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Spokane Board of Park Commissioners begins its duties on June 1, 1907.

On June 1, 1907, the newly instituted Spokane Board of Park Commissioners begins its duties with Aubrey Lee White (1869-1948) as president, a position he will hold for the next 15 years. White is the logical choice, having returned in 1906 from a six-year business sojourn in the East during which he has become an expert on the park development of major Eastern cities. While there he has seen land for parks purchased at inflated prices because these cities have not planned ahead. He is determined that Spokane will not make the same mistakes. White proves to be the most zealous among a number of Spokane civic leaders anxious see the city provide a park within easy walking distance of all its residents. Under his leadership, the Board of Park Commissioners launches Spokane into the top ranks of American city park development. Aubrey White will soon come to be called the "father of Spokane parks."

Park Politics

Prior to the 1907 charter amendment that established the new Park Commission, Spokane's paltry 173 acres of park land had been administered in a fairly chaotic fashion by a committee consisting of the mayor, the president of the council, and the city engineer. These entities were often at odds with each other. There was no design or strategy to the acquisition of land for parks: Up until that point, it had consisted entirely of donations by developers hoping to enhance the prices of lots within their plats. White and such civic and business leaders as *Spokesman-Review* publisher William H. Cowles (1866-1946), F. Lewis Clark (d. 1914), Jay P. Graves (1859-1948), Daniel Chase Corbin (1832-1918), John Finch, W. J. C. Wakefield, and Ren H. Rice pushed for the charter amendment to establish an independent park board free of control by city government. They based it loosely on the plan used by the city of Hartford, Connecticut.

The *Spokesman-Review* was solidly behind the amendment, with such editorial statements as: "The importance of taking the administration of the park system out of politics ought by this time to have so thoroughly impressed itself on the minds of

the people to insure a full and favorable vote" (Dyer, 260). To some, especially rival newspaper *Spokane Press*, such a position appeared during ensuing years to have been disingenuous. In addition to the newspaper, the Cowles business empire included vast real-estate holdings in and outside of the city. Such *Spokane Press* headlines as "Cowles Had City at his Mercy in Deal with Park Board" suggest conflicts of interest or worse (*Spokane Press*). Spokane, however, was not alone in these cozy arrangements between park boards and real-estate developers. As historian John Fahey has pointed out: "The mutual interests of park men and real estate men were so evident in most communities that critics of city beautification often accused park departments of spending public funds to benefit real estate developers" (Fahey, 177).

Acquiring Land and Hiring the Olmsteds

The voters of Spokane approved the amendment on May 7, 1907, by a margin of three to one. It called for an independent, non-political board of 10 unpaid members. One would be replaced each year, thereby ensuring both continuity and fresh perspectives. The first commissioners were Amasa B. Campbell (1845-1912), Dr. P. S. Byrne, F. E. Goodall, A. W. Jones, E. B. Hyde, J. W. Wentworth, F. P. Hogan, Charles Liftchild, Aubrey Lee White and A. M. Winston. White was promptly elected president, and Mayor Floyd L. Daggett would serve in an ex-officio capacity. Immediately the new board was confronted with debts incurred under the previous board. A loan of \$12,000 from the City Council and a subsequent bond issue of \$100,000 paid off the debts, but there was little money for land acquisition. A new city charter adopted in 1910 retained the park board as an independent body with the same structure provided by the 1907 amendment.

An early and brilliant move of the new Board of Park Commissioners, again under White's leadership, was to hire the Olmsted Brothers firm of landscape architects of Brookline, Massachusetts, to develop a comprehensive plan for the development of Spokane's parks, parkways, and many city streets. White was already familiar with their work in the East, the founder of the company, Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903) having planned New York's Central Park. In June 1907, at White's instigation, John Charles Olmsted (1852-1920), a nephew of the late founder, met with the board, which then contracted for the firm's services at an amazing bargain of \$1,000. In 1908 a comprehensive plan that was largely the work of Olmsted partner J. Frederick Dawson was delivered for a total cost of \$1,306. This plan included recommendations for parks, streets, and the Spokane River waterfront. The board delayed its publication until 1913 in order to prevent alerting the owners of desired land, who would raise their prices. This document contains not only the Olmsted recommendations but also an extensive report of the board's progress to 1913.

In the meantime, on May 3, 1910, the city passed a bond issue of \$1 million.

Despite a massive editorial campaign by the *Spokesman-Review* and the endorsements of Mayor N. S. Pratt, the Chamber of Commerce, and other business and civic leaders, the bond issue passed by a margin of only 18 votes. This infusion of money enabled the board to launch the aggressive acquisition of open land still available at reasonable prices that White had envisioned for Spokane. Furthermore, considerable acreage continued to be obtained through donation and trade. By 1913 Spokane parkland consisted of 1,480.58 acres with more in the pipeline. White could report to the board: "We now stand in the front rank of cities of similar population" (Fahey, 176). In 1914 White stated in his annual report: "Compared with Seattle, which is one of the most progressive cities in the West, Spokane has 1,914 acres acquired at a total cost of \$729,664, while Seattle acquired 1,803 acres ...[for] \$2,485,628" (Fahey, 177).

John Duncan and Aubrey White

Another of the board's early decisions with long lasting benefits to Spokane was to appoint a brilliant parks superintendent, John W. Duncan, a Scottish-born Bostonian familiar with the Olmsted's work in the East. Duncan developed and oversaw Spokane's parks, playgrounds, civic gardens, and municipal golf courses from 1910 until his retirement in 1942. The formal Duncan Gardens in Manito Park are named for him.

By moving outside the city limits, Aubrey White became ineligible to serve on the park board and stepped down in 1922. However, he continued his aggressive advocacy, assuming the "mantle of elder statesman of parks and beautification, speaking to clubs and friends on behalf of the parks" until his death in 1948 (Fahey, 178).

To this day, the city of Spokane owes much to the foresight and hard work of Aubrey Lee White and the original Board of Park Commissioners. Its official title is now (2010) the Spokane Parks and Recreation Board. The original Olmsted comprehensive plan, still not fully implemented, continues to guide many of this board's decisions and to provide a rallying point for the public in advocating for a more beautiful and livable city.

Sources:

Ralph E. Dyar, *News for an Empire* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, 1952), 257-264; John Fahey, "A. L. White, Champion of Urban Beauty," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, Vol. 72, No. 4 (October 1981), 170-179; *Report of the Board of Park Commissioners*, rev. ed., Spokane Parks Foundation and the Museum of Arts and Culture (Spokane: Tornado Creek Publications, 2007); "Cowles Had City at his Mercy in Deal with Park Board," *Spokane Press*, February 19, 1914; "Aubrey L. White Taken by Death," *Spokesman-Review*, September 19, 1948.

By Laura Arksey, April 05, 2010