

Samuel Parsons, Landscape Architect

SAMUEL PARSONS FINDS XANADU IN SAN DIEGO

by Richard Amero

In 1889, nursery woman Kate Sessions suggested that the City of San Diego should appoint a professional landscape architect to design City Park, a park close to San Diego's downtown business section which, because of encroachments by Russ High School and an Orphans' and a Women's Home, was less than its often quoted 1400 acres. Three years later, in 1892, the City of San Diego gave Sessions the use of 36 acres in the northwest corner of City Park on which she put a 10-acre nursery. Pursuant to her agreement with the City, she was to donate 300 trees and plants to the City yearly for parks and streets and to plant permanently another 100 trees. When she moved her nursery to Mission Hills in 1903, Sessions left a colorful array of plants on the northwest side of City Park from Palm to Upas Streets, including Monterey Cypress, Monterey Pine, Guadeloupe Cypress, Blackwood Acacia, and Cedar of Lebanon trees, Grevillea thelmaniana, Leptospermum, and Myrtus Communis shrubs, and Richardia africana, Watsonia ardernei, Watsonia augusta, and Vallota purpurea flowering plants.

T. S. Brandegee, a botanist who had studied the flora of Baja California, and others joined Sessions in her campaign for a professional park design. However, she knew more than her supporters what it took to develop a public park. She also knew that she could not do it, nor could the engineer and former mayor E. M Capps, who wanted the job.

When in 1902, the San Diego Chamber of Commerce formed a Park Improvement Committee, the Chamber appointed Kate Sessions, Julius Wangenheim, Captain W. R. Maize, D. F. Garrettson, William Clayton, W. L. Frevert, E. E. White, Mrs. Ada Smith, and George W. Marston as members.

Sessions convinced other committee members that a professional landscape architect should be selected to draw up plans for the City Park. She wrote to John McLaren, superintendent of Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, asking for advice. In his reply, McLaren suggested that Sessions collaborate with local engineers in laying out the park, as he—a gardener—presumably did in the design of Golden Gate Park. Rejecting this do-it-yourself approach, the Committee considered appointing either Guy Lowell, George Hansen, J. Clyde Powers, or Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. and John Charles Olmsted. to design the park.

McLaren had second thoughts about his advice for while visiting San Diego, on September 20, 1902, he recommended the Committee appoint either the Olmsted Brothers, Warren H. Manning, or Samuel Parsons, Jr. to do the work. To get the project going, he drew up a rough plan for curvilinear roads on the west side of the

park.

Meanwhile the Park Improvement Committee had hired Mary B. Coulston, then living in Livermore, California, to be its secretary and to write articles for the newspapers supporting the improvement of City Park. Coulston, who had been an editor of *Garden and Forest*, possessed an extensive knowledge of parks in the United States and Europe. She urged the appointment of Samuel Parsons, Jr., whom she knew from her work with *Garden and Forest*. She arranged for George W. Marston, a San Diego merchant who had volunteered to pay a minimum of \$4,000 and a maximum of \$5,000 for the services of a landscape architect, to meet Parsons while on a business trip to New York City. The meeting was favorable and Parsons was hired.

Landscape architect Samuel Parsons, Jr. (1844-1923) had written articles showing that he was familiar with Calvert Vaux's and Frederick Law Olmsted's joint designs for Central Park in New York City and Prospect Park in Brooklyn, and with Olmsted's designs for Boston's "Emerald Necklace" and for Mount Royal Park in Montreal. Parsons had worked as Vaux's assistant from around 1879 to 1884 and as his partner from 1887 to 1895, the year Vaux died. When in 1881, Vaux became Landscape Architect for the Department of Parks of New York City, Parsons joined him in the unpaid position of superintendent of planting. He found Vaux to be a passionate believer in the value of naturalistic parks, but reticent about pushing himself forward. Despite his subdued disposition, Vaux was as involved in the development of public parks as was his friend Frederick Law Olmsted.

Vaux came to the United States from England at the invitation of American landscape designer Andrew Jackson Downing, for whom he designed buildings and fixtures for the grounds of Hudson River estates and from whom he absorbed egalitarian social principles he would later put to use as an independent landscape architect. The knowledge Vaux brought with him to the United States of the royal (former hunting) parks of London and of the asymmetrical, country landscapes that Lancelot ("Capability") Brown and Humphrey Repton created in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were more transferrable to the sequential spaces in public parks than were the cramped lawns, artificial flower beds, and scattering of specimen trees Downing planted on the estates of his Hudson River clients. "To civilize and refine the national character," Downing wanted to equip the "ideal" public park he never had an opportunity to design with statues, monuments and buildings, a tropical garden under glass, a zoological garden, and with labeled exotic trees and plants.

When he joined Calvert Vaux to create the prizewinning "Greensward" design for Central Park in 1858, Frederick Law Olmsted's knowledge of parks was limited to observations he had made of Birkenhead, a 120-acre park of meadows, groves, lakes and paths near Liverpool, England, designed by Joseph Paxton in 1844, which was distinctive because of its separations of through and inner park traffic of carriages and pedestrians. As residents of Birkenhead had paid to build the park with tax money, the Town's Commissioners dedicated the land to public use. Following the example of Regent's Park in London, Birkenhead Commissioners amortized the costs of

developing the park by selling home-building lots surrounding the site. One of the chief reasons for developing public parks from that time onward was that they would enhance property values and increase city revenues.

Vaux helped to increase Olmsted's understanding of the informal elements of English-park design. Knowing he had much to learn, Olmsted revisited Birkenhead Park in 1859 and consulted with Adolphe Alphand, designer, between 1853 and 1870, of a modified English-style Bois de Boulogne in Paris.

Having been given the title of "Architect-in-Charge," Olmsted was theoretically Vaux's superior, a fact he impressed upon Vaux, a man whose skills in the laying out of landscape elements were equal to his own. Vaux and Olmsted and most of the landscape architects who learned their profession by working with them—including Samuel Parsons—opposed putting buildings, monuments, statues and restaurants in the parks they designed as these reminders of urban life would "make patchwork of the essential features of the natural landscape." Possessed of many well-placed friends and of an easy fluency in speaking and writing, Olmsted so overshadowed Vaux that commentators referred to Olmsted as the designer of the parks that he and Vaux created together.

Having been Superintendent of Planting for Central Park in 1892, Superintendent of Parks from 1894 to 1897, and Landscape Architect for Greater New York from 1901 to 1911, Samuel Parsons appreciated Vaux's and Olmsted's designs for Central and Prospect Parks. He induced the Park Board to reappoint Vaux as Landscape Architect, and approved additions to the park's design carefully to avoid injuring the harmony and unity of the scheme Vaux and Olmsted had created thirty years before. Through gentle persuasion, he persuaded the family of Ulysses S. Grant to put General Grant's tomb in an isolated plaza off Riverside Drive rather than in Central Park.

Unlike the Civil War and post-Civil War years, when an elite class determined what should go into public parks, politicians and working class people at the beginning of the twentieth century wanted more active and fewer passive recreational facilities in public parks. Parsons understood that the layout of parks had to change to reflect changes in fashion and social conditions, and he designed small parks in New York City—Seward, De Witt Clinton, and Jefferson—to accommodate active and passive recreation. But he clung to the ideal of a park consisting of broad meadows, sinuous paths, calm pools of reflecting water, and scattered groves of shady and screening trees that Vaux and Olmsted had instilled in him.

Vaux's and Olmsted's concept of a park that would combine placid pastoral elements and rugged, varied and energetic "picturesque" elements was simple. A pastoral park consisted of wide expanses of comparatively level grassland on which sheep grazed, bordered by clusters of trees placed to create an illusion of indefinite space. The interplay of pastoral and arboreal elements provided city people with views of nature they could not find in neighborhoods where they lived and worked. By offering them free, open, clean and beautiful spaces that were the opposites of the squalid, congested,

polluted, and monotonous spaces in nineteenth-century cities, public parks gave people a measure of solace and enjoyment. When available, picturesque elements, such as mountains, rivers, valleys, canyons, crags, pinnacles, panoramic views, waterfalls, and ruins of castles and temples brought to viewers a sense of the overwhelming majesty of nature.

Like Andrew Jackson Downing, Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted, Samuel Parsons, Jr. embraced the ideals of the Romantic movement accepted by artists and intellectuals in the early half of the nineteenth century. Parsons thought parks with country- like scenery were poetic in the images they presented and in the emotions they inspired. He quoted approvingly Frederick Law Olmsted's words in praise of the English nature poet William Wordsworth. Downing, Vaux, Olmsted and Parsons shared Wordsworth's belief that natural scenery through its beauty and power could enrich the lives of people.

Not wanting to change the parks he had inherited, Parsons fought those who would. He did not like to compromise with people who put their special projects ahead of the parks' romantic image. He deplored the deterioration of Vaux's and Olmsted's parks caused by negligence and false economy.

When in October 1902 Parsons accepted the commission to design San Diego's City Park, his landscaping firm had more than enough business. Due to his training at Yale University and the education he had received from his father, Samuel Parsons, Sr., a noted horticulturist, he had a firm grasp of the identity and nature of many plant species and he was confident that his abilities as a landscape architect were as good as or superior to those of his competitors. While he idolized Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., he was less charitable toward John Charles Olmsted and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., the stepson and natural son of their father. The Olmsted firm was receiving considerable applause at the time for its contribution to the 1901 McMillan Commission's plan for a landscaped mall and park system in Washington, D.C. whereas the U.S. Senate had initially chosen Parsons to draw up the plans.

As he had shown in the articles he wrote for publication, Parsons would not be repeating the formulas used by his predecessors. He would adapt the ideas and principles of Downing, Vaux and Olmsted to new conditions. San Diego Park Improvement Committee members were getting a flexible designer who would cooperate with them, but who would also differ with them when principles of good design were at stake. The most likely source of conflict would hinge on what should go in a public park. How "accessory" were the "accessories" that would inevitably be added to Parsons' plans?

Parsons became lyrical in December 1902 when he described his first impressions of City Park. He was fortunate enough to see the park after the winter rains had brought forth a mantle of wild flowers, including native Yellow Poppies, Tidy-Tips, *Bearia chrysostoma*, *Brodiaea*, Golden Violets and nonnative Mustards, Oxalises, Foxgloves,

and Brome Grasses. He wrote:

"The keynote of the treatment of the park is to preserve the natural beauty that exists, by simple treatment, and to avoid marring grand and impressive scenery by introducing sensational and startling effects."

Parsons knew he had been given an opportunity to create a park that would be "a successful rival in some particulars of the parks of the world." Like Riverside Drive in New York City and Mount Royal in Montreal, but on an even wider scale, City Park opened such amazing views of the horizons that it called for a reversal of Vaux's and Olmsted's approach, which was to exclude evidences of the outside world. As with the park in Silesia designed by Prince Puckler von Muskau, the outside world would be incorporated into City Park as an extension of its scenery. If the park would not become a complete antithesis to the City, the views it afforded of mesas, oceans and mountains were natural and they were not obscured by smog and by construction.

Next to sweeping views that he claimed lifted man's imagination into vaster spaces than he had ever known before, Parsons was captivated by spring flowers as plentiful as stars over the desert on a moonless night, not realizing that after a few months the flowers would be gone and the land would become brown and sere. Canyons with a variety of contours and shades of colors vied with the flowers for attention. Parsons said the canyons should not be scarred by grading, not realizing that slopes had already been scraped and bottoms excavated for street fills in downtown San Diego. In his remarks, Parsons ignored the pound in Pound Canyon, the power magazine in Powder House Canyon, and the rifle range in today's Gold Gulch Canyon. He was, however, aware of the presence of these intrusions and he left them out in his map of suggested park improvements.

Parsons' reading often distorted his perceptions. Consequently his comparisons were occasionally incongruous as when he compared the Coronado Islands, visible on clear days from the heights of City Park, to "the stately pleasure dome of Xana Du [sic] decreed by Kubla Khan and seen by Coleridge in his opium dreams" and the morning and evening mists in the canyons to "a thin garment that clings like a diaphanous Greek gown, giving a charm of color without obscuring the loveliness of form."

As is usual whenever an outsider is appointed to give San Diego his advice, local politicians, business people, gardeners, and clients for the work objected. Prominent among the objectors was G. P. Hall, an inveterate writer of letters to the San Diego Union, who claimed local people knew the climate, soil conditions and plant life in San Diego better than anyone coming from the East . . . this, although most people living in San Diego at the time had come from the Mid-West and the East. Hall thought the City should issue bonds for park improvement, hire local people to do the work, and dismiss the Park Improvement Committee.

Parsons remained above the fray. During his four visits to San Diego, he stayed briefly in the City and gave the execution of his plans to George Cooke, his assistant, who

remained in the city for weeks at a time between 1903 and 1907. In 1907 he moved permanently to San Diego to take on the jobs of park consultant for the City of San Diego and road engineer for the County of San Diego.

Parsons did most of his work in his New York office using contour maps sent to him by the San Diego Bureau of Public Works. No matter how loud grumbling in San Diego became, he could not hear it. When local carping became too loud, Kate Sessions, George W. Marston, and Mary B. Coulston emerged to defend Parsons' plans.

Repairing damage done to a southwest corner of the park, from Date to Fir Streets, in an area now known as Marston's Point, was Parsons first order of business. Here cuts and excavations to fill a canyon on Fifth Avenue had left steep cliffs and deep holes covering seven acres or more. In his "History of San Diego City Parks," George W. Marston recorded that one day as he watched work crews dig, drill and blast to break down the cliffs and even the surface, he was joined by a friend who said, "Marston, you better give this up. It's a natural home for cactus, coyotes, and jackrabbits. It ain't no park and never will be." To which Marston silently demurred, taking comfort in the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah that the desert shall "blossom as the rose."

While attending a summer school at the University of California in Berkeley, Mary B. Coulston died on July 17, 1904. Kate Sessions buried her ashes under a Cedar of Lebanon tree in the park she had championed and loved.

In the Spring of 1905 property owners wanted to widen the boulevard Parsons planned for the southwest side of the park, after its ravaged surface has been smoothed, and to extend it along the sides of their lots, thus making a jog in the boulevard and usurping park frontage. Seeing a threat to the entrance Parsons planned for this area, Kate Sessions defended Parsons' plans. She repeated the argument in January 1906 when the same property owners, having obtained their boulevard alignment, now wanted to eliminate the shrubs Parsons intended to plant at the southwest entrance to the park. In her bluff manner, Kate challenged San Diego City Councilmen to prove their manhood by preparing an ordinance to permit the shrubs to remain. Whatever the status of their manhood, the Councilmen sided with the property owners.

While Parsons was working on plans for the park, George W. Marston, George Burnham and the administrators of the Children's Home, Russ High School, and the State Normal School called on him to produce plans for their estates and grounds. More people began promoting the improvement of City Park. The Fraternal Orders of the Woodmen and Foresters planted 600 eucalyptus trees at the south end of Pound Canyon on July 4, 1903. They were followed on March 17, 1905 by San Diego school children, who planted 60 cypress and pine trees on the upper west slopes of Pound Canyon in a well-publicized Arbor Day Ceremony.

Besides George W. Marston's clandestine donations, the Park Improvement Committee raised \$11,081 in subscriptions for park improvement, after which the San Diego City

Council, on April 17, 1905, replaced the Committee with an officially appointed Board of Park Commissioners. So that the work of the new Board would not be vain, the Council, on June 17, 1905, amended the City Charter to provide between five and eight cents of each \$100 of assessed property valuation for park improvements and maintenance.

Parsons prepared directives and two formal versions of his plans, the first in 1905 and the second in 1910. There were minor differences between the two versions. Like the English landscape painters John Constable and J. M. W. Turner, Parsons thought a natural landscape was beautiful in proportion to the number of elements the artist left out. To back up this belief, he quoted John Ruskin's dictum that there should be nothing in a natural landscape made by man "that does not contribute to the effect of the whole."

Guided by a cardinal principle enunciated by the poet Alexander Pope that each landscape or garden has a special genius that must be respected, Parsons anticipated the findings of contemporary ecologists. Like twentieth-century landscape architect Ian McHarg, he insisted that landscape architects should follow nature's lead by making high hills higher, rugged slopes more rugged, and deep valleys deeper. Because he knew that whenever people disregarded imperatives of climate and topography, the results were ludicrous and disastrous, he objected to creating streams and lakes when there was no natural flow and to filling in canyons and valleys made by ancient upheavals and the accession and recession of primeval waters.

In his working instructions and his 1905 formal plan, Parsons proposed that peripheral roads and bands of trees should define the park's borders. In contrast to straight peripheral roads that would carry through traffic, roads and pathways within the park would wind around natural contours, would open surprise views, and would pass along highlands at the edges of canyons. Recognizing that rainfall was scant in Southern California, he advised planting water-consuming grasses in small quantities at park entrances. He suggested naming these entrances after trees grouped there, such as Pepper Tree, Blackwood Acacia, Monterey Pine, and Torrey Pine. To accentuate wild flowers and to dramatize vistas, he proposed keeping trees on the mesas low. Nevertheless, to provide enclosure and to frame views, he would allow eucalyptuses at strategic points on mesas and highlands.

Because cuts and fills would mar contrasts between mesas and canyons, he recommended they be avoided. To intensify the sense of depth in canyons, he would plant trees in the canyons rather than the uplands. These trees would become taller as they approached the rims of the canyons. While having an unfavorable view toward lakes and ponds (because of his fear of stagnant water and because San Diego had enough water in its harbor and bay), he acknowledged that they would supplement the scenery and provide water for irrigation. Without being specific as to species, he advocated preserving native plants "where they made the best display."

Sensing that gardens of specimen cacti would be artificial creations, he, nonetheless,

proposed placing these gardens where they did not interfere with the design of the park as a whole. Because of their incompatibility with the design and function of a country-like park, he stressed that flower beds and buildings should be few and they should be in the southern portion of the park.

Not all of Parsons' proposals were reconcilable. For example, it is difficult to see how indigenous planting could be preserved while new plants and trees were added to canyons or how high roads at the crests of canyons related to contour roads within the canyons. By "preservation" Parsons did not mean that existing conditions would stay as they are. Rather the landscape architect would intensify existing natural beauties. Contemporary landscape architects would interpret this dictum to mean that some adaptable exotic species would be added and some existing, but less appealing, species removed to create more pleasing aesthetic effects.

An omen of what was to happen to Parsons' plans occurred in September 1903 when George W. Marston and T. S. Brandegee tried to persuade Gifford Pinchot, of the U.S. Bureau of Forestry, to establish a eucalyptus forest on the east side of the park. Eucalyptuses were mistakenly thought to have commercial value for their medicinal properties and for use as railroad ties. Pinchot informed the naive park advocates that his department was concerned with preserving forests for commercial harvesting on the high slopes of watersheds. Marston, who was usually a champion of professional planning, chose in this instance to stray from the path.

George Cooke's dissolution of his partnership with Samuel Parsons in 1907 and his acceptance of the position of park superintendent and of commissions from private and public clients in San Diego may have been the result of the Park Commissioners trying to eliminate a duplication of landscaping services. By persuading Cooke to move to San Diego, the Commissioners separated him and themselves from further connection with Samuel Parsons. The development of the park was thus left in Cooke's hands. While Cooke did not depart entirely from Parsons' plans, he planned roads through Pound and Switzer Canyons and a diagonal road heading in a northeasterly direction from 18th Street on the south to the vicinity of 28th and Upas Streets on the north. He also promoted a plan to put deer and caribou in the canyons. Cooke appears to have been more of an engineer than a landscape architect. His specialty must have been plotting roads as the County of San Diego hired him for that purpose. For a road to be efficient and economical, it must be direct and it must be straight, the opposite of the roads Parsons wanted in City Park.

Ephraim W. Morse, who in 1868 urged the Board of Trustees of the Town of San Diego to set aside land for a city park, and George W. Marston noticed Cooke's tendency to run roughshod over existing terrain with a through park road from San Diego High School to University Heights that entailed the removal of trees and rocks from the Howard Tract, an area of the park landscaped in 1890.

George Cooke died on August 6, 1908, while on a road surveying expedition for the County of San Diego, the result of injuries sustained after the horse hauling his

carriage bolted and he was thrown into a ravine near Alpine.

At the urging of Kate Sessions and with the consent of Parsons, who made room for them in his 1905 map of improvements, the San Diego Board of Public Works planted a double row of *Cocos plumosa* palms on each side of Park Avenue (today Sixth Avenue) between Juniper and Upas Streets in 1912. *Cocos plumosa*s were coming into vogue as a signature tree for Southern California. The palms came from Brazil. They are known today as Queen Palms with the scientific name *Arecastrum romanzoffianum*.

In response to a commission from Marston to prepare a plan for San Diego parks that would parallel John Nolen's 1908 plan for the City's harbor and highways, Parsons returned to San Diego in June 1910. Marston may have chosen Parsons instead of Nolen for the task because he realized that designing parks was not Nolen's strength or he may have thought that Parsons had a keener understanding of Southern California's soil and climate than Nolen. Parsons' bill for his services came to \$400, with half of this sum being paid by Marston and the other half by the Board of Park Commissioners.

Parsons expressed his pleasure at the road building done in the park, so perhaps there was no disagreement between Cooke and himself on the matter. He repeated that eucalyptuses should be planted around the park to frame views of the ocean. When used in this manner, their height would be an attribute rather than a defect. He suggested putting a playground near Kalmia and Maple Streets, advocated the planting of pepper trees, and hoped a means could be devised to secure water for the park at low cost. To the chagrin of palm fanciers, he recommended planting only conifers and deciduous trees within the park, adding that these should not be mixed. He also rejected coastal live oaks, except a small grove between Pound Canyon and the Central Park Boulevard that he approved planting as a memorial to the late George Cooke. Palms in the Golden Hill section were to remain, though Cooke had advised moving some of them to enhance views.

Parsons' new preference for tall trees on the highlands rather than in the canyons and valleys is so contrary to his original advice, an observer might conclude he had forgotten his former position. He would surround the eucalyptuses with pepper and camphor trees to hide their stems, not realizing that plants cannot grow near eucalyptuses because of the toxicity of the soil. He said there should be no fixed distance between the eucalyptuses which corresponds to his previous advice to keep them a good distance apart, according to their size.

While sufficient time had not elapsed to assess the capabilities of new trees planted in the park, Parsons claimed the *Grevillea*, Blackwood Acacias, Monterey Pines, and Monterey Cypress had proven to be brittle and messy and their shapes did not harmonize with the informal character of the park. Not only should no more of them be planted, but those in the park should be "eliminated." Bluegrass was also undesirable as a ground cover because of the expense involved in its maintenance. Where ground

cover was needed, native grasses, such as *Lipsea repens*, vines and ice plants should be used. The park still lacked enough contour roads and paths to lead people to recreation areas and view promontories.

Parsons got in a complaint about the upcoming Panama-California Exposition; however, it was so muted that people who read his report probably missed its impact.

"A world's fair, astonishing and impressive as it may be, with its effective showing of the accomplishments of art and science, could never in the end satisfy a city with its permanent results as would a fully developed park like that of San Diego."

In a controversial section of his 1910 report, Parsons advocated the planting of a small rather than a large number of trees, which harkened back to his 1905 recommendation to keep the uplands open so that distant views could amplify the park's scenery. He concluded with a statement sure to rile members of the San Diego Floral Association.

"The park is not a botanical garden or experimental station, but a spot of great natural beauty, which it is desired to make accessible by roads and paths, and to ornament with trees and shrubs in the most economical and effective manner possible."

As might be expected, members of the San Diego Floral Association complained about the rejection of a botanical garden. Their reasoning that Parsons was a foreigner who could not understand San Diego had its humorous aspects as when L. A. Blochman and A. D. Robinson wrote that because they were residents of San Diego, they were able to know that the plants of the Arctic and the Tropics could grow side by side in the city. This contention was so absurd that Kate Sessions refuted it in a letter to the newspapers.

Parsons' suggestion to rename City Park in honor of Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo was the only recommendation in the 1910 report that city officials took seriously. Cabrillo, a Portuguese-born navigator, landed at San Diego on September 28, 1542, thus becoming the first European to visit the coasts of California. While this choice of a name was not to be, Parsons' advocacy of a new name led, on October 27, 1910, to the San Diego Park Commission giving the park the name of "Balboa," after Vasco Nunez de Balboa, who, on September 29, 1513, saw the Pacific Ocean from a hill in Panama.

San Diegans were so caught up in preparations for the Panama-California Exposition that they paid scant attention to Parsons' plans. The Exposition was to be in a southern portion of the park, in an area Parsons had said was suitable for buildings, though of a more modest character than the flamboyant and massive buildings required by an exposition.

On November 9, 1910, the Panama-California Exposition Corporation appointed John Charles Olmsted landscape architect for the Exposition and for the park as a whole

instead of Samuel Parsons, because Olmsted had experience and a reputation for laying out successful expositions. While Olmsted's responsibilities for planning and planting the park were not listed in his contract, Olmsted and James Frederick Dawson, his assistant, prepared tree planting programs for the east side, details of which are on file at the Olmsted Historic Site in Brookline, Massachusetts. Dawson occupied his spare time grading land for the roads and paths George Cooke had planned for the northeast side.

Olmsted expected that his choice of east side plants would harmonize with the plants Parsons and Cooke had laid out on the west side of the park. He hoped, however, to leave the undeveloped canyons in their native condition "as much as possible." If he used grass at all, it would be near the buildings or in formal gardens. Main exposition buildings would be on the terraced slopes of Inspiration Point, north of the San Diego High School. An amusement section, at the south entrance to Pound Canyon, would do away with the eucalyptuses planted by the Woodmen and Foresters on July 4, 1903.

Olmsted changed the name of Pound Canyon to Cabrillo Canyon, as it is called today. Contrary to his stated intention of letting the canyons alone, he planned to put a terraced "Spanish" (more accurately Italian) garden in a canyon between the mesa and the south exposition site, currently the planned site of a Japanese garden, with a reservoir at its north end. He found space for a Greek theater in a ravine on land west of the San Diego High School. Olmsted must have consulted Parsons' plans. However, except for the road systems, a today unknown number of carriage and pedestrian bridges spanning canyons on the east side, paths and plants on the west side, and pepper trees on the central mesa so little had been done to carry out Parsons' plans that Olmsted had a nearly clean slate with which to work.

As the Olmsted firm had experience preparing sites for expositions, going back to the World Columbian Exposition of 1893, John Olmsted was more adaptable to the Exposition Corporation's ideas than Parsons would have been. But, when the leaders of the Exposition decided to move the fair onto the central mesa, Olmsted could not countenance what he predicted would be the ruination of Balboa Park and, on September 2, 1911, he resigned his firm's commission.

While he left San Diego before final Exposition plans could be carried out, Olmsted prepared a scheme to connect Park (Sixth) Avenue from Date to Juniper Streets that involved the filling in of 38,000 cubic yards of dirt. The area was the site of Mulvey Canyon, named after James Mulvey who laid out paths, put in bridges, and planted acacia, cypress, pine and Carob trees (also known as *Ceratonia siliqua*) on the inclined surfaces. Kate Sessions may have contributed to the planting. In any case, she chose the same exotic, water-sparing plants she had planted in the northwest corner of the park to ornament the canyon's east border. Park enthusiasts regarded Mulvey Canyon as a bower of delight and as a harbinger of what the entire park would become. The enthusiasts, Kate Sessions, and property owners next to the canyon objected to the canyon's destruction. Responding to the wishes of those who wanted a north-south Sixth Avenue connection to the Laurel Street entrance to the Panama-California

Exposition, the Superior Court of San Diego dissolved a restraining order against filling in the canyon on March 3, 1913. Shortly thereafter, Frank P. Allen, director of works for the Panama-California Exposition, supervised the construction of a through road.

Hearing of Olmsted's resignation, Parsons, on September 20, 1911, wrote to George W. Marston inquiring about being made landscape architect of the Exposition. As an Olmsted supporter, Marston had lost his influence. Therefore, he could not have secured an appointment for Parsons even if he so desired. Parsons' motive in asking for the appointment was not clear. Perhaps he wanted to salvage what he could of his plans or perhaps he wanted to gain one on his competitors.

Parsons' September 1911 letter to George W. Marston and a follow-up visit in January 1912 marked the end of his involvement with San Diego. He probably looked back with regret over the collapse of his plans. If his romantic schemes had been carried out, San Diego would now have a coherent park with distinctive natural features, with a circulation system that would allow visitors to go from one side of the park to the other without going outside the park, and with sufficient open space to allow for active and passive recreational facilities. Due to high-rise construction along the Silver Strand and in downtown San Diego most of the panoramic views from the park have disappeared, and along with them the logic behind many of Parsons' road schemes. Even with the minimal grading and the less minimal dynamiting of hardpan that had taken place during Parsons' seven-year custodianship of the park, the fragile wild flowers had begun to disappear. As Parsons feared, today the park is split into a thousand and one gimcracks that have defiled the regional scenery Parsons hoped to leave as his legacy.

As a professional, John Charles Olmsted was not going to cry over spilt milk. After his resignation, he put Balboa Park behind him and went on to design other public and private parks. The City of San Diego hired Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. in 1947 to recommend the disposition of the surviving Panama-California Exposition buildings on the central mesa, a location both he and his half-brother had opposed. Not surprisingly, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. said that four of them should be demolished.

For Balboa Park to continue to be an idealized rural park with native and imported plants enhancing the beauty of its mesas and canyons, the San Diego City Council, City Manager and Park and Recreation Department should reexamine the plans and proposals of Samuel Parsons, the park's only professional horticultural designer. Planners and engineers since Parsons have been preoccupied by demands to put landscape devouring facilities and activities within the park and by parking and traffic problems. That people benefit from beautifully landscaped parks is shown by the popularity of parks in cities in the United States and Canada. No less than people in these cities, people in San Diego can appreciate free public spaces that afford them rest, refreshment and recreation amid scenes of flowers, trees, shrubs and grass.

As it turned out, Balboa Park became the exception to Vaux's and Olmsted's idea of a park that would contrast with the city, though not the only exception, as the fate of

Forest Park in St. Louis, the product of the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition, has paralleled Balboa Park. In seeking to accommodate expositions, both parks altered their function to "the raising of men and women" rather than the raising of grass and trees. In trying to be all things to all people they disfigured their woodland areas, their curvilinear paths, their winding roads, their clear lakes, and their broad spaces.

Balboa Park presents park lovers with a quandary. It is loved by people for its cultural attractions and for its fantasy architecture. These are not the people who go to Central Park in New York City or Washington Park in Chicago on hot summer afternoons to lie on lawns, to toss frisbees, and to picnic or in the winter to slide down snow-covered slopes and to skate on ponds.

In 1994 Weisman Travel Reports—an agency that rates city parks in the United States based on the number of cultural facilities they contain—rated Balboa Park as the number one city park in the United States.

In its 300-acre central portion, Balboa Park contains many urban elements that pastoral and picturesque parks do not have. It intermingles architecture with floriculture, with the architecture as the dominant feature. Even in the adjacent 125-acre San Diego Zoological Gardens, the subtropical planting, as striking as it is, fills in between zoological displays. Many people attend the museums, the theaters, and the Zoological Gardens. Museums and theaters can be anywhere. Indeed their location in the heart of San Diego's deteriorating business district might serve as a catalyst for renewal. To those who can afford admission charges to museums and theaters, access is no problem. However, those who cannot afford entrance fees must look to the landscaped and accessible portions of the park for entertainment, as Vaux, Olmsted and Parsons had intended they would. Since nonprofit organizations are continually appropriating land for buildings and for fenced-in, exclusionary uses (such as the 125-acre San Diego Zoo and the planned 11.5 acre Japanese garden), regular park visitors discover they have fewer paths on which to walk, benches on which to sit, tables on which to eat, and less grass on which to play.

Balboa Park at the close of the twentieth century is a long way from the picturesque park Parsons planned at the beginning of the century. Vestiges of his plans remain in the road systems of the park. Planting done by Kate Sessions, Samuel Parsons, George Cooke, and John Charles Olmsted has fallen to disease or is past its prime. Native plants Parsons wanted to keep grow only in a small stretch of Florida Canyon. Public schools, a zoo, a velodrome, golf courses, tennis courts, theaters, cultural institutions, gift shops, restaurants, and a Naval Hospital—not foreseen by Parsons—take most of the money from park appropriation budgets and so much space that only about 263 acres in the park are open and free to people.

Except in the zoo, plants take a backseat to institutions. Whatever planting takes place comes from nursery stock. Planting is not coordinated for aesthetic and ecological reasons. Planted areas show the effects of minimum irrigation, pruning, soil conditioning, and tree thinning in disease, stunted growth, and disfigurement A 40-acre

sanitary landfill area on the east side is not planted at all. Covering canyons that Samuel Parsons had praised in 1905 for their beauty and uniqueness, the landfill was created over 23 years (from 1953 to 1975) for a Switzer Canyon freeway connection and a golf course that were never constructed. In 1992, landscape architects Wallace Roberts and Todd proposed putting Monuments to Trash on its festering and unstable surfaces. To get rid of transients, sections on the west side have been cleared of shrubbery, facilitating the erosion of slopes. Viewpoints everywhere have been vandalized or obscured.

Each citizen of San Diego and visitor to the park should ask themselves if what Balboa Park has gained is better than what it has lost.

January 1997

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