

The Campus in its Glory

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Spring is finally showing itself on the Culver campus and shades of green on shrubbery and trees offer encouragement to students and faculty alike. We have had a reasonably mild winter, but the prospect of work crews installing piers on Lake Maxinkuckee and crew teams shouting stroke counts provide the first real sign that June Week is less than two months away.

The beauty of the grounds at Culver, over which visitors invariably exclaim, is partly the handiwork of the great Norwegian landscape architect Jens Jensen. The story of his coming to Culver and his suggestions is an amusing one which General Leigh Gignilliat delighted in telling.

Shortly before the outbreak of World War I, Edwin R. Culver, son of the founder, and Gignilliat, decided to address the meandering drainage ditch that Henry Harrison Culver installed on his property between 1883 and 1885. He had purchased 98 acres of land on the northeast corner of the lake and added another 208 along the north shore the following year.

Much of the land which bordered the lake was marshy and unusable except in late summer and fall. Before Henry Harrison Culver could turn it into productive farmland it had to be drained.

Throughout 1883 and 1884, he employed local residents to drain the quagmire. A wide ditch stretched from near today's tennis courts to the lakeshore site in front of yet-to-be-built Main Barrack. Some nine miles of drainage tiles were connected to the ditch which, in time, Academy officials referred to as a canal. By 1885, when Mr. Culver returned to St. Louis to manage the Wrought Iron Range Company, the land was suitable for agriculture and was producing hay and corn.

The opening of the Culver Military Academy in 1894 and the subsequent growth of the campus to 17 buildings and an enrollment of 551 students by the end of 1916 convinced Edwin Culver and Superintendent Gignilliat that the lakeshore was a treasure and needed the advice of a nationally known landscape architect.

At first glance, it had a pleasant visual appeal. Just in front of West Barrack, the canal made a loop around a circular shaped island with a free flowing artesian fountain jetting from its center. Purple barberry and umbrella trees were planted along the edges. However, the pleasant view was seasonal and, in reality, had become an eyesore and a health hazard.

Whatever the differences of opinion over the beauty of the grounds provided by the canal and lagoon, there was no controversy over the mosquitoes that they produced. In drier summers, the water often became covered with a green scum, which was unsightly if not unhealthy. As a result, there was discussion about the possibility of filling them in.

Gignilliat took the issues to heart and invited the landscape architect Jens Jensen to Culver. Already famous for his work in Chicago , including designs for Garfield, Humboldt, and Columbus parks, Jensen joined Gignilliat and Edwin R. Culver in a tour of the lakefront.

Gignilliat recounts: “I walked with him to the lakeshore. At that time, the boards and wooden horses from which the swimming and boating piers were built were stacked at the edge of the lake after their removal from the water in the fall. Nearby was the circular lagoon with its border of purple barberry and its miserable, trickling little artesian fountain.”

Gignilliat and E.R. Culver waited for Jensen to expound on the lovely lakeside setting and were quickly disappointed. “I had expected (Jensen) to expatiate on the beauty of the lake. Instead, he looked at me and said: ‘My Gott, you have the lumber yard and the reservoir on this beautiful lakefront.’ Until that time, it had not occurred to me that the lagoon was not a thing of beauty.”

“Don’t you like the lagoon?”

“He looked at me pityingly and touched me on the shoulder.” “Never let the work of man run in opposition to the works of the Almighty. Alongside of this beautiful lakeshore, you have that terrible geometrical thing.”

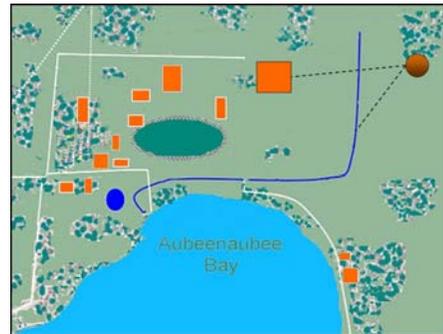
“What shall we do with it, I said?” “Fill it up, he replied!”

“What would you do with the canal?”

Jensen responded: “Fill it up! Then you will have peace and beauty in your landscape, a beautiful meadow sloping from your buildings to meet the lake. And, for heaven’s sake, take out all of those purple things and umbrella trees and those terrible artificialities.”

“You have right here in your Indiana woodland the hawthorns, the wild crab, the red haw, the viburnum; and there are no more beautiful shrubs in the world. Bring them into your grounds; plant them where they should grow and where they will be happy. On the edge of your woodland, put your hawthorn and crab; and on the edge of your parade ground, plant your prairie rose; and near your lake shore, put the Hoosier dogwood and spirea Tomantasia, which love to have wet feet and will grow in your Indiana marshes.”

Gignilliat continued: “We followed his advice; and of those who visit Culver now and are impressed by the beauty of the grounds, few realize that the plantings are, for the most part, our own native shrubs.”



The construction of the new Riding Hall a year earlier provided a simple solution. A building of such size required thousands of yards of fill to provide a stable foundation. A narrow gauge railroad track moved thousands of yards of earth from a nearby hill to the Riding Hall site. After construction was underway, the tracks were moved to the canal and by the end of 1917, it was filled and a part of campus history faded into memory.

Parenthetically, shortly after Jensen’s visit, E. R. Culver found himself in need of a personal gardener and commissioned the campus groundskeeper to procure one for him. On his next trip to Chicago , he apparently consumed too much Swedish punch and completely forgot his mission. When he

returned to the Academy Mr. Culver asked if he'd been successful. "Yes," he replied. "What is his name?" said Mr. Culver.

"His name . . . his name is . . . Leo." At the earliest opportunity he went to the phone, called up the Swedish Consul, and asked him to send down a gardener by the next train.

Fortunately, an excellent one arrived, but his name was not Leo. Greeting him at the train, the school gardener said to him, "What is your name?"

"My name is August Wennerstrom," said the new arrival with a heavy Swedish accent. "No," was the quick reply, "Your name is Leo."

In time, "Leo" became responsible for the grand sweep of the Academy campus and served as groundskeeper until his retirement in 1949. In the memory of the cadets and faculty, however, Wennerstrom is best remembered for his tale of immigrating to America . He had come, at least partway, on the *Titanic* and after it sunk, survived the icy waters of the North Atlantic for nine hours.

*(Editor's Note: August "Leo" Wennerstrom celebrated three anniversaries each year: his birth date, his rescue after the sinking of the *Titanic*, and his arrival at Culver. Many former cadets recall his annual lecture of the *Titanic's* demise and his rescue on April 14, 1912).*