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The Cowling Arboretum: Its Foundation and Reinvention

At 11 o'clock on Saturday June 4th, 1927, senior class president Karl Gastor a planted Russian Poplar, the first official tree of Carleton College's Cowling Arboretum. Flanked by his classmates, Gastor was photographed by the man whose vision set the massive project in motion, biology professor Harvey Stork. (Seniors). Since that day, the arboretum has been a fixture of natural beauty and environmental appreciation for Carleton and the Northfield community. Mark Luterra, a Carleton alumnus of 2007, cites the ability to experience "a profound, almost spiritual sense of place, of connection with all of nature, past and present" within the Arb's mosaic landscapes (Luterra 2). The dynamic landscape of the Cowling Arboretum has not always taken the shape it does today, but since 1927, the Arb has remained an important voice in conversations surrounding land use practice, conservation, and preservation within the community of Northfield and across the nation.

In addition to Dr. Stork, the people that made Carleton's Arboretum possible were Superintendent of Grounds D. Blake Stewart, known unanimously as *Stewsie*, and President Donald J. Cowling for whom the Arboretum is named (Luterra 9). Their vision for the Arboretum was grand. It was the first arboretum established in Minnesota, and its position along the banks of the Cannon River afforded it such an optimum landscape that in December of 1926, the Carletonian claimed it to be "possibly better than any other institution" and "the best

opportunity for [an Arboretum] in the North Western United States" in May of 1927. Stork and Stewsie sought to create a traditional arboretum, "a museum of trees" modeled after Harvard's Arnold Arboretum, which was established in 1872 and one of the most notable arboretums in North America in 1927 as well as today (Luterra 9, McDougall 47).

Since the Cowling Arboretum no longer exists in the state of its foundation, an elaboration of parallels between Arnold and the foundation of Cowling to elucidate how Stork and Stewsie played into the narrative of arboretum creation and environmental work. The Arnold Arboretum was designed Frederick Law Olmsted, a giant of landscape architecture who designed New York's Central Park, the Chicago Waterfront and several other urban green spaces (Sutton 25). Charles Sprague Sargent, the botanist who created the Arnold Arboretum desired to grow "as many trees, shrubs, and hebacious plants… as possible" in the Arnold's 255 acres (McDougall 64, 47).

This desire to curate global biodiversity and design beautiful landscapes as an escape from civilization was central to the foundation of Cowling as well. A sign at the entrance of the arboretum in its early years detailed that the arboretum's purposes were to provide "for the scientific study of trees and shrubs… acclimate new varieties in the region… [and suggest] artistic effects that may be achieved by the landscape architect" (Butler et al. 3). This continues to be the traditional view of what an arboretum should be, and at the foundation of Carleton's Cowling Arboretum, was central to environmental conversations. Arboretum researcher Susan McDougall's claim "one of the greatest appeals to the visitor to an arboretum is the feeling of isolation from as bustling world, where trees soar and flowers bloom" is similar to the feeling cited by Mark Luterra, but the landscapes to which they refer are drastically different (12).

It is difficult to glimpse the foundations of the Cowling Arboretum today. Picking through the floodplain forest, you may stumble upon aging abutments that once held suspension bridges over the Cannon, and a Gingko tree survives near the entrance to the Best Woods, but the Russian Poplar planted Karl Gastor on a Saturday morning is no longer there, and neither are the bird feeding stations or rustic bridges (Carleton Campus). By the mid 70s, it was generally recognized that referring to the land along the Cannon as an arboretum was more of a misnomer than anything (Butler et. al, 3), and the grand traditional vision proposed by Harvey Stork had much deteriorated.

This came about as the result of several events. Firstly, the gigantic goals of Stork and Stewsie were in some ways too grand for the monetary and physical resources allotted. Dr. Stork anticipated planting 3000 species within the Arb's then 390 acres, but the total peaked at only 400 species (Luterra 9), compared to the 4000 current species in the Arnold Arboretum (McDougall 47). As valiant and, for the most part successful as Dr. Stork and Stewsie's efforts were to curate their museum of trees, most of the motivation they had garnered dropped off during the 1950s when both men retired and the natural history major, whose students frequently worked in the Arb, ceased to be offered (Butler et al. 2). In addition, the Carleton Farm, whose well known herd of holsteins is immortalized as the *cows* in Northfield's motto of "Cows, Colleges, and Contentment," ceased operation due to lack of agricultural interest (Luterra 12). The land previously occupied by the Farm was rented to cash crop farmers, and the lack of management guidelines for the Arb's agricultural or recreational landscapes coupled with the development and expansion of Northfield left the Cowling Arboretum in a state of disrepair (Butler et al. 2).

While the land along the Cannon River was deteriorating, the national conversation surrounding land use and ecosystem preservation had been developing. Just seven years after the Cowling, the University of Wisconsin Arboretum was established in Madison as a result of cheap land prices and Civilian Conservation Corps labor that came out of the Great Depression (McDougall 514). Though also inspired by Arnold in its inception, the University's Arboretum was developed with an additional focus of ecosystem preservation as developed by the arboretum's earliest manager, Aldo Leopold (McDougall 517). The University of Wisconsin consists of a traditional arboretum with a global selection of trees an shrubs, but also includes a restored deciduous forest and wetlands, in addition to the 60 acre Curtis Prairie, the first prairie restoration in North America (McDougall 513). Cleveland Ohio's Holden Arboretum was also established in 1931 and was founded with an initial emphasis on ecological and restoration rooted plantings of forests (McDougall 210). By midcentury when the Cowling Arboretum was beginning to struggle, the foundational ideas of the University of Wisconsin and Holden arboretums had taken hold in mainstream environmental conversations, and the former ideal of beauty through landscape design had begun to make room for an alternate ideal of healthy self sufficient regional ecosystems (McDougall 11).

In the late 70s, the confluence of the Cowling Arboretum's struggle and the development of land use ideals led to an attitude at Carleton that is encapsulated by the Carleton Voice when it claimed that "the are was clearly no longer the formal 'museum of trees and shrubs' … envisioned and no one advocated for a return to that ideal" (6). The land on which the Arboretum stood had been profoundly impacted by humankind even before its prairies were plowed during the settlement of Northfield. As Ed Buchwald, one of the key players in the

arboretum stated in 1976, “The question is not whether we will manage, but how” (Butler et al. 4).

The 1970s regarded as the start of the new movement to restore the Cowling Arboretum. Professor of Geology and Environmental Studies Ed Buchwald and Professor of Biology Gary Wagenbach conducted the first Arboretum Planning Seminar during Winter Term of that year, polling students, faculty, and community members with the intent of redirecting the Arboretum’s purpose and developing plans for management (Butler et al. 3). The influence of other arboretums and the greater conversation in regards to land use is evident. The seminar proposed an educational framework build upon Aldo Leopold’s Land Ethic, and cited research from the Holden Arboretum (Butler et al. 4). Wagenbach, had also pursued undergraduate and graduate studies at the University of Wisconsin (Flamm). This symposium culminated in the mission statement that remains today:

> “The Carleton Arboretum should be developed as a multi-use preservation/educational/ recreational area, serving primarily the Carleton community, but also open to the public. To that end, it should be managed as a mosaic, protect fragile plant community and animal habitats while allowing recreational use in other areas. The educational potential of the Arb, both for formal courses and individual study, must be developed.” (Butler et al. 3)

Two years later, a grant of $60,000 from the Culpepper Foundation was given to the college to aid in restoration of the Arboretum (Carleton College). Work was begun on improving

trails and restoring prairie and there was even an art exhibition highlighting past, present, and future perceptions of the Arboretum (Mertens), but at the end of the grant's life in 1982, the condition of the Arb had not much improved (Peter W. Stanley). The issue with the restoration effort was not lack of funds, but lack of organization. The same year the Culpepper grant was recieved, the Carleton Voice called for students involved with the Arboretum campaign to "constantly involve and pass on knowledge to new students for longevity," but without dedicated staff members, or any organization of faculty devoted to the arb, attempts at restoration of prairie and savannah remained "small and inconsistent" (Ashmore 7, Anderson et al. 3).

From the late 70s into the 80s, members of the Carleton community had realized what was at stake and were beginning to speak up. A 1985 letter to President Bob Edwards, Professor Buchwald reads "I realize that the arboretum and Natural History are not mainstream concerns of the Carleton community, and yet I feel that as the world becomes more hectic we will need the solace and touch with nature that the Arboretum provides." This feeling of solace, connection, and retreat Mark Luterra and Susan McDougall allude to was vanishing in Northfield for two reasons. One was the lack of organization surrounding the restoration effort, but the other was the idea that the Arboretum existed as separate from the rest of Northfield. Erosion from the cash crop agriculture the college was leasing was detrimental to efforts to restore prairie, and increased fertilization from expansing Northfield communities and agriculture had caused the Lyman Lakes and Spring Creek to become eutrophic and polluted (Anderson et al. 5).

In 1988, Professor Mark McKone organized another Arboretum Planning Term that addressed both of these issues. The seminar proposals echoed those of the previous seminars, but also recognized that if management is further neglected, that neglect "will no longer be

benign," that and as recreation had served as a bridge between community members and the college, the Arb could not exist without some sort of bridge between the two landscapes (Anderson et al. 2-3). Specific proposals from the seminar a full Arboretum Manager position and Arboretum Committee, the creation of buffer zones and settling ponds to prevent pollution in the Arboretum and Lyman Lakes, and the cessation of cash crop agriculture on Arboretum land (Anderson et al. 5-9).

Sometime after the seminar, an Arboretum Manager position was created and filled by Mark McKone and Myles Bakke became the Arboretum director (Luterra 13). In the 90s, an anonymous grant of $750,000 was given to the college for "conservation, maintenance, and preservation" of the Cowling arboretum, farm leases were taken out of production, and prairie restoration efforts were redoubled with seeds from the McKnight remnant prairie, acquired in the 1960s (Jarchow 141). Today, the Cowling Arboretum remains a misnomer. It's focus has shifted from the creation and research of beautifully designed and globally diverse tree and shrub plantings, to research rooted in restoration and maintenance of fragile regional ecosystems.

Though some of the Bur Oaks still remain before the area was tilled over, the arboretum will never return to the way it was before European settlement, nor is that the goal. If you look closely, you can see evidence or the Arboretum's past conceptions like the eradication of invasive species, many of which, like Buckthorn, were introduced by European settlers, but some like the Siberian Elm, were introduced by Dr. Stork himself during the Arboretum's foundation. Throughout its history, the Cowling Arboretum has remained squarely within the conversation of what being an Arboretum is and what land use ideals it should embody. Recognition of the important maintenance of scarce regional landscapes and of Northfield's ecosystem and

community as key to environmental progress, Carleton College's Cowling Arboretum remains a dynamic and progressive landscape and a environmental fixture of Northfield.

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