

## **WES PETERS – THE EARLY YEARS**

### **YOUTH**

William Wesley (Wes) Peters was born in Terra Haute, Indiana on June 12, 1912, the son of Frederick Romer Peters and Clara Margedant Peters. The Peters had one other child, Margedant. Mr. Peters was a newspaper reporter and the family soon moved to Indianapolis where Wes entered grade school in 1917 at School #66.

In the 1920s, the family moved to Evansville, Indiana where Wes Peters' father was offered a position with the Evansville Press. Of this period, Mr. Wright recalled "Who's Who says the editor was the man who drove the Ku Klux Klan out of Indiana. He did, practically single-handed."

Wes attended Stanley Hall and then Benjamin Bosse High School in Evansville, graduating in June 1929. A solid B student, it is not surprising his best grade was a 95% in trigonometry, followed closely by a 93% in modern history. Math was his best subject overall. Over the four years he also took Latin, French, and German.

### **COLLEGE**

For his first year of college (1929-1930), Wes stayed home and attended Evansville College, now the University of Evansville. Planning to pursue an education in architecture, Wes took as many math courses as allowed.

The next fall Wes was accepted into the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, at the time considered the leading architectural school in the United States. Wes remained in the architectural program at MIT for the next two school years, including the summer of 1931. During that summer he worked in a local architectural office for credit, where he continued part time during his second year.

At this time, the MIT curriculum was based on that of the École des Beaux-Arts, the French national school of architecture. Their system stressed the re-use of historic styles, mainly classicism, as is reflected in the architecture courses Wes took which included history and theory, each semester.

In 1931, *Modern Architecture* by Frank Lloyd Wright became Wright's first book published in this country. His six lectures contained therein, provide one diatribe after another deriding the credibility of the Beaux-Arts system. Mr. Wright's *Lieber Meister*, Louis Sullivan, it should be remembered, attended not only MIT, but also the École itself. Even though, Frank Lloyd Wright fervently stood against the system since his early career.

### **TALIESIN FELLOWSHIP**

Frank Lloyd Wright believed that "Art should take the lead in Education," and set out to establish a model school based on this belief as early as the late twenties. The depression having brought all building to a halt, his opportunity soon came. Mr. and Mrs. Wright decided, in 1931, to form Hillside - Home School for the Allied Arts, which soon became the Taliesin Fellowship. Mr. Wright rebuilt the school of his aunts on the family farm in Spring Green, Wisconsin. Here the group could be self-sustaining by living off the land.

News of Frank Lloyd Wright opening a school spread rapidly in 1932, even reaching the pages of Time magazine. "On the fifteenth of September, 1932," as Mrs. Wright remembered, "car after car drove up to Taliesin. As the young students came up, Carl Jensen, our secretary at that time, ushered them into the Taliesin studio at first, then into the living room." At which point, each was interviewed by Mr. and Mrs. Wright.

Wes quickly made an impression on Mrs. Wright, who recalled:

"As the days went on, twenty-three students gathered at Taliesin within a week. The windows were not in yet, nor were the doors, but fortunately the weather was warm. One day, as I was looking from the bridge connecting the big kitchen with the living quarters, down in the court below I saw a tall young man carrying a door from our part of the house towards an apartment on the nearby hill. Not remembering his name, I called out: 'Wait a minute, wait a minute. What are you doing with that door?'

'I have no door in my room, Mrs. Wright. I have taken this one from the guest wing below. I will pay for it.'

'You take that door right back,' I said. 'And hang it where you took it from. It won't hurt you to be without a door for one day. We will have them all in by tomorrow.'

That young man turned out to be William Wesley Peters."

If these students expected an atmosphere of the controversy that had always surrounded Wright, they were not to be disappointed. On the last day of October, Mr. Wright was visiting nearby Madison, with five apprentices, including Wes. Suddenly a creditor of Wright's confronted him on the street claiming Wright owed him \$282 and stated "If you didn't pay me, I'll take it out of your hide." Mr. Wright's nose was broken in the ensuing discussion, but not before instigating retribution from the apprentices. Short jail terms, fines and valuable lessons resulted for all concerned.

As if this event did not redeem Wes in the Wright's eyes, Mrs. Wright recalls the moment they first recognized Wes's true character.

"I remember the first year he was at Taliesin. He had driven us to Madison, Wisconsin. We were all dressed in our best clothes, returning from a dinner-party. We ran into a thunderstorm and such a deluge of rain that Wes had to stop the car on one of the roads, so deep in water that he was hesitant to continue. He was concerned about our convenience and our safety.

Before our incredulous eyes, Wes got out of the car, slamming the door shut, and in the light of our headlights we saw him walking through the water deeper and deeper until it reached up to the knees of his six-foot four-inch height.

He kept walking with his hands in his pockets as though he had just stepped out for a pleasure stroll on a boulevard....Mr. Wright nudged me; we then knew the strong mettle Wes was made of.

He came back just as nonchalantly, said shortly, "It is too deep," and turned the car around while Mr. Wright and I smiled in silence."

Wes rapidly became a member of the inner circle of apprentices. One of the most famous stories of Wes during this period is relative to his 6' 4" height. "Sit down, Wes! You're destroying the scale!" *Frank Lloyd Wright, as told by Edgar Tafel, Taliesin Fellow*

### **SVETLANA WRIGHT PETERS**

Frank Lloyd Wright met Olgivanna Milanoff at the Petrograd Ballet, on a well-known night, November 30, 1924. Both were estranged from their spouses, Mr. Wright from his second wife, Miriam Noel and Olgivanna from Vlademar Hinzenberg. Olgivanna met Hinzenberg, an architect ten years her senior, while still in her teens. In 1917, they had a daughter, Svetlana

shortly after which she left her husband and moved to Paris. Mr. Wright adopted Svetlana, after his marriage to Olgivanna, in 1928.

When Wes came to Taliesin, Svetlana was a beautiful fifteen-year-old. Mr. Wright recalls, "Soon it appeared that Svetlana liked to ride the truck Wes drove. A general sympathy amounting to a conspiracy grew up behind these young people in the Fellowship. Everybody except Olgivanna and myself aware of a budding romance. Not we. When we did wake up - there were some accusations and unkind words. Too soon! Both too young! The budding romance which looked like a kind of treachery then went underground, but partisans for the young couple formed to fight their battle for them. No use. We wouldn't have any of it. Soon after the principals and their partisans struck out for parts unknown."

## **INDIANA**

As a result, on September 15 1933, exactly one year from the day of his arrival, Wes left Taliesin and returned home to Evansville, Indiana. Svetlana went to Chicago to study music.

A determined Wes Peters, opened an architectural office. Surprisingly, in the toughest of times, Wes picked up a number of good jobs. In fact, during the period of his absence from Taliesin (September 1933 - November 1936), Wes had more designs executed than Mr. Wright!

During this period, Peters had no bigger advocate than his father, Frederick R. Peters. The senior Peters is seemingly responsible for most, if not all of his son's commissions. F.R. Peters was one of the most influential leaders in Evansville and he used that influence to support Wes in this difficult financial period. In some cases, by either making or co-signing for loans to build.

The largest design was for the remodeling of the newspaper offices of the Evansville Press. Wes added a new Pressroom, Composing Room, Circulation Department and shipping dock to the two-story building on Second and Vine Streets, all at a cost of \$ 75,000.

His first commission was underwritten by his father for a speculation house on a vacant lot he had owned for many years. Now known as the Peters-Margedant House, as its first tenant was Wes's mother's brother James Margedant, who was, at the time, city editor of the Press. The Peters-Margedant house was the first 'modern' house in Evansville. He also designed a residence for J.P. Price.

## **RECONCILIATION**

On Monday, April 1, 1935, Wes and Svetlana became the third fellowship couple to unite in marriage. They were married in the home of the minister of the Trinity Methodist Church, Dr. Herbert A. Keck, in Evansville. They made their temporary home, "Atoporox", near Cannelton, Indiana, where Mr. Peters planned to have an architectural workshop. Two months later, Peters father died. Shortly after, Wes took the three-day, twenty-three hour written examination to receive his registration as an architect in the state of Indiana. Receiving a passing score, Wes received his registration on the next July 18th.

"We didn't hear from them for a year or more," Mr. Wright remembered. "But we greatly missed them and the inevitable reconciliation took place after they had been married. Were we happy to have them back - giving good accounts of themselves? We were. Perhaps the break was a good thing all around. Certainly, both were much improved by this break on their own. And we were a good deal the wiser. So, I guess we improved too."

Wes and Svetlana returned to Taliesin and the Fellowship in November of 1936. Although Wes had been an outstanding apprentice before he left, having now married the Wright's daughter, he took these additional duties in stride.

In the drafting room, Wes was starting to do most of the structural engineering. No small task considering he was having to make buildings work for the greatest creative mind of all time. Wes also supervised outdoor work, including construction and farming. At her mother's behest, Svetlana ran the kitchen, the major domestic operation within the fellowship.

#### **TIMELINE OF WES PETERS PERSONAL MILESTONES**

- 1932 – "First" Apprentice of the newly formed Taliesin Fellowship.  
Wes soon meets and befriends - Mrs. Wright's daughter - Svetlana
- 1933 – Wes returns to Evansville, Indiana. Starts his own Architectural Practice.
- 1935 – On April 1, Wes marries Svetlana Wright in Evansville.
- 1936 – Returns to Taliesin Fellowship - never leaves after this.
- 1940 – Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation forms; Frank Lloyd Wright, President and Treasurer, Olgivanna, Vice-President; William Wesley Peters, Secretary.
- 1941 – Svetlana and Wes give birth to Brandoch Peters.
- 1944 – Svetlana and Wes give birth to Daniel Peters.
- 1946 – Svetlana (pregnant with their third child) and Daniel die in an automobile accident.
- 1959 – Frank Lloyd Wright dies. Mrs. Wright becomes President of Foundation and Wes becomes Vice-President. Peters become the Chief Architect in charge of all design. Wes soon becomes registered to design in all 50 states.
- 1970 – Wes's former mother-in-law, Olgivanna Wright invites Svetlana Alliluyeva Stalin, Joseph Stalin's fifth and youngest child and his only daughter, to visit Taliesin West. She pushes Wes and Svetlana together and they marry on April 12, 1970.
- 1971 – Olga Peters is born. She is the first and only daughter for Wes Peters and third for Svetlana. Later, she changes her name to Chrese Evans.
- 1973 – Following a difficult period, Wes and Svetlana divorce.
- 1986 – Olgivanna Lloyd Wright dies. Wes becomes Chairman of the Board and Vice-President of the Foundation. His title becomes Senior Architect.
- 1991 – On July 17, William Wesley Peters dies in Madison, Wisconsin, following a stroke. He was a resident of Taliesin West, near Scottsdale, Arizona, and Taliesin, near Spring Green, Wisconsin. He leaves a legacy serving 50 years as an architect and structural engineer, designing 120 of his own distinct projects.