

Laying the Foundation:

Landscape Architecture at The Morton Arboretum

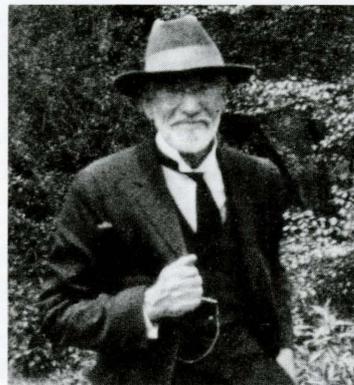
O.C. Simonds and Clarence Godshalk

1922-1953

By Scott Mehaffey, *Landscape Architect*

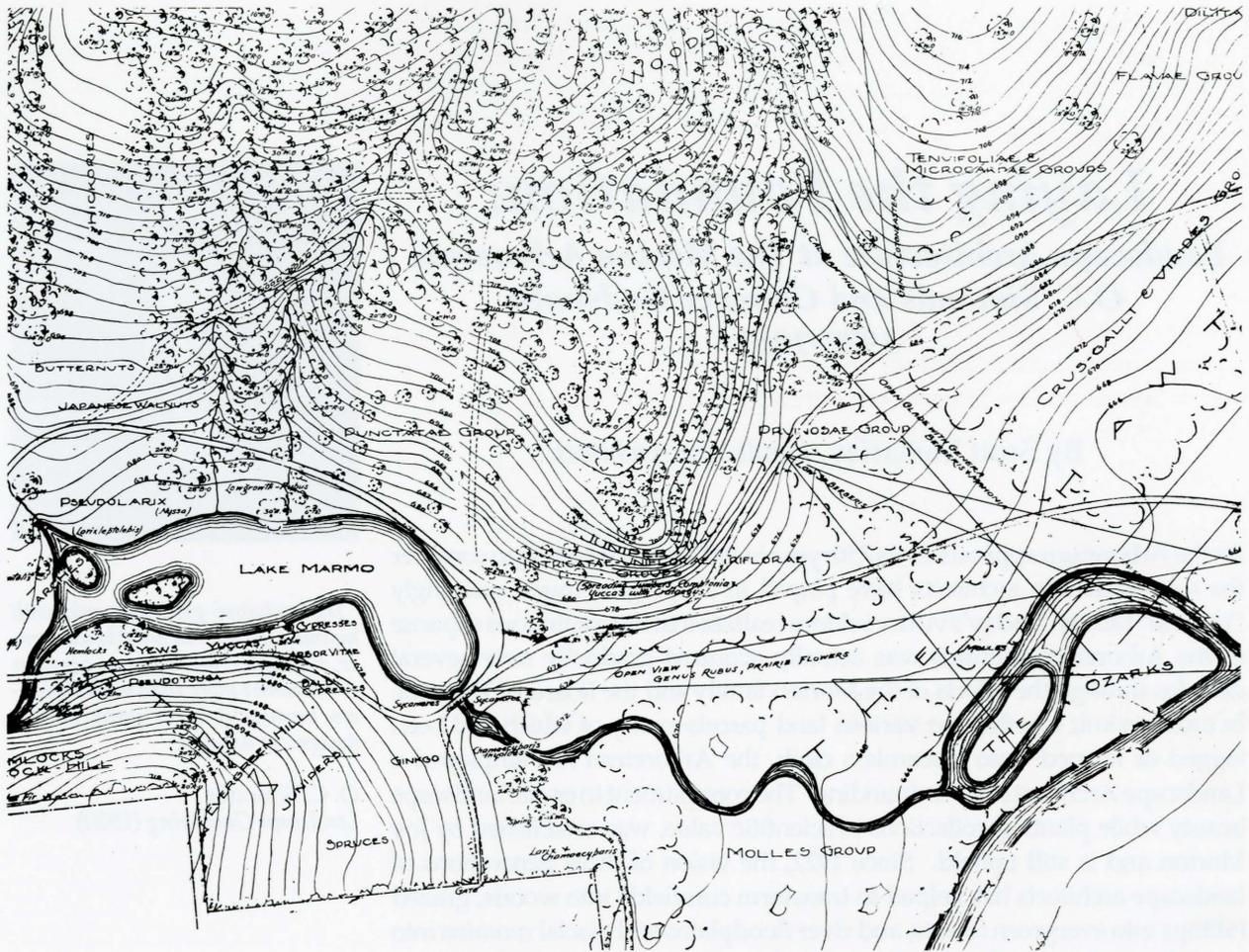
As the Arboretum approaches its 75th year in 1997, it is interesting to consider the role landscape architects have played in shaping so much seemingly “natural” beauty. Today’s visitor seldom realizes that the continuous expanse of the Arboretum grounds was actually acquired gradually over several decades through the efforts of the Morton family and the Board of Trustees. In order to knit together the various land parcels—many of which had been logged or farmed—into a seamless cloth, the Arboretum has employed a Landscape Architect since its founding. The commitment to create landscape beauty while planting collections of scientific value, was established by Joy Morton and is still upheld. Since 1922, the vision of three generations of landscape architects has helped to transform cornfields into woods, grazed hilltops into evergreen forests, and river floodplains and glacial moraines into magnificent botanical collections. Each successive landscape architect responded to the needs and attitudes of the day, but each carried forth the philosophies and ideals of his predecessor.

By the time Joy Morton enlisted the help of Chicago landscape architect O. C. (Ossian Cole) Simonds in 1921, he had already done much preliminary thinking about his Arboretum landscape. Simonds (1855-1931) was 66 years old at the time, and semi-retired after a distinguished career as one of this country’s foremost landscape gardeners. Although the term landscape *architect* was most commonly used, Simonds regarded himself as a landscape “gardener” or “designer”—despite the fact that he helped to found the American Society of Landscape Architects in 1899 and was elected its president in 1913. Simonds created cemeteries, parks, residences, and subdivisions throughout the Midwest, always trying to maintain the essential qualities of the native landscape. Along with his slightly younger



"The landscape-gardener works with his imagination...he must be a dreamer, a designer, an inventor, a creator—a dreamer more than most designers because it takes years for his designs to develop."

O. C. Simonds
Landscape Gardening (1920)



Above: Detail from the General Plan of (The) Morton Arboretum drawn by O. C. Simonds in 1922. Note the sight lines denoting open views to be kept clear of obstruction.

contemporary, Jens Jensen, Simonds inspired a design philosophy which drew upon the indigenous plant combinations and landscape forms of the region, known today as the "Prairie Style." Simonds expressed his thinking in his book *Landscape Gardening* (1920), and his approach to the Arboretum landscape in the May, 1925, *(The) Morton Arboretum Bulletin of Popular Information*.

In his book he writes, "In an arboretum, the space allotted to each plant or group of plants should be large enough to allow full development for each individual or group and also open surrounding space so that trees and shrubs can be seen to advantage...the land should have varied topography... and each plant should be placed in its most appropriate location in regard to slope, soil, and moisture. The roads and walks in an arboretum should be planned with easy lines and grades...even though an arboretum is primarily a museum, its plans should be influenced by a desire to produce

pleasing landscape effects." Simonds's "General Plan of (The) Morton Arboretum" (1922) shows many roads that are still in existence, as well as the newly dug Lake Marmo, and the earliest collections. The plan illustrates his concern for open vistas. It contains many indications of sight lines to unobstructed vistas in the distance.

Planting began immediately after Simonds drew the plan. In 1922 alone, 138,000 trees and shrubs were planted, and work progressed at a constant pace as Joy Morton, then 67, wished to see significant progress before he died. "An arboretum... should be a work of art," Simonds wrote in 1925, "affecting one like a beautiful painting, a great musical composition, a poem, a magnificent building, or the work of the greatest sculptor...." Before laying out The Morton Arboretum, Simonds had also designed the Nichols Arboretum on the University of Michigan campus where he had attended college and later taught landscape gardening. His most famous design work, however, was Chicago's Graceland Cemetery, where he started in 1878 and continued for the remainder of his life. There, lush plantings of trees, shrubs, grasses, and perennial flowers were layered around winding roads and hidden ponds—perhaps Simonds's ideal for The Morton Arboretum.



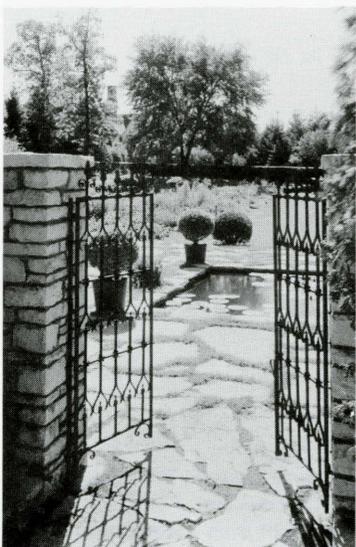
An early view of undeveloped Arboretum land (ca. 1930). The photo was taken from Ridge Road—on the site of the current Appalachian Collection on the east side—looking northwest across the DuPage River to farm land in the distance.



Clarence Godshalk, 1921

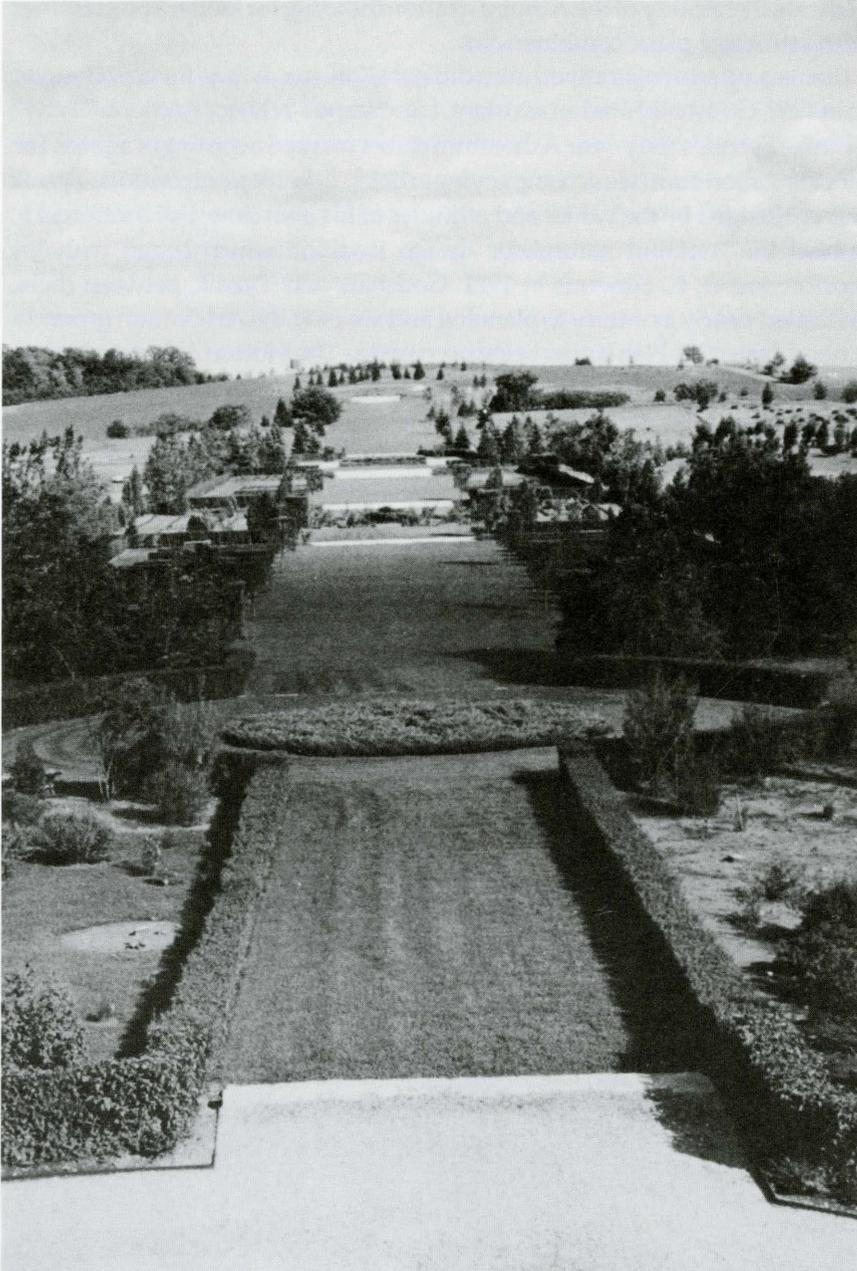
Simonds's assistant, Landscape Architect Clarence Godshalk (1897-1988), arrived at the Arboretum on September 27, 1921. Through hard work and creativity, he earned the position of superintendent the following year. Godshalk, whose first assignment was grubbing out trees with a pick and shovel, soon became a key part of the early success of the Arboretum. A likable young man who possessed the practical knowledge of a farm boy and the creative vision of a trained landscape architect, Godshalk won the respect and trust of Joy Morton, and was gradually given more and more responsibilities. When he arrived, "everything was in farm crops or pasture land except the woodlands and areas being disturbed for the lakes," Godshalk later recalled. While most of his time was spent designing "in the field" and supervising the ambitious pace of work, Godshalk also managed to complete some landscape designs in the early years. On the Thornhill grounds, he designed, for the Morton family, a formal yet characteristically appropriate flower garden. Along Joy Path, he laid out several plantings and a "Form Garden" where plants of various interesting shapes were displayed—perhaps the earliest horticulture collection. Remnants of the Form Garden, which was later discontinued, remain today.

During the late 1920s and early 30s, Godshalk worked closely with Joy Morton and the Arboretum Botanist Heinrich Teuscher. Collections specified on the 1922 Plan were expanded, new collections were introduced, and several experimental forestry plots were added. The Arnold Arboretum in Boston and other botanical institutions sent plants, seeds, and cuttings. The Morton Arboretum was increasingly recognized around the country. By the time of Joy Morton's death in May, 1934, the nucleus of the Arboretum landscape as we know it today was roughly formed. That year, his daughter Jean Morton Cudahy became Chairman of the Board of Trustees and a new era of Arboretum leadership and development began. Later that year, ground was broken for a new Administration Building and the adjacent formal Hedge Garden. As an avid gardener, Mrs. Cudahy initiated many new landscape plantings and collections which were laid out by either Godshalk or Arboretum Botanist E. Lowell Kammerer (1906-1966), another trained landscape architect. After Mr. Morton's death, Godshalk often served as Arboretum host to visiting colleagues, scholars, and dignitaries. He became active in the founding of the American Association of Botanical Gardens and Arboreta (AABGA), and was finally named director of The Morton Arboretum in 1939.



Clarence Godshalk designed this formal garden at Thornhill for the Morton family.

In 1941, a fundamental shift occurred in the organization of collections and landscaping. Unlike most other arboreta, The Morton Arboretum had not been planned along a strictly taxonomic sequence. Working within the framework of woods and fields, plant families were sited where they would grow best. Further, since the Arboretum was planted with dual concern for



The Hedge Garden design was a composite of suggestions by Mrs. Cudahy, architects Holabird & Root, Clarence Godshalk, and E. Lowell Kammerer.

science and art, botanical families had often been interspersed with attractive but unrelated landscaping. Twenty years after the founding of the Arboretum, many plants—though botanically valuable—were proving less desirable from the horticultural standpoint. The decision was made to

For further reading:

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Simonds, O.C. *Landscape Gardening*. The Macmillan Co., 1920.

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Tishler, W. H. (ed.). *American Landscape Architecture: Designers & Places*. The Preservation Press, 1989, pages 74-77.

Zurcher, Suzette Morton. "On Clarence Godshalk's Retirement," *The Morton Arboretum Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 1966, pages 33-34 (this issue contains other related articles).

These publications are available in the Sterling Morton Library.

Right: *Meadow Lake*. In his 1959 *Annual Report to the Board of Trustees*, Clarence Godshalk wrote: "The new Meadow Lake has given me more of a thrill in its creation than anything I have done in the Arboretum development."

dedicate the vicinity of the Administration Building for landscape plantings with attractive plant combinations.

Increasing administrative duties did not allow much time for new designs, so in 1953, Godshalk hired an assistant, Landscape Architect Anthony "Tony" Tyznik. Tyznik's forty-year Arboretum career marked a coming of age for The Morton Arboretum (see accompanying article). Like his predecessors, Tyznik was challenged by the values and attitudes of his own time, but continued to uphold the beautiful naturalistic design tradition which began with Joy Morton and O. C. Simonds in 1921. Godshalk and Tyznik, between them, dedicated nearly a century to planning and shaping the Arboretum grounds. A new Master Site Plan is now being prepared as The Morton Arboretum plans for the next quarter-century, (see page 48). Building upon the strong foundations provided by these men, we go forward with the time-honored commitment to create beautiful landscapes and collections of scientific value—challenged all the while by the values and attitudes of our own time.

The author wishes to thank Carol Doty for her invaluable assistance in preparing this article.

