

## THE VIKING OF JACKSON PARK

By Peter Nepstad

About an hour's drive west of Chicago, in a private park, sits a 110-year-old wooden ship that once made headlines around the world. The flimsy tarp that protected it from the elements has been blown aside by strong winds, and rain now freely pounds against the exposed wood. It is only a matter of time until the ship is damaged beyond repair. But in its current location, few people will even note its disappearance; many believe it is gone already.

It wasn't always this way.

The story of the ship is a long one that goes back to 1880, to Gokstad, Norway, and the discovery of a Viking war vessel unearthed from a burial mound. The Gokstad, as it was called, was built around 890 and was in remarkable shape. It provided the first tangible evidence that the Vikings had built ships capable of traveling to the New World.

But the proof would have to wait for a Norwegian named Magnus Andersen who decided that a replica of a Viking ship should be sailed across the Atlantic, as a counterpoint to the World Exhibition that would be held in America in 1893 to honor Columbus. He later recalled, "As I thought this over more closely, I found the idea more and more attractive. That Lief Erikson had been in America before Columbus had been clearly proved but was not commonly known either in America or elsewhere, not even Norway . . ."

The replica of the Gokstad was funded by popular subscription and completed in time for the Exposition. It was decorated with a silk banner embroidered with ravens. The ship itself was christened "The Raven," but American popular press quickly named it, "The Viking." Magnus Andersen was the Captain.

The Viking sailed from Bergen, Norway and reached Newfoundland four weeks later. The crew, uncertain how the ship would handle on the open seas, found it had exceeded all expectations. "We noted with admiration the ship's graceful movements," Andersen later wrote.

From Newfoundland, Viking headed south to New York, then sailed into the Great Lakes. Carter Harrison, Chicago's four-term mayor, boarded and took command for the last leg of the voyage, arriving at Jackson Park on Wednesday, July 12, 1893 to much fanfare. Magnus Andersen had turned his dreams into reality.

The Viking moored at Jackson Park for the remainder of the fair. Afterwards, the Captain piloted it through the ILM canal to the Mississippi River, all the way to New Orleans – the only seafaring vessel to ever to do so.

The ship was brought back to Chicago and stored in the Field Columbian Museum until 1919, when it was restored and placed in Lincoln Park. In 1933, Magnus Andersen repeated his historic voyage in a modern freighter to appear at Chicago's Century of Progress Exposition.

The ship sat in Lincoln Park right up until the 1970s. Covered by a roof and enclosed by a chain-link fence, it sat outside in the blistering heat of summer and the freezing cold of winter until the wood seems more akin to steel than anything else. Time had taken its toll on the Viking.

The Chicago Park District, without the funds to do a proper restoration, sold the ship for \$1 to the American Scandinavian Council, which promised to raise the necessary funds, estimated at \$12 million dollars, to restore the historic vessel.

It seemed like a good idea at the time. But the funds were never successfully raised, and no preservation or restoration has been done. Unfortunately, the ship was also moved out of Lincoln Park, and has been out of the public eye for nearly thirty years. Now it sits in Good Templar Park,

a private park located in Geneva, IL, and closed to the public for much of the year. And the careful work of keeping it dry for the past fifty or so years is being undone by a temporary shelter that no longer keeps off the rain.

It seems unbelievable that the historic vessel has ended up in this condition. But the situation is not entirely without hope. Ownership of the ship may have reverted to the Chicago Park District. And all parties are now seeking a new, permanent location. Cook County Commissioner Carl Hansen, a long time advocate of the project, describes all parties involved as committed to saving the ship and giving it a new home where everyone can enjoy this part of their cultural heritage. "We are looking for a permanent location for the ship, before we try again to preserve it," Hansen said. "We've all learned the hard way how hard it is to raise funds for something when no one knows what will happen to it once it is finished."

Nothing has been decided yet, and discussions for a new home for the Viking are still underway. Among the possibilities: the Museum of Science and Industry, housed in the last remaining World's Fair building still located in Jackson Park. Perhaps someday soon, the Viking will once again set sail, and return to the place that has always been its only true destination.

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This is one of a series of articles being published monthly through a collaboration of the Herald with the Hyde Park Historical Society.

Peter Nepstad has studied the 1893 World's Fair for the past four years to develop a CD-ROM adventure game called "1893: A World's Fair Mystery" which can be ordered on line at <http://illumintedlantern.com/1893>.

This Saturday at 1:00 p.m. Peter Nepstad and Douglas Anderson will appear at the Hyde Park Historical Society for a presentation on the Columbian Exposition followed by a related tour through the Wooded Island. The presentation will begin at the Society's museum, 5529 S. Lake Park. For information call 773/288-1242

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Photos:

Viking1893.jpg: The Viking Ship in 1893

Viking2003.jpg: The Viking Ship today, in Geneva, IL. Photo by Peter Nepstad.