Northeasterners’ struggles to garden landscape were recapitulated, in a shorter time span and with greater seriousness, in Illinois and Wisconsin. Interest in replicating familiar Anglo-Hudson scenery competed with desires to evoke the regionally distinctive prairie. Landscape historians have focused on the pre-World War I innovations of the Danish German immigrant Chicago park designer Jens Jensen and the American horticulturist Wilhelm Miller. I suggest, however, that Jensen’s and Miller’s “prairie style of landscape gardening” drew so much from German and Olmstedian naturalism, and placed so much emphasis on shrubs and trees, that it contained little that was distinctive. The truly important development occurred, not on Chicago parklands or North Shore estates in the 1910s, but in southern Wisconsin in the 1930s, where Aldo Leopold planted a vast wildflower garden. [p. 187]

Original Wisconsin

Aldo Leopold, Norman Fassett, and Theodore Sperry were the developers of a real prairie style of landscape gardening. Between 1935 and 1940, they transformed about twenty-seven acres of old pasture in Dane County, Wisconsin, a few miles southwest of Madison, into a naturalistic garden of grasses and wildflowers that they called a prairie. This act of historical naming enabled them to resolve the problem faced by landscape gardeners from Downing to Miller. They planted a landscape that was distinguishable from, and an improvement upon, the common vegetation around it, but which was plausibly naturalistic.

The University of Wisconsin Arboretum began as a provincial Olmstedian park project. In 1911 the private Madison Park and Pleasure Drive Association hired the young Massachusetts landscape architect John Nolen to prepare a comprehensive plan for the improvement of their city. Among Nolen’s recommendations was the idea that the city and the university should emulate Boston and Harvard’s partnership of the 1870s by establishing an arboretum-park on the shore of Lake Mendota, west of the city and the university campus. That suggestion went nowhere. The arboretum idea was revived in the late 1920s, however, by local boosters seeking to transform a failed suburban development on the small and marshy Lake Wingra, a few miles southwest of the city. They argued that the state and the university should fund a park, arboretum, and wildlife refuge as part of the ongoing initiative to establish a conservation professorship for Madison-based for-ester and game manager Aldo Leopold. The university approved this plan in 1932, appointed landscape architect William Longenecker to the position of executive
director, and asked Leopold to take on the arboretum’s research directorship as one of his professorial duties.

Disagreements arose immediately over issues of plant choice. Longenecker envisioned a landscape park containing systematically and ecologically ordered displays of all the perennials, shrubs, and forest trees that might prove hardy in Wisconsin. Visitors to the arboretum would be inspired to beautify their own properties, and would learn what different ornamentals and woodland trees looked like and which were worthwhile. Leopold wanted to send the visiting public a different message. He was uninterested in what he considered merely “a ‘collection’ of imported trees.” Instead he wanted to show how much the state’s vegetational quality had declined since the 1830s, and to provide a vision for improvement in the future. Advised by botany professor Norman Fassett, he proposed that the arboretum should be “a reconstruction of original Wisconsin.” It would be “a bench mark, a datum point, in the long and laborious job of building a permanent and mutually beneficial relationship between civilized men and a civilized landscape.” This disagreement was resolved by dividing the arboretum into areas controlled by either Longenecker or Leopold.

For Leopold and Fassett, original Wisconsin was an essentially steady state, consisting of forest, wetland, and prairie, that had existed prior to Anglo-American settlement. (They passed over the major presence of Indians in Dane County during the Woodland Period, evident in the number of mounds—over one thousand, more than anywhere else in the United States.) Creating replicas of these plant communities on a few hundred acres would require a number of different kinds of effort. Sections with trees could redevelop on their own if there were fire suppression and culling of undesirable species. The right mix of wetland vegetation depended largely on
steam dredges that could change the monotonous marsh into a more varied landscape of islands and lagoons. Shoreline areas with different slopes and soil compositions could then be planted with cattails and pondweeds that would attract wildfowl.

The real gardening challenge, however, was to create a “Wisconsin prairie” (the present-day Curtis Prairie). The basic prerequisite was labor. In 1934 the arboretum received a windfall when the state established a work relief camp for transients on its grounds. Then, when complaints arose about the behavior of these migrants and hoboes, the university persuaded the National Park Service to take over the camp and use it for the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) (see Figure 7.9). The CCC recruited a more tractable pool of young local men, and its involvement enabled the university to hire the young National Park Service plant ecologist Theodore Sperry as foreman. “Camp Madison” averaged about two hundred residents during the second half of the 1930s, at a cost to the federal government of more than two million dollars.

The first step in the creation of a Wisconsin prairie park was to clear existing old-field growth. Tree control was a straightforward matter of destroying saplings, but was complicated by Fassett and Sperry’s interest in leaving one large tree standing to evoke early settler accounts of “oak openings”; each year laborers had to pull up a crop of squirrel- and bird-distributed oak seedlings. The major problem was quack grass. Sperry and his workers sought to eliminate this Old World pasture mainstay and agricultural weed by plowing deeply, harrowing to dry out the rhizomes, and then replanting with clover to smother remaining growth. Irritating plants such as nettles and thistles were also a concern, without regard to their geographic origin. Finally, Leopold sought to suppress high-density populations (“thickets”) of plants that were too common, such as goldenrods and asters.

Once the ground was cleared, the major issues involved plant choice. In principle, Fassett and Sperry’s palette could include any of the species...
associated with prairies in or near Wisconsin during the previous century. A present-day list of such plants totals between 340 and 550. But prairie gardeners in the 1930s were neither capable of nor interested in cultivating such a diverse flora. Sperry’s planting list from 1935 to 1939 consisted of about fifty species. In both his exclusions and featured species, his goal was to plant an assemblage that would not be confused with common or despised pasture.

The largest category of excluded species consisted of the dozens of plants that were small, had inconspicuous flowers, or were visually generic. There was minimal interest in devoting labor and space to vegetation that added little to the field’s visual composition. More straightforwardly, Sperry did not replant the nettles and thistles that had been removed when the land was cleared, nor did he introduce additional species with similar properties. While some of the more memorable native species that people encountered on Wisconsin prairies were greenbrier (*Smilax lasioneura*), prickly pear (*Opuntia macrorhiza*), and poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*), they were not part of the arboretum plantings. The most interesting group of exclusions was of species poisonous to livestock. Prairie larkspur (*Delphinium carolinianum* subsp. *virescens*), sundial lupine (*Lupinus perennis*), and death camas (*Zigadenus elegans*) were all visually impressive Wisconsin natives. But the prosperous rural citizens whose sensibilities Leopold wanted to touch would not have appreciated a field filled with seed-bearing specimens of the weeds they had worked for a century to eradicate.

Sperry wisely emphasized familiar species that would, under proper cultivation, provide a spectacular mass display. His most frequently planted species was turkey-foot grass (*Andropogon gerardii*, now commonly called big bluestem). The most-planted forbs were stiff sunflower (*Helianthus rigidus*) and three species of *Silphium* (including compass plant and rosinweed). Others included blazing star (*Liatris*), prairie goldenrod (*Solidago rigid*), prairie rose (*Rosa carolina*), prairie bush clover (*Lespedeza capitata*), prairie coneflower (*Lepachys pinnata*), and prairie painted cup (*Castilleja sessiliflora*). They were either large (big bluestem, compass plant, and stiff sunflower could all grow ten feet high in a good summer), had conspicuous flowers (blazing star, rose, coneflower), or unusual characteristics (indicated in names such as compass plant and painted cup). While Wisconsinites might know these plants, they would have seen them only in small populations or in fields browsed by livestock. At the arboretum, by contrast, they were able to display their capabilities and to reinforce each other visually as elements of a multiacre garden. People who visited this landscape, especially in the peak summer vacation months of July and August, would experience a wonderful wildflower garden in the style of a prairie. It was both easy and pleasant to imagine that this was original Wisconsin.