Instead of our usual mountain areas, this month we present:

**Historic State Parks**

The recent growth in environmental awareness across the globe is not a new idea. Creation of a national park system took root in the mid-1800s, but with one significant difference from the Old World’s park system. Throughout Europe, nature parks were reserved for private hunting and resorting activities, activities of the elite. In North America, private landowners were opening their scenic properties for public use. The concept of a New World park system, providing public land for use by everyone, was evolving but proponents struggled with gaining legislative support.

By 1872, the movement was well under way, and gained further support with President Ulysses S. Grant’s creation of our nation’s first park, Yellowstone National Park.

In the early 1900s, Jens Jensen (above) and others founded The Prairie Club, an organization leading excursions to some of Illinois’ most scenic sites, including Starved Rock, which became a state park in 1911.

—Jens Jensen, 1926

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(Courtesy Lincoln Memorial Gardens, Springfield.)

Story By Cory Pelc

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Interest Builds in Illinois

Around the turn of the 20th century, the concept of dedicated parklands was gaining momentum in Illinois. Jens Jensen (1860-1951), a landscape architect who designed many Chicago-area parks, was one of the leaders in the creation of state park and forest reserve systems in Illinois.

In 1903, Jensen and fellow architect Dwight Perkins began to develop a plan to provide for natural preserves (not to be confused with the present-day designated nature preserves) throughout northeast Illinois. A product of this collaboration were “Saturday Afternoon Walking Trips,” outings that attracted crowds of 200 or more people. Because of the rapid growth and interest in these events, a separate organization, “The Prairie Club,” was formed to manage the excursions.

One popular early destination for the Prairie Club was Starved Rock along the Illinois River, featured a stand of rare, native white pines. Many local citizens considered Starved Rock worthy of state preservation. The Rock River area around Oregon was another site favored by club members.

The Prairie Club pushed the legislature for a forest preserve bill, allowing Starved Rock and other areas across the state to be saved. As a result, Starved Rock was acquired by the state in 1911. From 1911 to 1925, at least 24 bills were introduced in the General Assembly for purchase of 13 specific sites. None of the four proposed scenic sites but four of the nine proposed historical sites were passed in the 14-year span.

Determined to make an influence, in April 1913 Jensen invited a group of influential men and women from the Chicago area and downstate Illinois to meet and discuss a conservation policy that would protect tracts of Illinois with historic and scenic value. This group formed a new organization, “Friends of Our Native Landscape,” and in 1921 published a report describing scenic sites worthy of preservation for their natural landscapes.

Extensive lotus beds drew visitors to Grass Lake (Chain O’Lakes State Park, left).

Historic (Fort Kaskaskia, above) and scenic (Cave-in-Rock) sites dominated Illinois’ park system until the 1930s when recreation became a focus.
Progression of Purposes

Preserving History

Until 1927, historical sites were the focus of all parks acquired by the state. Illinois’ first state-owned park, Fort Massac, celebrates its 100th anniversary this year. Starved Rock State Park was acquired in 1911 to preserve its rich Native American and French history. Fort Chartres, Lincoln’s New Salem, Fort Creve Coeur and Cahokia Mounds were added by 1925.

Scenic Movement

Although legislation allowed for the acquisition of scenic sites, not until 1925 did the idea of scenic parks gain general acceptance. A letter from C.R. Miller, Director for the Division of Parks and Memorials, to a person who suggested the acquisition of a historical site, shows that the park idea had started to catch on with officials as well: “While I fully appreciate that we should select historical parks...it seems to me we should try and provide a few playgrounds for the people of the State.”

The 1925 General Assembly clearly stated that scenic land was to be considered for incorporation into the park system. Within a few years, Giant City, Cave-in-Rock and Mississippi Palisades were designated as Illinois state parks.

Recreation

A 1931 amendment to the forest preserve act called for recognition and authorization of three kinds of parks—scenic, historical and recreational. The importance of conserving the original character of the landscape was stressed, and criteria established for designating public-use lands. A continued emphasis on historic sites was featured; however, stipulations for lands with signifi-

In the 1930s, development of new parks stemmed from the need to provide easily accessible outdoor recreation throughout the state.
Now 100 years old, Illinois' state park system contains sites of scenic, historical and recreational value (Pere Marquette State Park, left; Starved Rock State Park, below).