manufacturer of dairy equipment, Babson had developed a passion for Arabian horses. As the new owner of the former Brundage gentleman farm, he operated as Babson Arabian Horse Farms raising pedigreed animals.⁶⁰ It was one of only five Arabian breeding farms in the country. Babson added a distinctive, architect-designed show barn and stable, both within view of the public road. The horse farm operation would continue for some 65 years, until in 1999 Babson heirs shut it down and sold the property.

What has happened to other possible vestiges of the Simonds landscape and site improvements at the La Roche Verte/Babson Arabian Horse Farms location? The Brundage cottage had been moved by Babson from its original location overlooking the Rock River and remodeled to provide a home for the resident horse trainer. The farm's entry road remains intact as well as some of the groups of trees that were planted and are now mature. Any native shrubs that Simonds likely would have planted in masses to beautify the gateway and integrate with the driveway plantings have now vanished.

The 230-acre **Reynoldswood Farm**, located at the west side of Dixon, has met a fate similar to that of La Roche Verte. It was established on an historically prominent property that includes a native oak-hickory woodland bordering the Rock River. Settled in the mid-1800s by Dr. Oliver Everette, a pioneer doctor and botanical collector, it later came to be known as the Elmdale Farm. A landmark tree, "The Old Elm," measuring 32 feet in circumference at the base of the trunk, was located on the farm near the river.

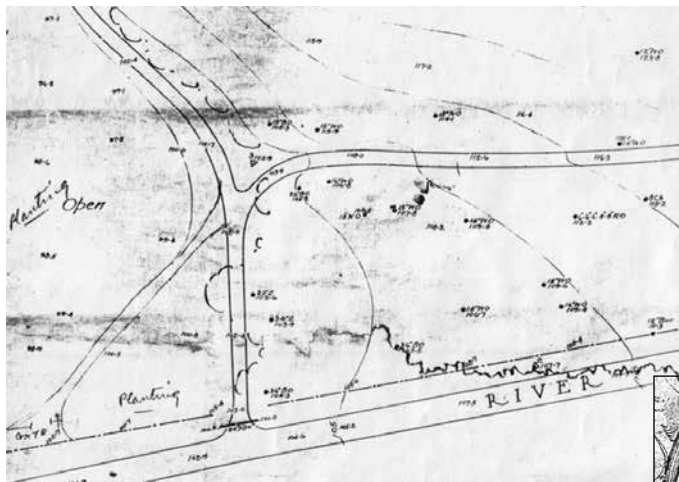
Dixon industrialist Horace G. Reynolds purchased the farm in 1922. He promptly retained Simonds to plan the drives, site the planned residence, and improve the grounds of his gentleman's estate, "both as a park for the people of Dixon and as a home for himself and his family."⁶¹ Reynolds intended to beautify the riverfront and add a swimming beach.

The potential of the virgin woodland to be a natural "playground" had been seen many years earlier by George H. Page, founder of the world's largest condensed milk factory at Dixon.⁶² The 40-acre wooded area was wild and craggy, with ravines around the two bluffs that faced south to the river. Following his purchase, Page in 1897 developed a series of paved drives through the terrain with stone bridges in the ravines. He named the property Adelheid Farm and Park after his Swiss wife, Adelheid, and invited the public to enjoy the park. Page intended "to make it the finest park in this section of the state."⁶³ It was promoted in Dixon Chamber of Commerce publications as a public park, visited by nature lovers, and was a venue for events such as picnics, clambakes, and performances sponsored by civic organizations.

The gateway had been placed at the northeast corner of the woodland. From there the main entry drive proceeded south on a broad curve around a bluff to the riverfront. En route it crossed a stone bridge over a small stream amid beds of bluebells spreading out over a floodplain. Near the river the drive curved, turning west at the foot of the bluffs

and continued along the river to the west side of the park. There it curved north again, rising on a more gradual slope away from the river and intersecting with a driveway to the farmhouse and barns lying just downriver at the northeast corner of the estate's cultivated farmland.

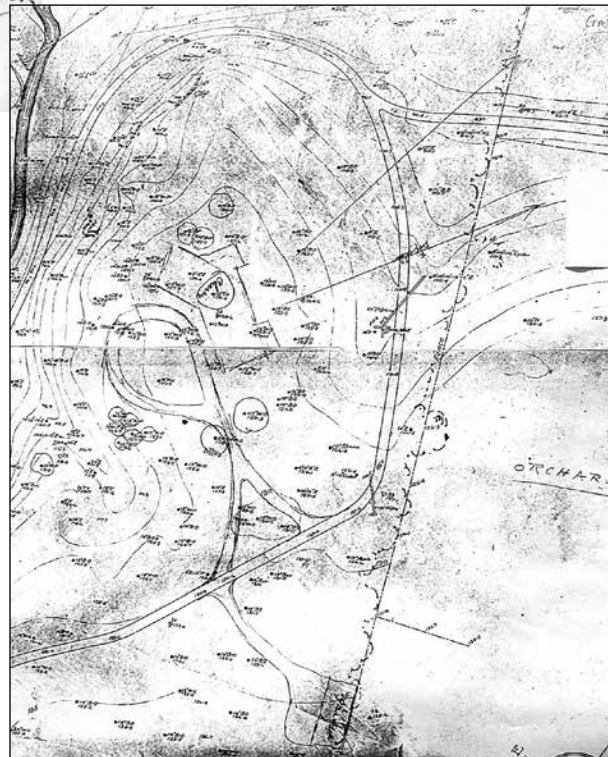
Within months, Simonds completed a topographical survey of the entire park area in preparation for the planning of improvements.⁶⁴ He obviously perceived the woodland, a native oak and hickory forest, to be Reynoldswood's finest asset: his survey details the location of every large tree, its species, and its trunk diameter. An existing print of the survey bears penciled notes and sketches by Simonds that indicated his thoughts for development.⁶⁵ Among the notations is a revision to the gateway area at River Road. It would bring the main drive in at an angle that focuses attention not on the continuation of the road ahead but on the parkland and its great trees to the side of the road.



Left: Improvement of the entrance to Reynoldswood park can be seen sketched by Simonds on the topo map to left (east) of existing drive.

Below: Simonds' proposed siting of the manor house and garage. His plan was not followed by the Reynolds heirs, who built further up the drive (north is down).

Other penciled notes and a long arrow indicate a line-of-sight at a specific location further down the drive where he would open up a view to the river by removing trees. Where the existing drive passes the west bluff and turns north, Simonds sketched in a driveway leading easterly to the crest of the bluff, the proposed site of a new residence. The penciled outline of the house shows it facing southwest. From the front of the proposed house extend two long arrows, spreading narrowly in a southwest direction. The arrows designate the scenic *long view* downriver preferred by Simonds. The garage is shown to be 300' to the west across the main drive.



The highest point in the park is on the west edge of the woodland. In that location Simonds sketched a simple rectangle, 15' wide by 50' long, the long side facing southwest. There is no notation as to the structure's purpose, nor is there any driveway sketched linking to the existing drive, which is 240' to the east. However, two wide-spread arrows in front indicate a broad view. The view, from the very edge of the park to the river, across a cultivated field, farm buildings sitting below, suggest that the proposed structure would be occupied. Was Simonds proposing a location for a separate guest house, as at Sinnissippi Farm?

Except for the planting of spring-flowering bulbs and the change made to the alignment of the entry to the half-mile long driveway, any other recommendations as shown in Simonds' notes sketched on the topo plan as well as any that might not have been recorded were not implemented.⁶⁶ The very next year, in 1923, Page died and with him his dreams for the park. Still, Simonds did perform at least two more tasks for Reynolds' heirs. In 1926 he provided an updated site plan that showed the new entry to the property, completed just as Simonds had proposed and other alterations to the main drive that had been made. It showed a more fully developed site plan for the proposed new house and access driveway at the top of the west bluff facing southwest downriver.⁶⁷

Then, early in 1927 he delivered a partial site plan, at a larger scale, showing the footprint of a proposed architect-designed manor house in the location marked on the 1922 topo plan. It included the approach drive, the circle drive at the entrance, and all of the existing large trees in the vicinity of the house.⁶⁸ The plan suggests that Simonds intended to position the house to save most nearby trees in the park. It indicated conceptually the locations of shrub masses that were typical of a Simonds' landscape design. The house floor plan was designed for two families, those of John G. Ralston and Douglas G. Harvey, his two sons-in-law. Both men were executives at Reynolds Wire Mill and screen factory in Dixon. The architect had placed separate accommodations for the two families on either side of a large central music room, with kitchens, service and maids' rooms in separate wings. The music room and its flagstone



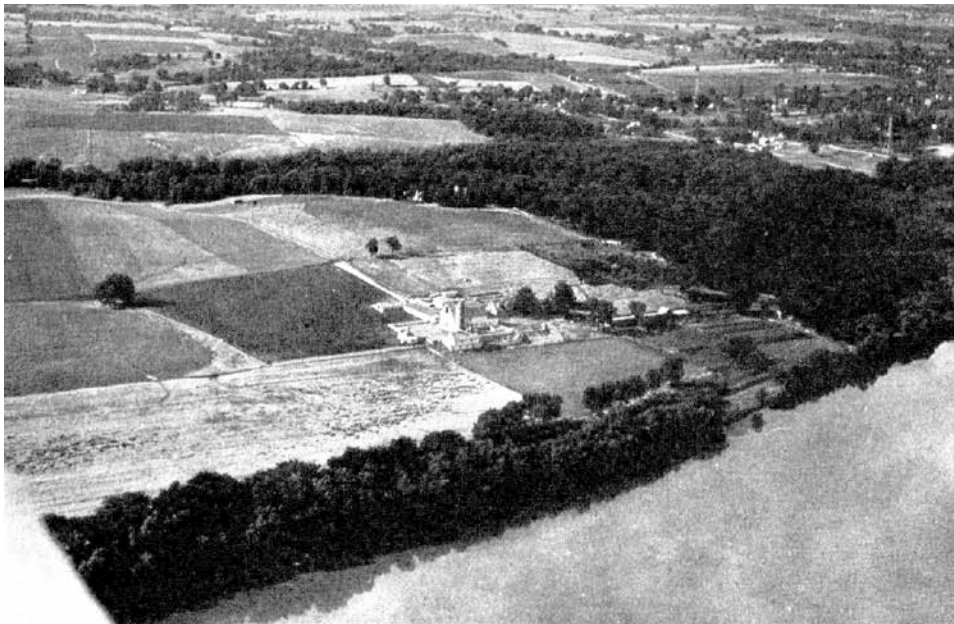
terrace overlooked a swimming pool, located on a lower terrace held by retaining walls and linked to both sides of the house with curving flagstone pathways.

Reynoldswood manor house in a picture post-card c. 1980. Lucile Ralston's much admired floral gardens extending from the front of the house had long since been replaced by mowed lawn.

Construction of a two-story French Provincial-style country manor house with a revised floor plan was completed in December of that year.⁶⁹ It was built not where Simonds' site plan had indicated but lying just to the west side of the wooded park on the high ground where the "guest house" had been proposed. In this location, the space and the grades were more favorable to the installation of the swimming pool and the large ornamental garden that would follow and to the views from second-story windows. Facing southwesterly, the structure is symmetrical with lodgings in two wings. On the first floor between the wings the two families shared a great living and music room, 84' by 24', with two massive fireplaces. The manor commands a view of the river valley, the farmstead, and the rolling countryside. A stretch of riverbank trees was cleared to open the view of the river.

If Reynolds had made any plans for the farming operations, they were not soon implemented or disclosed publicly, and so are unknown. One of his two daughters, Lucile Reynolds Ralston, later recounted that in 1923, desiring Jersey milk and cream, Ralston and Harvey bought several cows.⁷⁰ Insofar as known, the milk cows would be the extent of the new owners' participation in farming operations for the next five years. A farm manager and his family occupied the existing farmhouse.

Soon after the two families moved into the manor house, having become "thoroughly imbued with the Jersey spirit," Ralston and Harvey completely replaced their small herd of cows with imported purebred Jerseys. In 1931 the herd had grown to 60. By then Douglas had died and his widow Jane Reynolds Harvey had remarried and moved to the east coast. Reynoldswood Farm, formed as a business by agreement between the two daughters who had inherited it, expanded to two farms and two farm managers in



1927. The farm at Reynoldswood boasted a show herd of Duroc hogs. Jersey milk and milk products were delivered daily to homes in Dixon. The second farm, comprised of 320 acres of level, arable land, 12 miles southeast of Dixon, was a separate operation.

Aerial view of Reynoldswood Farm featured on the cover of *The Jersey Bulletin and Dairy World* weekly, March 23, 1932. The river is at the bottom and the 40-acre wooded park is on the right. Barely visible at the edge of the woodland, directly above the the farmstead, top center, is the manor house.

Lucile Ralston scaled back the operation at Reynoldswood farm in 1933 by selling the breeding and show hogs. Later, and in the war years, the farm raised Poland China hogs and sold pork. By 1937, after her husband John had died and Lucile had taken up the reins of the farm, she was raising turkeys and selling the meat with ads in the local paper.⁷¹ But Lucile had executive duties at the wire mill and in 1938 sold the Jersey herd and the milk route, reducing her work burden.⁷² She also had another priority common to many “gentleman” farm estates, her manor garden.

Famous throughout the area, her garden featured an extravagant border of peonies, lilac hedges, a pool and cabana, and an expanse of lawn stretching from the front of the house towards the river.⁷³ Nothing points to the Simonds firm as having any part in designing her garden.

In the springtime the wild plums and crabs and the wildflowers, notably beds of great white trillium and hundreds of thousands of shooting stars, lit up the park. Below the east bluff, flanking an intersection in the entry drive, four large beds of narcissus had naturalized from the 4,250 bulbs in four varieties planted there by Simonds. Beyond them in the open area reaching toward the river he noted “Violet area,” perhaps indicating that an existing field of violets he had observed should be left as it was. Each spring the striking display of daffodils drew residents of the area to take the drive into the park. In the penciled notes on the original survey print in 1922, he also specified 2,000 tulips flanking another intersecting road. That was followed by 4,000 red, white, pink, and purple Holland hyacinths to be grouped by color in one lengthy bed between the road and the foot of the west bluff. If Simonds & West actually planted those too, they since have vanished.

Lucile Ralston continued to live in the manor house until she disbanded the estate and moved away from Dixon.⁷⁴ Under the estate’s new ownership, the winding entry drive was soon closed, replaced with a short entry drive direct from Reynoldswood Road to the back of the manor house. For many years now the woodland has suffered, the inherent challenges of ecological stewardship requiring funding and staff beyond the means or mission of the property owner. The abandoned historic drives have been overtaken with woody growth, and the park has been invaded by honeysuckle shrubs and garlic mustard, an exotic plant that smothers the original wildflowers. Fortunately, in the 19th century the native flora were well documented by Dr. Oliver Everette in an herbarium, now to be found at the Loveland Museum in Dixon.

Esta Barrett Manor and Gardens lies on Kishwaukee Road just south of the Kishwaukee River. Part of the original farm property is now in Indian Hill Forest Preserve. Based upon a study of the remaining vestiges of the historic landscape, several historic photographs, and a hand drawn plat, it appears that plans by O.C. Simonds for the extensive manor grounds were initially implemented.

The property differs from the other three gentleman farm estates that used Simonds’ services in several important respects. First, the manor, farm, and woodlands are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Second, the present owner, the Esta Barrett

Manor and Gardens, Inc., has privately undertaken landscape rehabilitation and restoration. And third, the site is now accessible to the public.

Although no historic drawings or written descriptions of the manor landscape have been found, there are several key sources in oral history and in print, including a newspaper clipping,⁷⁵ that support the assertion that Simonds was responsible for laying out the grounds of the manor. The distinct methods of handling outdoor spaces with plantings, the layout of the drives, the traces of overlooks near the top of the wooded bluff and clearing of trees to open up views to the river below, as well as the handling of views from the manor house to the lawns and bordering woodlands, all point to Simonds.

The property overlooks the Kishwaukee River, a short distance from its confluence with the Rock River. Charles C. Barrett, president of Devoe and Raynolds Company, Chicago, and his wife, Esta Asher Barrett, began construction of the manor house on a 41-acre site at the junction of South Bend and Kishwaukee Roads in 1916. The mansion was designed in the Colonial Revival style by Rockford architect, Charles W. Bradley. It was completed in 1917, and in the autumn of 1918 Charles Barrett died during the influenza pandemic.

The gateway and gravel-surfaced main entry drive were in place and landscaped with trees and massed plantings of shrubs when construction of the manor house and the coach house was completed. The drive enters from South Bend Road, which bisects the farm and forms the southwest border of the manor site, at a gentle angle typical of a Simonds' entry treatment. It is a short drive, and it quickly breaks into a fork. From there it curves north to a *porte cochere* on the southwest side of the manor house where it circles back to the curve. From the fork a second drive curves south to the coach house and garage where a driver would hold the proprietor's or the visitor's automobile. An existing drive connecting the Manor and garage also was laid out with a curve. It appears that Simonds deliberately managed the view of the house as it would be seen from the entry drive, placing massed plantings that obscured the house during approach until it could be seen closeup toward the end of the curve. At that point there is an open view of two sides of the house.



The Manor circle drive seen in an historic photo, landscaped with masses of flowering shrubs. Later, a second entry drive approached the *porte cochere* from the north, passing directly in front of the terrace steps on the left.

*Esta Barrett Manor and Gardens
Collection*

There is a second gateway and drive from Kishwaukee Road that seems to have been intended by the architect as the main approach to the house for visitors. The approach of this driveway appeared in architect C. W. Bradley's pen-and-ink rendering of the manor house, at the top of a newspaper clipping.⁷⁶ It passes directly in front of the broad steps of the terrace on the northwest or front side of the house, intruding on the view of the great lawn as seen from the terrace and through the windows on the front of the house. It is unlikely that Simonds would have endorsed such placement, but other aspects of the existing drive point to some evidence of his hand in laying it out. The gateway is placed well off-center from the house, allowing the drive to enter at an angle from Kishwaukee Road. The gateposts are set back from the road, which makes space for shrub masses to frame the gate. From there the drive passes with a very gentle curve through a planted border that was extended with trees and shrubs to initially hide the full view of the manor house. Then the drive crosses an open space with large lawns stretching away on either side. Separation of the two lawn spaces is defined by the drive and by shrub masses. A shrub mass and trees were placed to justify the final curve in the drive before it passes the house and links to the circle drive. That this second driveway was an afterthought is indicated by the apparent fact that it did not even exist when the circle drive landscape was photographed, circa 1920.

In his designs, Simonds typically placed "islands" of large shrubs and possibly ornamental trees within large lawns to create a sculptural effect. He did not want the viewer to see the entire lawn at a glance. The irregular, naturalistic shrub masses added to the apparent depth of the spaces. In the eye of the viewer, the masses introduced a flow of space around and out of sight behind the masses, with the result that the lawn becomes more interesting, both to view and to explore on foot.

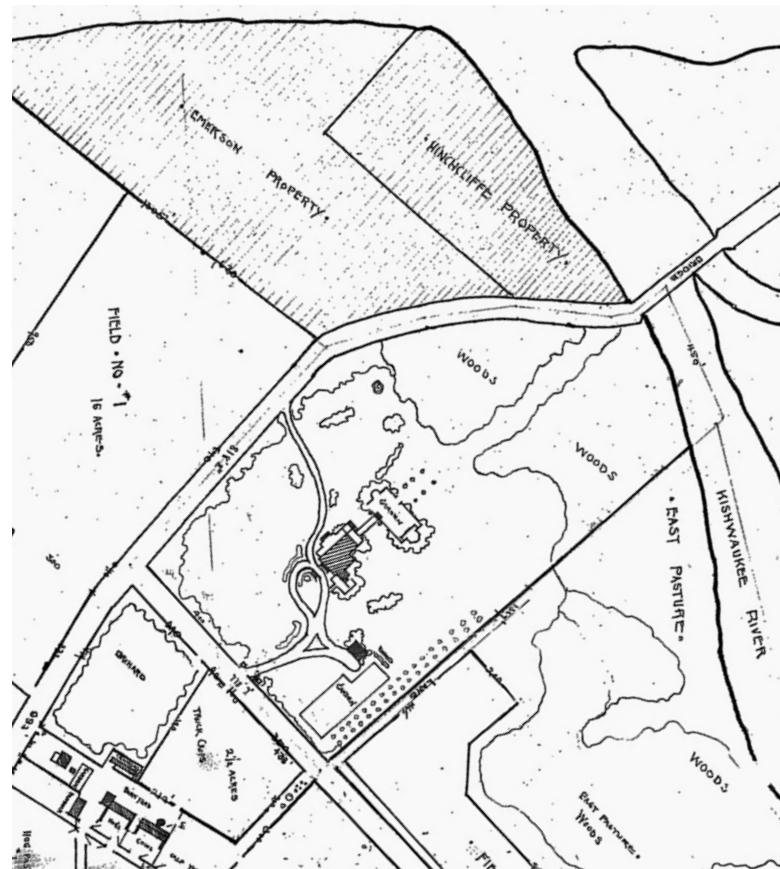
Another naturalistic design technique that Simonds used to good effect in the front and side yards at the manor was to make the edges of the larger lawn spaces irregular. He achieved this in two ways. He extended the border in some places by adding masses of flowering shrubs and ornamental native trees. In other places in the bordering woods, he extended the lawn under the shade trees by removing undergrowth. As a result, the large lawn spaces flowed in and out of the undulating projections of vegetation and the receding bays. This created diverse edges in which the light and shade and the visual appearance of the vegetation would vary. It also produced differing microclimates, which allowed a greater variety of herbaceous species to thrive at the lawn borders. Simonds saw such diversity as an opportunity to nurture appreciation of the subtle beauty of native wildflowers and ecosystems versus the artificiality and gaudy attraction of exotic plant species.

From any viewing point, the differentiation of the borders caused differing edges of the lawn spaces to appear to advance or recede as the angle of sunlight shifted between sunup and sunset. Naturalistic masses of large shrubs were planted near the house, as well, to screen and sublimate the dominance of the architecture where it met the lawn. The intended effect on any viewers standing within or passing through lawn spaces was that they were now immersed in nature.

1923 plat map of the Esta Barrett Manor and Gardens illustrates the spatial organization of the lawns with the undulating borders of woodland vegetation and the massing of shrubs into small islands within the lawns.⁷⁷



The front yard, in Simonds' opinion, "should be the most artistic part of the home grounds."⁷⁸ He had a deeply held appreciation of the beauty created by the shifting composition of light and shade, line, form, texture, and color, of views throughout the hours of the day and seasons of the year. At Esta Barrett Manor and Gardens the great lawn on the northwest side of the house best filled that role. He



designed it to encourage the occupants to see this beauty, which should give them a lifetime of pleasure. Like the front and side yards, the front yard was a "sun opening" revealing sky and the movement of clouds. The sky space bounded by trees and shrubs was to be left natural to appear graceful and pleasing. Simonds would have intended that each yard, and especially its middle, be kept free of objects and formal beds, as was the great lawn at the manor. Into the yard would come birds, sun, rain, and snow — in Simonds' words, "the passage of the tableau of nature." The side yard was designed to be a place of rest and freedom from intrusion. Behind it, at the edge of the woods on the northeast, the bank of deciduous tree and shrub foliage was interrupted only by an opening that aligned with the central axis of the manor house. At that location a narrow corridor of trees had been removed to provide a scenic view to the Kishwaukee River.

Two distinctive qualities of Simonds' landscapes were the naturalistic arrangement of plantings and his extensive use of native plants. He went to the woods in the vicinity of the landscape project to see what to plant as well as how to arrange the plantings. Simonds noted that natural groups of plants had no straight lines and no circles. In nature he found gracefulness and freedom. At the borders of large lawns such as at Esta Barrett Manor and Gardens, he advocated horizontally branched trees and shrubs

that swept the ground. Simonds advised that when shrubs were planted as a border or as individual specimens, “the lower limbs should be allowed to remain and spread out over...the adjacent ground. To trim off these branches and expose the upright stems greatly mars their beauty.”⁷⁹

Naturalistic arrangement did not depend entirely on what was planted, but also on what was taken out. Rather than draft detailed drawings, Simonds drew sketch plans only. He often altered those sketches during execution to remove or to preserve an existing tree, bush, or grouping to obtain the effect he desired. He sometimes called it “making pictures.” For Simonds, arrangement was the very essence of the art of landscape-gardening. In borders and planting mixed beds of trees and shrubs, he mimicked “layering” as found in the undisturbed woods, with shade trees overhead, understory trees below, and a well-developed ground layer of shrubs and herbaceous plants.



Historic Landscape Rehabilitation Plan — Esta Barrett Manor and Gardens (historically called Indian Hill Manor), 2012

It is certain that Simonds would have employed or intended to employ these important design principles wherever he made landscape improvements to the original site. Prior to the rehabilitation efforts by the Foundation, years of neglect and weedy growth had degraded the beds and borders. Plantings of many evergreen trees around the perimeter of the open lawn spaces by a previous owner obscured the naturalistic woodland borders, replacing them with new borders that decreased the lawns. Just a few clues as to Simonds’ treatment of the original borders and beds remained to guide

the rehabilitation plans for removal of the evergreens and shifting the borders of the lawns back to their historic location.

While Simonds advocated special gardens in the landscape, usually in the backyard of the residence, he did not make design plans for the garden plantings. He preferred to leave the design of gardens comprised of “plants that are conspicuous for their bloom” to the proprietors or to others. Although Simonds would have recommended that it be in a less commanding position, at the manor the formal flower garden was placed in the center of the southeast side yard. Simonds accommodated it there and integrated it with his design by concealing its geometric lines and its showy blooms with a border of naturalistic shrub plantings. Thus hidden, the partly sunken garden was revealed to visitors who might approach on the straight path from the manor only as they passed through the shrub border and down the steps into the garden.

The formal garden at the manor is understood to have been the principal hobby and the pride of Esta Barrett in her lifetime. She was active in the Rockford Women’s Garden Club, and her formal garden was a showplace. The actual design and location of the garden structures, including the columned Colonial Revival pergola at the south end, was probably worked out by the owners and the manor house architect, Charles Bradley. A principle of Colonial Revival design held that the house and garden should be unified in design and placement.⁸⁰

It is not known when Simonds’ involvement with the manor landscape may have ended. After the death of her husband, Esta Barrett lived at the manor and was active in management of the house, grounds, and farm. She died in a car accident in 1947. Her son by a previous marriage, Harry Reed, inherited the estate and lived there with his family until his death in 1969, at which time it passed to his son, Charles Reed. During those two decades the integrity of the landscape design suffered. In 1971 Reed sold the manor, the coach house, and grounds to William and Lucile Smeja. Their five adult children helped maintain the manor and grounds and in 2001 created a private operating foundation to preserve the site and promote historic preservation and land conservation. Reed had kept the farm, but he donated the land along the Rock River to the Winnebago County Forest Preserve District. In 2010 the foundation purchased the farm from Charles Reed’s heir and reunited it with the manor.

Continuing Influence of Simonds

In his time, O.C. Simonds’ works in the public realm—parks, cemeteries, arboretums, scenic drives, colleges and universities—attracted thousands of visitors. His landscapes provided recreational, spiritual, mental, and physical benefits and enhanced appreciation of natural beauty. In the early 1900s his stereopticon slides and the Lathrop-Simonds papers promoting civic improvement and beauty were presented by community-minded organizations in Rockford and in numerous towns and cities across the Midwest and beyond.⁸¹ The full extent of his behind-the-scenes influence prior to the war years can only be imagined.

A University of Illinois Extension publication authored by Wilhelm Miller in 1915 (and cited here, #82) urged Illinoisans to adopt a landscape design style that paid homage to the unique character of the local landscape and preferentially featured native plants of the prairie states. The style advocated by Miller in *The Prairie Spirit of Landscape Gardening* was in many ways comparable to the "Prairie School" of architecture, as promoted by Frank Lloyd Wright and fellow architects in Chicago, with its emphasis on horizontality of form. Miller's concept of a "prairie style of landscape gardening," introduced in this circular, he defined as "an American mode of design based upon the practical needs of the middle-western people and characterized by preservation of typical western scenery, by restoration of local color, and by repetition of the horizontal line of land or sky which is the strongest feature of prairie scenery."⁸²

With text and photos that explained and illustrated the works of O.C. Simonds, Jens Jensen, and several other landscape architects, Miller espoused planting of trees, shrubs, and perennials that symbolized the prairie landscape by their "stratified" or horizontal nature of branch structure or flowering, thus repeating the horizontal lines of land, sky, and plant massing that often are the strongest feature of the Midwestern landscape. The educational publication provided comprehensive lists of these plants as well as additional lists of "non-stratified" plants that are also native and would serve as "reminders of Illinois."

And finally, it exhorted the reader to conserve the remaining "beauty that has not been destroyed in Illinois" by saving trees and shrubs on home grounds, farms, and roadsides and by saving watercourses and historic features within a proper landscape setting. The 36-page extension publication was offered "Free to anyone in Illinois who will sign a promise to do some permanent ornamental planting within a year."

Just one year earlier, the university had released another publication, also packed with illustrations and instructions, titled *The "Illinois Way" of Beautifying the Farm*.⁸³ It, too, was written by Wilhelm Miller. The 36-page circular emphasized both the aesthetic considerations and the economic rationale of using native plants to beautify the farm. "The right way," it explained, "is to use permanent plants, instead of temporary ones, and to place them where they will meet every need of the family, instead of scattering them for show." It prescribed that 90% of the planting would be composed of trees and shrubs that grow wild in Illinois, "because they are hardy, and therefore economical to maintain."

Miller's instructive messages in these two publications were clearly inspired by Simonds' efforts as an activist for natural beauty and native plants. Although the advocacy in *The Prairie Spirit of Landscape Gardening* is somewhat heavy-handed and far from Simonds' low-key approach,⁸⁴ the author so fully portrays the ideals and applied techniques of O.C. Simonds and his contemporaries that even today it is a significant educational resource for horticultural and landscape design professionals and students. (A reprint of the original publication with an introduction by Christopher Vernon, published by the American Society of Landscape Architects, is available from the *University of Massachusetts Press*.)

Whatever actual influence Millers's advocacy in the two university extension publications may have had on the general public in their time, toward the end of his life Simonds along with his associates would have felt pressure to adopt more showy, artistic landscape fashions. The new trend in the 1920s and 30s was to adopt formula foundation plantings that required little design input. Landscape nurseries and other commercial interests promoted "low maintenance" landscaping that featured evergreen shrubs and trees with little or no regard for the local setting.

In landscape design, as in all things, there was also the human tendency to want to replace the old with something new. Simonds in his lifetime did not compromise his design principles, but by the 1950s, following the Great Depression and WWII years, interest in naturalistic design and native plants had waned. Not until the time of the first Earth Day in 1970 did a new generation of landscape architects and conservationists begin to successfully refocus public attention on the importance of landscapes that promoted the appreciation of nature.

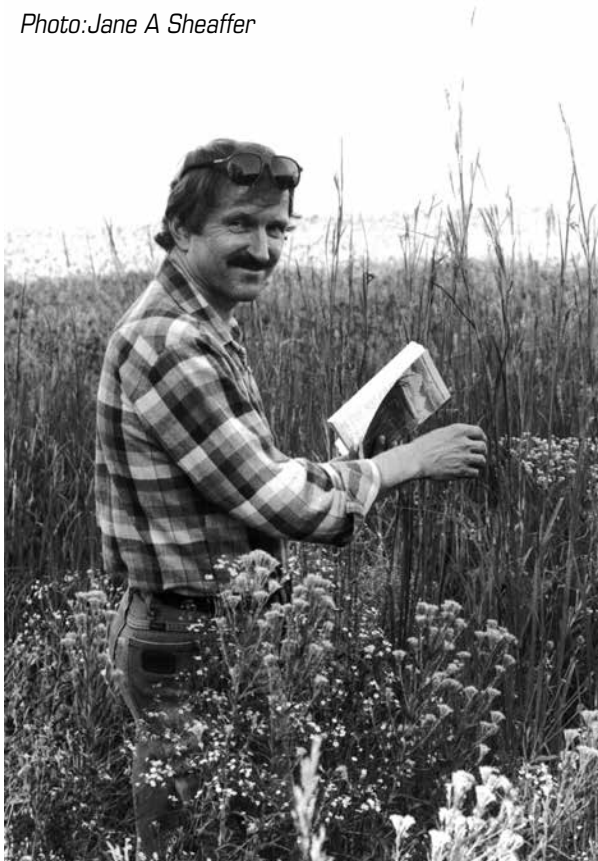
More recently, the sustainability movement has encouraged the application of ecological principals and the use of native plants in designed landscapes. Often appearing distinctly naturalistic in contrast to the predominance of conventionally groomed landscapes, these design efforts help foster public acceptance and appreciation of the important role of local native plants and ecosystems in our lives. Restored prairies, wetlands, and woodlands can and will heal the land, mitigate climate change, maintain our mental health, and improve quality of life. The inclusion of even a small patch of re-created prairie or woodland within an accessible public landscape has the potential to exert positive influence on public taste.

Even while the pruning of plants into artificial, geometric shapes by maintenance workers in public places continues to grow, the renewed public acceptance of the value of natural landscapes to human well-being has fostered the rediscovery of the work of O.C. Simonds and several of his contemporaries. Simonds is still teaching us today what the contemporary phrase "sense of place" is intended to convey. He always developed or restored this memorable quality, distinct to each site with which he worked. Such places are knowable in a sense that you know another person or your home. They are places that a person can grow to love, places that one can return to again and again without tiring but with increasing pleasure, places that tell you exactly where you are in the world and in the passage of seasons and of life.

O.C. Simonds' landscapes as were found in the Rock River Valley were never rigid, perfect, or groomed arrangements of clipped shrubs and trees pruned to "lollipop" configurations. They were not intended to display the wealth or status of their owners, nor adhere to fashion, or symbolize the cultural preferences of their occupants. They did not imitate the landscapes of other lands and other times, nor pay tribute to the designer's ego. Instead, his landscapes represented nature — growing, ever changing, alive with birds, wild animals, and beneficial insects. His landscapes encouraged visitors to return, day after day, season after season, to inhabit and experience the sequence of naturalistic spaces and the compelling scenic views of land, sky, and water

that might lie beyond. The landscapes of O.C. Simonds excited the senses and whetted anticipation of arrival at a destination to view the living tableau of nature, to find real beauty, and to fulfill a fundamental human need for being one with nature and each other.

Photo: Jane A Sheaffer



About the Author

Dean Sheaffer is a landscape architect and author of numerous articles, historic and cultural landscape reports, and historic landscape preservation and restoration plans. As principle of Sheaffer Landscape Architecture since 1990, he focuses on ecological design, native plants, and historic landscapes. Dean initiated, researched, and wrote the 1991 Survey of the Historic Parks of Dixon, Illinois that featured eight parks designed by O. C. Simonds. Subsequently Lowell Park was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. While growing up he visited Lowell Park frequently with family and friends, and the summer before college he worked there. Dean considers the Lowell Park landscape and, as was true for Simonds, the fence rows, roadsides, and remnant wild places near his family's farm, the primary influences on his love of nature and career choice.

- 1 Barbara Geiger, *Low Key Genius; The Life and Works of O.C. Simonds* (Ferme Ornee Press/ Urbpublisher, 2011), 33.
- 2 ---, 305. Throughout his life Simonds acknowledged his debt to his mentor, as in his 1920 book, *Landscape-Gardening*, which he “Dedicated to the memory of Bryan Lathrope to whom all fine art made a strong appeal and whose influence has been felt in each page of this volume and in all the professional work of the author.”
- 3 ---, 36.
- 4 O.C. Simonds, *Landscape-Gardening* (The Macmillan Company, New York, 1920), 3. At the end of the first chapter, Simonds elaborates on “The Aims of Landscape-Gardening,” 22-25.
- 5 Geiger, 9-10. Also, on page 187 she cites Irving Pond as having written that Simonds, with whom he shared living quarters when they first moved from the university to Chicago, “talked transcendentalism of a sort” with a visiting friend, John Edelmann.
- 6 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (James Monroe and Company, 1836), 6. He writes that, standing on the bare ground in the woods, “these plantations of God, ...I am part or parcel of God...” and that there is “the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable.”
- 7 Primary sources used in the writing of this paper include: Dixon Evening Telegraph digital archives; Dixon Park District archives; Rockford Park District; Chicago History Museum architectural archives; interview with Florence Lowden Miller; Simonds family collection; Camp Reynoldswood holdings; Dixon Public Library Dixon parks historical files; Ogle County Historical Society Sinnissippi Farm files; and the author’s collection of drawings and architecture/ engineering prints from private sources.
- 8 Minutes of the Dixon Park Board meeting held Dec. 29, 1911. The day before, commissioners Howell and Vaile had traveled to the Simonds & Co. offices in Chicago to meet with Simonds and get his proposal.
- 9 Beatrice Lanphier, *History of Lowell Park and the Dixon Park System*, 1941, 21. Olmsted’s earlier proposal to prepare a comprehensive plan was for \$3,000. Simonds’ offer was for “\$150 per year plus expenses.” Lanphier’s “book” is a typewritten and bound publication that can be found in the Dixon Public Library’s local history collection.
- 10 Unpublished typescript for a talk by Beatrice Lanphier, daughter of E.N. Howell, before the Illinois State Historical Society at its meeting in Lowell Park, Oct. 16, 1943, 1-2. Lanphier states that her father had written to Carlotta to inquire how Lowell had come to buy the property. She in turn had asked Charles Perkins of Boston, Lowell’s co-worker and Harvard classmate, who had accompanied Lowell on the visit. Lowell and Perkins had heard of the property from John Ames, another co-worker and former classmate, who had surveyed land in that area given by the government to the railroad. Perkin’s reply was cited in a letter responding to Howell and written by Charles R. Barge, dated October 22, 1907, who had met with Perkins and Carlotta Lowell.
- 11 Beatrice Lanphier, *History of Lowell Park and the Dixon Park System*, 1941, 13. Lanphier cites a letter from Barge to Howell that reports, “Miss Lowell tells me her mother was always interested in parks and thought that most cities have too few.” Both Josephine Lowell and Olmsted resided in New York City in the postbellum years and both were active in progressive social reform efforts. In addition to leading the prominent landscape architectural firm bearing his name, Olmsted served as a commissioner of Central Park, which he had designed with Albert Vaux, and he battled to uphold the social consciousness and egalitarian ideals of the park against private encroachment. Olmsted viewed the park as a surrogate wild landscape where ordinary people could get away from their often-squalid urban surroundings, and that the experience of scenery, whether natural or manmade, could be a civilizing force. In 1865 he and Vaux designed

Prospect Park, a large rural park in Brooklyn, N.Y. followed by public parks in other cities in New York state and elsewhere. He played a leading role in the conservation movement and in the campaign for public health. During the same time period, Lowell is said to have been involved in virtually every social reform movement in New York. If she was not personally acquainted with Olmsted, she at least would have been familiar with his work and values.

- 12 Comey's written report, printed and bound, dated March 27, 1909, was appended to the *First Report of the Lowell Park Commission* in the Dixon Park District archives.
- 13 Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., in a treatise he contributed to the *Cyclopedia of American Horticulture* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1901) under the topic entry of "Park." 1212.
- 14 Inspired by the beauty of the wild crabs, members of the Dixon Woman's Club and the Kiwanis Club planted hundreds of pink, red, and white flowering crabapples in naturalistic groupings on both sides of the highway leading from Dixon to the park. Simonds' firm laid out the tree plantings.
- 15 This is the author's analysis of the visual dynamic observed while traveling on a curving road. Certainly Simonds could not have made such a comparison in the 19th century when he developed his design approach before motion pictures.
- 16 *Report of the Commissioners of the Rockford Park District for the Period from May 1, 1909, to November 30, 1910*, 9.
- 17 ---,7; *Daily Register-Gazette*, Aug 31, 1909. "The park commissioners made a decision in the matter of landscape artists to plan the work of beautifying Rockford and its park system with particular reference to what is commonly known as Rood Park, this afternoon. The award went to O. C. Simonds & Co of Chicago..."
- 18 The Riis plan in the third annual report is titled "Sinnissippi Park, Public Golf Links, Proposed Swimming Pool and Lagoon."
- 19 "Location of Memorial Should Be Given Careful Study Says Pitcher," *Dixon Evening Telegraph*, July 26, 1937, 1. Pitcher had asked Simonds for his opinion on the best location for a community building to be built with a bequest from the estate of Mr. and Mrs. George C. Loveland. The site finally chosen is not on the riverfront.
- 20 "Manifold the Beauty of Dixon; The Charm of Landscape Gardening was Beautifully Illustrated in the Lecture Last Evening," *Dixon Evening Telegraph*, May 7, 1901, 4. A synopsis of the two papers and brief description of the stereopticon presentation accompanied by explanatory remarks.
- 21 "Beautiful Dixon' Discussed at Meet of Interested Ones; Plan for Enhancing City's Beauties; Natural Beauties Were Made Known; Park Board Has Fine Outline; Details of Their Plan Provide for Great Work in Improvement," *Dixon Evening Telegraph*, Dec. 31, 1915, 1,8.
- 22 ---, 8. No copy of any of Simonds' plan drawings for the riverfront or any other Dixon parks from the years up to and including 1931 has been found. In his searches for such plans, the author came to believe they had been kept at board president Howell's home, as there was no separate park office or facility at that time.
- 23 "Beautiful Dixon' Discussed at Meet of Interested Ones; Plan for Enhancing City' Beauties// Natural Beauties Were Made Known// Park Board Has Fine Outline / Details of Their Plan Provide for Great Work in Improvement," *Dixon Evening Telegraph*, Dec. 31, 1915, 1,8. Park board president E. N. Howell recommended the permanent Lincoln memorial in 1915, the same year the Lincoln Highway opened to transcontinental traffic, passing on Galena Avenue less than a block east of the Lincoln site.

- 24 "Reflecting Pool for Lincoln Memorial Grounds," June, 1932, Div. of Architecture & Engineering, State of Illinois. A recessed area for the reflecting pond was excavated in 1930, but the final pond drawings and construction were completed in 1932, the year after Simonds died.
- 25 "Activities of Dixon's Park Board Extolled; Park Board Review Devotes Article to Local Parks," *Dixon Evening Telegraph*, May 8, 1933. This news item quotes the entire untitled article, submitted and almost certainly written by park board president Louis Pitcher, as it appeared in the official publication of the Illinois Association of Park Districts. The same article was clearly the basis of a similar news item, "New City Park to be Opened at Dixon Soon," in the Rockford Sunday newspaper, April 2, 1933, lifted from Consolidated News Services. The latter largely quotes the *Park Board Review* article including two pairs of before-and-after photos of the former city dump contrasted with the new riverfront park. Clippings of the article and the news items are found in a scrapbook from Louis Pitcher's personal files.
- 26 "Coolidge to Send Tree For Lincoln Park; Evergreen Off His Farm Will Be Contributed," *Dixon Evening Telegraph*, Oct. 25, 1930, 1. The news article included Simonds' complete list of trees and shrubs to be planted at the monument site,
- 27 "Drive, Parkway, Walk Along River Planned by Board," *Dixon Evening Telegraph*, Sept. 17, 1931, 1,2.
- 28 "Extension Park Board Program Now Considered," *Dixon Evening Telegraph*, May 22, 1931, 1.
- 29 "Ask Early Work on Black Hawk Trail; Expert Gives His View," *Rockford Daily Register Gazette*, Aug. 14, 1920, 4. Landscape engineer George Kessler of St. Louis was another of the three authorities and was known for his design of Kansas City's outstanding park and boulevard system. Two years previously the chambers of commerce of Dixon, Oregon, Byron, and Rockford, jointly through the Rock River Valley Road Committee, had hired him to study the route of the old Black Hawk Trail along the river and make recommendations for its improvement as a scenic highway. "That the highway department is interested in the matter," the newspaper reported, "is shown by the fact that Mr. Denman, engineer for the state, accompanied Mr. Kessler during his survey of the valley last spring." Although searches in recent years have not discovered any copy of Kessler's report, at the time of its release many of his recommendations were summarized in the newspaper account.
- 30 *Minutes*, Board of Commissioners, Dixon Park District. At the meeting Jan. 26, 1923, board president E. N. Howell "gave an interesting outline of Mr. Simonds trip over the Black Hawk Trail from Dixon to Byron in company with Messrs. Goeke and Gerhardt of the State Highway Department." Simonds had donated his time, likely at the behest of Howell, who was one of the leaders of the committee that had earlier engaged George Kessler (see footnote 19).
- 31 Author's conversation with Evelyn Street (daughter of Illinois Division of Highways surveyor Lester Street), c. 1991.
- 32 "Governor Saves Ill. 2 Trees," *Dixon Evening Telegraph*, Oct. 29, 1977, 1. Following a one-hour drive from Dixon to Oregon, stopping four times to inspect trees and meet protestors who gathered along the 15-mile stretch, Gov. Thompson told a gathered crowd that no healthy trees would be cut. The plan to remove 190 trees between Dixon and Rockford, proposed by the Dixon regional office of IDOT "for the safety of the motoring public, had met with mass opposition."
- 33 Wilhelm Miller, "A New Kind of Western Home," (*Country Life in America* (April), 1913), 39-42.
- 34 Florence Miller to author. From an entry in the diary of her mother, Florence Pullman Lowden.
- 35 Florence Miller, interviewed by the author at her home in Chicago, Aug. 19, 1987.
- 36 J. Roy West in a letter to Lowden, June 24, 1910, in the FOL archive at the Regenstein Library,

- University of Chicago. Accompanying the letter is a typewritten list of dates, species, sizes and quantities of "Evergreens planted at Sinnissippi Farm from spring of 1902 to spring 1910."
- 37 William T. Hutchinson, *Lowden of Illinois; The Life of Frank O. Lowden, Vol. I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 227.
- 38 Charles W. Garfield, "Death of Ossian Simonds; Greatest Engineer of Landscape Art in America," Dec. 1931, 94. In an obituary and tribute to his cousin and "intimate companion since boyhood," Garfield, former president of the Michigan Forestry Commission, writes at length about Simonds' interest in forestry, "particularly in the method of using forest planting to check blowing sands." Simonds had successfully experimented with planting trees and shrubs adapted for the conditions on his own sandy property at Pier Cove in western Michigan. Garfield adds that for Lowden's farm "He made the plan...a leading feature of which is the growing of a native pine forest."
- 39 Florence Lowden Miller, interviewed by the author on Aug. 19, 1988. "J. Nelson Spaeth headed the department. He was very anxious to get an experimental place in northern Illinois...My mother had died, and my husband and I thought it was wonderful to get my father interested in something like this...The university was given a 25-acre plot where they could do anything they wanted in exchange for supervising the general reforestation program...some of the (university) professors used to come and work with my Dad planting (the trees.) They did a lot of research..."
- 40 ---, August 19, 1988. "...J. Roy West, who used to come out and spend two weeks at a time during the planting season...supervising the planting of all these hundreds of bushes and trees and laying down roads, and so forth."
- 41 William T. Hutchinson, *Lowden of Illinois, The Life of Frank O. Lowden, Vol I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 215. Lowden had viewed numerous estates when he scouted in Mississippi delta and southeastern seaboard states for fertile land at bargain prices. He finally settled on Arkansas bottomland as the most likely to be profitable. In 1909 he bought "South Bend" plantation, 5,400 acres stretched along the Arkansas River 60 miles below Little Rock. With additional purchases, by 1914 he had expanded his holdings to 15,000 acres. On this tract lived 150 tenant families and 21 employees. The homes of the farm managers, assistants, and house servants were "clustered about the gin building, the cotton and cottonseed storage structures, the implement and mule barns, and the large plantation store built by Lowden." The 1848 plantation house, which he renovated, stood apart, overlooking a big bend in the river and a "park" of tall trees. Lowden occupied the traditional columned house when he made his regular spring and autumn visits to South Bend. In addition to cotton, he rotated pasture, corn, and rice, and crops such as alfalfa, lespedeza, and cowpeas. The latter succeeded in raising the fertility of the land and improving cotton yields.
- 42 Simonds, 182.
- 43 Simonds, 183.
- 44 William T. Hutchinson, *Lowden of Illinois; Vol. I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 224 (footnote 6).
- 45 "Many Species of Birds Found on Lowden's Sinnissippi Farm," *Dixon Evening Telegraph*, Jul. 28, 1916, 1.
- 46 "Lowden's Lilacs Enhance Beauty of Big Estate / But Real Pastoral View Is Had in Wild Crab Groves on Farm," *Dixon Evening Telegraph*, May 27, 1937, 11.
- 47 William T. Hutchinson, *Lowden of Illinois; The Life of Frank O. Lowden, Vol. I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 225. On July 8, 1917, his eldest daughter, Florence, told

FOL, "They trample the grass and sometimes even ask to eat lunch on the porch. Can you beat it?"

48 ---, 225.

49 Miller. Harriet Madelener and her husband built a new house on the site as a second home, and Florence said that although she and Dr. C. Phillip Miller had plans to build a big house on top of Flagpole Hill, she asked the architect to instead "remodel the large carriage house to live in."

50 "Note From Edsall, Former Atty. Gen. Brundage's Prize," *Dixon Evening Telegraph*, Oct. 30, 1923, 8. "There are no roads near (the location) and none planned except for the one Mr. Brundage says he intends placing through the forty acres of woodland on the farm."

51 *Grantee Book 144* (Ogle County, Illinois), May 32, 1924, 347; *Grantee Book 147*, Jan. 19, 1924, 238, 239.

52 "Landscape Experts Plan Improvements of Properties Here," *Dixon Evening Telegraph*, Nov. 30, 1923, 3.

53 "Residence for E. J. Brundage (Grand Detour, Ill.), 1924," Holabird & Root, Architecture Collection, Chicago History Museum.

54 "On Brundage Estate," *Dixon Evening Telegraph*, April 11, 1929, 1.

55 "Entertained Party At Brundage Cottage," *Dixon Evening Telegraph*, April 4, 1925, 3; "Found Shot to Death Today/ Wife at Farm in Ogle Co. to Spend Week End," *Dixon Evening Telegraph*, Jan. 20, 1934, 1.

56 ---, 1.

57 ---, 1.

58 *Grantee Book 157* (Ogle County, Ill.), 511. The transaction was entered Nov. 24, 1934.

59 "Another Wealthy Chicagoan Buys Estate Near Dixon for an Elaborate Summer Home; Henry B. Babson Buys 130 Acres Adjoining Brundage's," *Dixon Evening Telegraph*, August 18, 1926, 1.

60 "Babson Arabian Horse Farm Dates Back to '32," *Dixon Evening Telegraph*, July 8, 1999. C1. This account appeared in a column written by Duane Paulson of the Lee County Historical Society at the time of the closing of the farm operation. Paulson had been a personal friend of the resident trainer, John Vogel.

61 "H. G. Reynolds Buys Adelheid Park Near City; Dixon Manufacturer Secures Estate of Rare Beauty," *Dixon Evening Telegraph*, May 15, 1922, 1. The wording of the news article strongly suggests that planning of improvements was already underway before the purchase was made public: "...it will be necessary to invest a considerable sum in the rebuilding of the roads, making of lawns, clearing of brush, etc., to make the park and its beauties available to the public." Also, "... the new owner plans it will be one of the show places of northern Illinois." No record of Reynolds initial meeting with Simonds has been found, however the completion of an extensive land survey within four months of the purchase indicates that the Simonds & Co. had started work very soon thereafter. Furthermore, a force of men under the direction of Reynolds was at work on the tract with axes within weeks of the purchase ("Workman is Badly Cut at Adelheid Pk.," *Dixon Evening Telegraph*, June 1, 1922, 2.)

62 ---.1. Page "was one of first to see the value of the park as a play ground of rare natural beauty, with its rocks and hills and ravines, a profusion of wildflowers and ferns and shrubs, and all canopied with a forest of great trees."

63 "Planned to Make Adelheid Finest Park in This Vicinity; Page Spent Thousands," *Dixon Evening*

Telegraph, Aug. 30, 1916,1.

- 64 "Topographical Survey of Land Belonging to Mr. H.G, Reynolds," O.C.Simonds and Co. Landscape Gardeners, September 1922.
- 65 A blue line print, 54"x48", in possession of Reynoldswood Camp, Dixon, Illinois.
- 66 The author searched the park in the early 1990s for traces of any improvements that might be attributable to Simonds. Amidst wild growth of shrubs and young trees that had overtaken the revised entryway, he found several viburnum shrubs, one of Simonds' favorite species to frame a gateway and harmonize it with the natural scenery. Aside from this clue, it is almost certain that Simonds would have landscaped the new entryway at the time it was constructed under his oversight.
- 67 "Survey of Reynoldswood Estate of H. G. Reynolds, Dixon, Ill." Simonds & West Landscape Designers, April 1926.
- 68 "Sketch of a Home Grounds for J.G. Ralston and D.G. Harvey near Dixon, Illinois," Simonds & West Landscape Designers, January 1927.
- 69 "Spacious New Home Built in Reynoldswood; Is One of City's Fine Show Places," *Dixon Evening Telegraph*, Dec. 17, 1927,1. Although the manor house was not built where Simonds recommended, years later at his proposed location on the western bluff there remained a pile of salvaged building stone, seemingly intended for use in its construction.
- 70 "The Cover Cut This Week," *The Jersey Bulletin and Dairy World*, v. 51 (1932), Mar. 23, 410.
- 71 Small notices and classified ads ran frequently in season in the *Dixon Evening Telegraph*. Reynoldswood dressed turkeys were also advertised in the weekly ads of local grocery stores.
- 72 "Diversification of Activities at Reynoldswood Planned," *Dixon Evening Telegraph*, Oct. 4, 1938, 1.
- 73 "Dixon Beautiful," *Dixon Evening Telegraph*, May 14, 1949, 5. This description was contributed to the newspaper by the Dixon Beautiful Committee of the local Woman's Club under their column head. It publicized two estate gardens at Dixon chosen by the Garden Clubs of Illinois as being worthy of being included in their garden tours that week. The other garden was at Hazelwood, the historic Walgreen estate.
- 74 "Church Group Plans Outdoor Center for 500," *Dixon Evening Telegraph*, April 3, 1952. "The Illinois Conference of the Seventh Day Adventists announced today it has purchased Reynoldswood for an outdoor youth center. The purchase includes the former 25-room mansion, a swimming pool, tennis court, and some 60 acres of rugged woodland bordering Rock River." Subsequently, ownership was transferred to the Northern Illinois Conference of the United Methodist Church as a retreat and summer camp.
- 75 "C. C. Barrett's New Country Home; Overlooks Kishwaukee and Rock Rivers," *Daily Register-Gazette*, Feb. 27, 1917. "The grounds...around the house will be laid out by Simons (sic), a Chicago landscape architect." The article claims, "...Barrett's new residence...on the highest eminence in that vicinity, will be one of the show places of this locality." It also states, "All of the original buildings on the two farms have been remodeled."
- 76 ---.
- 77 It is quite possible the plat directly referenced a comprehensive landscape plan Simonds would have drawn for the manor. The plat also clearly reflects the probable influence of the architect's site plans: the alignment of the manor house with the existing formal flower garden and with an allée, a long, straight opening cut through the woods. The original intent of the formal allée would have been to provide a window in the woodland border linking the Kishwaukee River vista

to the house. However, by 1923 a new bridge had been built directly in line with that view, and without continued maintenance the allée has fully grown over.

78 Simonds, 141.

79 ---, 51.

80 *en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colonial_Revival_garden*, accessed Jan. 29, 2022. This perspective was not unique to gentleman farm estates with Colonial Revival or Arts-and-Crafts architecture. More broadly it served a back-to-the-land movement, especially the gentry's romantic desire to fulfill the dream of year-round existence in the country, in nature, that was at the root of "The Country Place Era" (1900-1930). Architectural unity was achieved by placing a Colonial Revival house and garden directly adjacent, but sometimes at a distance, and on a central axis emanating from a main entrance to the house. The garden design had geometric order and symmetry. It was treated as an outdoor room largely enclosed with walls or fences. Colonial Revival gardens were often sunken in the landscape. Typically, the garden had its own central axis at a right angle to the house, on which was placed at one end a viewing pergola with columns, as on the house. At the terminus, and also at the central intersection of the garden axis with the house axis, were placed features such as a fountain, sculpture, or sundial. If bright annuals were desired, they were confined to large architectural vases so as not to distract from the bones of the design, the garden's form.

81 "The Dove of Peace Broods Over All,* *Dixon Evening Telegraph*, Oct.18, 1900, 5;" "Gain Many New Ideas for Beautifying City," *The Dispatch* (Moline, Ill.), Feb. 16, 1904. This is the same stereopticon lecture that was presented in Dixon, May 7, 1901. The *Telegraph* was reporting the previous day's session of the Federation of Women's Clubs convening in Rockford. A cursory search of *Newspapers.com* archives online indicates that the Simonds-Lathrop stereopticon lecture program was presented about the same time period in numerous towns and cities in many states.

82 Wilhelm Miller, *The Prairie Spirit in Landscape Gardening*, Circular 184 of the Illinois Agricultural Experiment Station (Urbana, University of Illinois, Department of Horticulture, 1915), 5.

83 Wilhelm Miller, *The "Illinois Way" of Beautifying the Farm*, 1,2. The subtitle above the text and illustrations reads, "How You Can Get 100 to 1,000 per cent Profit, in Five to Ten Years, from a Few Dollars Invested in Planning and Planting, by Increasing the Cash Value or Salability of Your Farm, to Say Nothing of the Added Health, Comfort, and Beauty." Aside from Miller's arguments for landscaping Illinois farms and in the naturalistic manner pioneered by Simonds and Jensen, the publication is notable for the 115 photographs and line drawings Miller chose to serve as examples of the right way to plant and the landscape effects that can be achieved.

84 Geiger, 198. 199. Simonds thought that casting his landscapes and planting choices as "The Illinois Way" was misleading. Before going to press, Miller had asked for his suggestions, and Simonds wrote back that "I think I have a stronger feeling for Michigan than for any other state." Simonds also took exception to the term "Prairie Style," as he did not think there was such a distinct style and it did not define his own design approach, "simply to do that which...will make the most beautiful effect." (Correspondence, Department of Horticulture, University Archives, University of Illinois).



Above: Howell's garden seen from the street in a photograph by Howell ca. 1923.

Below: Flower beds and lily pond in the broad ravine at the center of the lot.



1912/June**Warren C. Durkes residence, Dixon, IL**

This may be one of the most naturalistic of Simonds' plans for a city lot. The landscape was developed immediately following the development of the E.N. Howell grounds next door, also highly naturalistic. It includes the same ravine, which originates in the Durkes front yard. The plantings for Durkes, a local banker, were extensive. The high south yard atop the riverbank was filled with masses of shrubs and vines. There were flowerbeds and lawns about the house at the top of the bank. The large north yard, which contained the ravine and many mature shade trees, is virtually filled with shrubs and naturalized shade wildflower beds separated by narrow "grass walks", stratified in form, parallel to the ravine and the street that runs east/west. The extensive plant list includes low and tall shrub beds, flowering ornamental trees, several evergreen species as groups and specimens, and beds of specific wildflowers such as Spiderwort and Rudbeckia purpurea.

1915**A. W. Chandler residence, Dixon, IL.**

In a reference by Howell in a magazine article, the landscape plan by Simonds was done at the same time as his plan for Ives' lot, which it originally adjoined. On the west, downstream side, the lot adjoins the narrow north riverbank park, also planned and eventually landscaped by Simonds' firm and now known as Howell Park.

1915**Dr. C. H. Ives residence, Dixon, IL**

This home was on the north bank of the Rock River adjacent to and just downstream or west of Howell's lot. The ravine, referred to as a "sunken garden," (Dixon Evening Telegraph 6/6/23) was an attraction to visitors, apparently treated by Simonds in a naturalistic manner similar to Howell's garden with shrubs, ferns, and flower beds.

1918/Oct.**Charles B. Morrison residence, Dixon, IL**

Until recent changes, the landscape may have been the best intact example known of a Simonds' plan for a small lot. Morrison was a lawyer. His daughter resided there her entire married life and kept many of the original native shrubs and trees. The property stayed in the family until the late 1980's, then it changed hands three times within a brief period. Most of the remaining original plants were grubbed out. The historic plan Simonds drew was found in the attic in 1990.

1922**Reynoldswood farm estate, Dixon, IL**

This 230-acre property, an historic farm with a wooded park of 40 acres including scenic drives, bordering the Rock River, was purchased by Dixon industrialist Horace G. Reynolds to be developed as a “gentleman’s farm.” Simonds surveyed the park area, revised the entry drive, and proposed further changes. Then in 1923 Reynolds died and the development halted. His two daughters, Lucile Ralston and Jane Harvey with their husbands, Reynolds Wire Company executives, took up the work again in 1926. At that time Simonds, in collaboration with an architect, created a site plan for a two-family manor house that would take advantage of a location in the wooded park on a high point overlooking the river. But ultimately the owners chose a different site at the west edge of the woods. The architect revised the two-family house plan for the more open setting and in 1927 it was built. At the front of the manor house Lucille developed a large ornamental estate garden that became widely known. From the half-mile long entry drive, in spring visitors could view many of the thousands of naturalized hyacinth, tulips, crocus, and narcissus in variety planted by Simonds. Beyond these documented improvements there is only limited evidence that any of Simonds’ plans were implemented. Under Lucile Ralston’s management the farm flourished for many years, marketing Jersey milk products locally and later turkeys. She resided at the manor until 1952, when she disbanded the estate and sold the 50 acres that included the woodland and manor for use as a denominational campground and retreat.

1922**Lee County Tuberculosis Sanitarium site,
later Robert Shaw residence, Dixon, IL**

The county had purchased the site that ranged from a deep ravine to a high bluff overlooking the Rock River in 1920 with the intention of building cottages for TB patients. Dr. E. S. Murphy chaired the board of directors of the proposed sanitarium. According to newspaper accounts and county records, the directors hired Simonds to develop the grounds soon after it was purchased. In 1922 Simonds’ plans for the entry road and shrub plantings to “beautify the grounds” were implemented. The narrow driveway winds from the entry gate alongside and around the head of the ravine. To all appearances it was the only road ever built on the site and is typical of Simonds’ handling of drives. The architect’s building plans for the sanitarium were never

implemented. In 1939 newspaper publisher Robert Shaw built a residence and coach house on the site. The entry drive still exists as well as some shrub masses, i.e. a Simonds' favorite Fragrant Sumac, that naturalized in the woods.

1923/Sept.

D. E. S. Murphy residence, Dixon, IL

The planting plan was done shortly after Simonds worked with Dr. Murphy, a physician and surgeon, on plans for a Lee County Tuberculosis Sanitarium. It is more than likely that Simonds recommended Holabird & Root as architects for the improvements to the Murphy residence, including the south terrace with its great awning. The house is one of the oldest on the north side of Dixon, built by a Mr. Godfrey in 1859 but occupied historically by the Brooks family. The present owner is the grandson of Dr. Murphy.

1923/Nov. E. J. Brundage farm estate, Grand Detour, IL

According to the Dixon Evening Telegraph, 11/13/23, "O. C. Simons (sic), well known Chicago landscape architect, and an assistant, are in Dixon for the improvement of Dr. E. S. Murphy's north side residence; and also to plan improvement of the farm up the river which was recently purchased by Attorney General Brundage. Mr. Brundage plans to build a handsome residence on the river bank, affording views up and down the stream, and he will otherwise beautify the grounds of his future summer home."

1925/Dec.

J. F. Enright residence, Dixon, IL

This lot is across the street from Howell's residence. Front and side yards as shown on the Simonds plan are typical of his residential landscape design for use of massing of prairie rose, rugosa and sweet brier, barberry, fragrant sumac, wild crab and hawthorns on the borders. Unusual is the use of evergreens near the back of the house (a hemlock, Colorado blue spruce, pachysandra, and American yew) and placement of a long, curving mound with dense plantings of evergreen trees at the rear borders (dwarf pines, white pine, Austrian Pine and western yellow). It is notable that the date of this plan corresponds to development of a major Simonds' project at Lisle, Illinois, the Morton Arboretum and its pinetum.

n/d

Louis Pitcher residence, Dixon, IL

Pitcher was a long-time Park Board member. He succeeded Howell as president of the board and continued in that capacity through the 1930s WPA works era and into the 1940s. The house and landscape have been replaced by an apartment building. No plan or photos of the Simonds landscape are known. The source was an oral history taken from Pitcher's son, Letby Pitcher, in 1990.

Landscape plans by Simonds' successors

1935 ca.

Dr. A. McNichols residence, Dixon, IL

This was a new architect-designed home on a riverfront lot two blocks east of Howell's lot. The project manager and probable architect of the landscape was J. Roy West. The landscape design, documented in oral history interviews of the landscaper and a worker (the author's uncle), included a large flagstone terrace, lilacs in front near the street and the wild-flower beds on the lower river terrace, fragrant sumac shrubs in a border, rose species on the banks, coralberry and snowberry on a bank by the tennis court. All of the foregoing are plant species and uses typical of Simonds & West design.

1939/Sept.

Schuler residence, Dixon, IL

According to oral history, C. Roy West was the designer. A blueprint of the plan shows that design emphasis was on the use of evergreens with a small flagstone terrace and formal flower beds. The emphasis on foundation planting with evergreen shrubs, which became popular in the 1930s, is a departure from the design work and planting choices of the Simonds and West firm in Simonds' lifetime.

*O.C. Simonds in the
Rock River Valley*

