Theodore Wirth Collection
M/A 1999.01.01-03

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May 16, 2016
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## Summary Information

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<th><strong>Repository</strong></th>
<th>James K. Hosmer Special Collections Library</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Creator - Author</strong></td>
<td>Wirth, Theodore, 1863-1949</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Title</strong></td>
<td>Theodore Wirth Collection</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Date</strong></td>
<td>1899-2000</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Extent</strong></td>
<td>1.08 Linear feet</td>
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<td><strong>Language</strong></td>
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Biography

Theodore Wirth was born on November 30, 1863 in Winterthur, Switzerland and emigrated alone to the United States in 1888. He died on January 29, 1949. He served as the Superintendent of the Minneapolis Park System 1906-1935, during which time the city’s parks expanded from 1,780 acres to 5,241, doubled its length from 31.1 miles to 62.23 miles. He was a strong advocate of outdoor recreation and safe park access for all, gaining him admittance to the National Recreation and Park Association Hall of Fame.

Wirth studied and worked in horticulture in Zurich, London, and Paris, and also studied engineering. Initially a gardener for private estates, including the famous Jardin des Plantes in Paris, Theodore Wirth quickly became Construction Foreman for the New York Park Department, trimming trees in Central Park. An encounter with a police officer while Wirth was walking home, which culminated in Wirth being forced to retrace his steps to utilize the paths instead, solidified Wirth’s rage against “Keep off the Grass” signs and his vow to do away with similar unwelcoming obstacles to the general public. After some “political upheaval,” in his words, his position was eliminated (along with many others) and he became a freelance landscaper. Appointed superintendent of Parks in Hartford, Connecticut in 1896, where he designed the nation’s first municipal public rose garden in 1905; his second would be built near Lake Harriet in Minneapolis in 1907.

Wirth came to Minneapolis in 1905 to accept the offer from Charles Loring of Superintendent, following the retirement of William Morse Berry. Initially reluctant, Wirth accepted the position with the condition that a home be built for him, and that he be given a chauffeur, since Wirth never learned to drive.

Wirth strongly supported Charles Loring’s Street Tree Program, begun in 1888, and implemented the “Grand Rounds Boulevard System” somewhat after H.W.S. Cleveland’s design of a continuous boulevard system encircling the city. Wirth’s work was also influential for Minneapolis neighborhoods starting their “Playground and Neighborhood Park System,” changing the flavor of city parks from that of “passive recreation” (walking and driving), to active recreation: bicycling, kite flying, ball playing, sliding on winter hills, and walking on the grass—which had previously been forbidden by the Park Board. Despite objections from traditionalists and some influential families, attendance at these newly-inviting city parks soared from 93,600 in 1907 to 250,000 in 1908, to 7 million prior to World War II, making the Minneapolis Park System “the envy of the rest of the country.” Wirth also led the first hike of the Minneapolis Municipal Hiking Club (Minnehikers) in 1919. Hailed as a visionary and a risk-taking idealist, Wirth was survived by his wife and sons—two of which, Conrad (“Connie”) and Walter L., along with a grandson, Theodore J. (“Ted”), also became architects, bequeathing three generations of landscape architects and the Wirth Environmental Award.

Description of the Collection
Original letterpress copies of Wirth’s correspondence, 1899-1907. Includes correspondence to Charles Loring (1905-06) and to Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. (1904). Also includes biographical profiles, articles, and clippings. Also included is correspondence from his grandson, Theodore “Ted” J. Wirth.

Administrative Information

Publication Information
James K. Hosmer Special Collections Library

Controlled Access Headings

Personal Name(s)

- Wirth, Theodore J., 1927-2009

Subject(s)

- Landscape architects -- United States.
- Parks -- Minnesota -- Minneapolis.

Index to Letterpress Correspondence

Corporate Name(s)

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• Bayersdorfer & Co., October 24, 1902  Page 31A
• Breitmeyer & Sons, John, January 5, 1904  Page 126
• I[usfe?] & Almiral, December 11, 1909 (?)  Page 5A
• Meehan and Sons, April 16, 1903  Page 14
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• New Haven County Horticultural Society, October 7, 1903  Page 84
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• Society for Savings, February 20, 1906  Page 277
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<td>Photocopies of private correspondence from letterpress book, with page numbers and indexes. 1899-1907</td>
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<td>Original letterpress correspondence, with page numbers 1899-1907</td>
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