# INTRODUCTION

Who was Frank Lloyd Wright?

I was with friends at a Friday fish fry—if you don't know, this is a very Wisconsin tradition—when someone posed this question. It was then that I realized most people connect Wright with his architectural projects but not necessarily his character and personality.

As a journalist I make a career out of picking up the phone and interviewing people who are still living. But in writing this book, I grappled with the legacy of the deceased. Stories from those who knew Wright during the time he was alive are the only living pieces of the puzzle. And as Wright died in 1959, the number of people who once stood in the same room with him is dwindling. These stories are now on the second or third generation, with descendants of those who commissioned his designs left to bare the truth.

Still, there are commonalities within these stories. Wright was charismatic. He could woo families into commissioning one of his designs and handing over all of the decorative decisions to him. If you wanted a Wright house you bought into his design, not yours. While on a visit to Wingspread, Irene Purcell Johnson was startled to wake up and see Wright had rearranged all of the artwork and furnishings overnight. (He was never invited back. Or, he never came back. We'll never know the reason.) In another story, Wright was invited to lunch at the Willard Keland House and found the piano to be "in the wrong place." Even Margaret Howland, whose family owns the Frederick C. Bogk House in Milwaukee, commented during our interview that she found it impossible to rearrange the furnishings in her childhood bedroom. It was that unchangeable. Another fun story comes from the Hardy House, where onetime owner Peterkin Seward declared that everything in the home was built to Wright's height, and not hers. As she wrote to Mark Hertzberg, author of a comprehensive book on the Hardy House that was published in 2006 (*Frank Lloyd Wright's Hardy House*, Pomegranate Books), "It was the most miserable kitchen to work in. The counters were Wright's height. The height of the counters was wrong."

Yet despite a lack of collaboration with the client, Wright clearly possessed talent. According to the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, he designed 1,114 structures, of which 532 were built, over a period of seventy years. Of those, 432 are still standing. And, of the eight that were placed on the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 2008, two are in Wisconsin: the Herbert and Katherine Jacobs House I in Madison, and Taliesin, Wright's Spring Green homestead. In this book I use "built" to imply completion dates.

As a relative of mine said, he was "the prophet of the new." There are many firsts in Wright's designs, with radiant floor heating among them. When his first homes were built, in the late 1800s, in what is now the Frank Lloyd Wright Historic District in Oak Park, Illinois, American streets were decorated with rambling Victorians, their turrets and gingerbread trim a nod to craftsmanship. The concept of *organic architecture*—a term attached to Wright, meaning that the outside is seamlessly brought into the interior spaces through natural light and intentional choices for building materials—was a stark contrast to cramped rooms with high

ceilings and scant light. Wright skillfully managed to put his own imprint in the neighborhood while also riffing on those designs. The homes that still remain are definitely rambling and span multiple levels, but also introduce concepts like a concealed front door on the side of the house, not the front, and multiple built-ins that maximize storage while maintaining a fuss-free interior.

Despite this eventual success, Wright lived under a cloud of pressure from a very young age. He was only a child when his mother Anna declared he would become a successful architect. How does a person even begin to entertain other fields of study and careers with this expectation? Could it be that she recognized his talent at such a young age?

Those who commissioned one of his designs not only wanted to live in the house, they longed to be associated with him. Bernard Schwartz—commissioner of a home in Two Rivers, Wisconsin, in 1940—even began to emulate his attire, much to the dismay of his wife, by donning a top hat and cape. Another theme: Wright's works were always over budget. Craig Adelman, the second-generation owner of the Albert and Edith Adelman House in Fox Point, remembers as a child a man in a tall hat always asking his parents for more money.

"He was among the first to understand branding," said a tour guide at Taliesin, referring not only to Wright's architectural works, but also his flamboyant look with the cape, top hat, and cane. "He was driven to be successful and be in the public eye."

The Wisconsin commissions for private homes fall during two favorable times in Wright's career: 1902–1917 and 1937–1959. Those earlier homes embody Prairie-style and four-square architecture, a reaction to Victorian homes, while many of the later designs represent the Usonian period. When you walk through these homes today, it's clear that the Midcentury Modern design period made so popular with throwback shows like AMC's *Mad Men* (2007–2015) is woven into these homes, but with Wright's signature twists. Yes, there are floor-to-ceiling windows and stone fireplaces, but the kitchens lack an open layout. They are mostly galley-style, thought to be this way because Wright wasn't a cook himself. But he did love to eat and entertain, which is why the living rooms and communal spaces in his homes are expansive. The bedrooms? Not so much. Bedrooms were for sleeping, he suggested, and not hanging out away from the family. Could it be that because Wright grew up among many family members on a massive estate in Spring Green, Wisconsin, he naturally felt comfortable in a room with many others?

We do know he slept very few hours each night, which is why when you visit both Taliesin and Taliesin West, you will note that he and his third wife Olgivanna had separate bedrooms. When the muse strikes, you want to be in the drafting room, of course, and not disturb your partner each time you wake.

Another contribution from Wright are the many Japanese woodblock prints he brought back from Japan after his first trip in 1905. When I toured Burnham Block on Milwaukee's South Side, toward the end of the interview, curator Michael Lilek suggested that Wright may even be responsible for the collections in American museums today. One example is at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, which houses the largest (and finest) collection of Japanese art outside of Japan. Though you won't find his name on the label next to a work, and they were gifted to the museum by other collectors, we now know he was the first curator.

Commentary about Wright must also include his quirks and nuances. He was relatively short for that time—5-foot-7—and had a distaste for tall people, viewing it as "wasted space." In *New World Odyssey: Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church and Frank Lloyd Wright*, author John Gurda narrates an experience from parishioner Stanley Stacy, who took Wright to dinner at the Wisconsin Club. He reportedly ate so many corn muffins the staff gave him a bag full to take home.

He loved to eat, but cooking? Not so much. His kitchens received many critiques for the cramped conditions, perhaps because Wright himself didn't spend much time in front of a stove. He also disliked designing swimming pools and basements, and did not have a soft spot for dogs, although in 1956 he did design "Eddie's Doghouse" for the Berger family (clients in San Anselmo, California), so their Labrador retriever Eddie could take cover during rain or inclement weather. It's on permanent display at the Marin County Civic Center in Marin County, California, another of Wright's buildings. Wright fans should not be surprised that this 4-square-foot mini home features a sloped roof—and it leaks.