

The Magnus Swenson Trees

Madison

When 14-year-old Magnus Swenson came to America, barely surviving the sea voyage in a rudderless ship, he brought with him seeds from a forest of beech trees near his home in Norway. And he eventually planted them on land he bought bordering Lake Mendota, then outside the city of Madison, which he called “Thorstrand” or “Tor’s Beach.” Along with the beech trees, he also planted elms, Norway spruce, and balsam fir. The beech trees grew to maturity, forming a lovely grove, but the climate was not ideal for them and they died some years ago. The property also included a very old elm, spruce, and fir as well as 30 sassafras trees, which are considered a rarity in this northern climate.

Immediately after his arrival here, Swenson went to Janesville where he worked for an uncle repairing train locomotives. Later, he took degrees in both engineering and chemistry at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, the first to combine those majors. As an engineer he built the Kilbourn dam in Wisconsin Dells in the first decade of the twentieth century, as well as a dam at Prairie du Chien. He also became an inventor of note. Among his concerns, way back then, were ways factories could prevent pollution and use byproducts. Swenson was a friend of the Norwegian author Ole Rolvaag and active in Madison Norwegian organizations.

His original farm has been cut in two by University Avenue, but Thorstrand and Magnus Swenson Drives still indicate its location.

Source: Polly O’Hare, Madison



Magnus Swenson Norway Spruce

B-Wolfgang Hoffmann (1982)

Excerpted from ***Every Root an Anchor: Wisconsin’s Famous and Historic Trees***
by R. Bruce Allison
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