

Meeting Mr. Wright

Author pens
Prairie School
touring guide.

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

Kristin Visser is a free-lance writer and a part-time employee of the state Department of Natural Resources, where she has been since 1976. In 1991, she and Jerry Minnick formed Prairie Oak Press, which has published two of her books: *Wisconsin with Kids and Frank Lloyd Wright* and *The Prairie School in Wisconsin*. Born in California in 1949, Visser grew up in Alabama and Tennessee, was graduated from Michigan State University with a major in resource development and has a master's in water resources management from UW-Madison. She was full-time with the DNR until the mid-1980s, when she

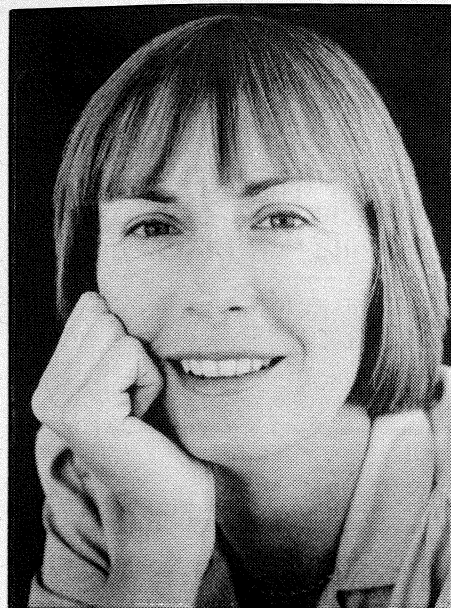
decided to cut back her hours and get serious about writing.

"When I was a kid growing up in Chattanooga, one of my best friends lived in a Frank Lloyd Wright house. I didn't know it at the time, but it was the only Wright house in Tennessee. Her house was always so much more interesting to be in than anybody else's house.

"The rest of us didn't really have any feelings about our houses. They were all just a place to live. But my friend and her family loved their house. That really struck me.

"When I moved to Wisconsin in 1971, one of the first things I did was go out to Taliesin and tromp around by myself—just looking and trespassing. I thought about doing a book for four or five years until Jerry said: 'Do it.'

"My book is not a biography of Frank Lloyd Wright. It's a touring guide for people who are interested in architecture and all the Frank Lloyd Wright buildings in Wisconsin, both



BRENT NICAstro

Visser toured every one of Frank Lloyd Wright's buildings in Wisconsin.



private and publicly owned—the houses, the churches, everything he designed that was built here.

"The book talks about the evolution of Wright's style through his various periods, but it's really aimed at people who just want to go out and see his buildings. That's exactly what I did.

"Why do I like Wright so much? Well, it's pretty clear that he was truly a genius. I think he was on the same level with people like Picasso and Michelangelo, people who really made breakthroughs in art.

"Wright did it by manipulating space and light in a way that no one else has ever been able to equal. He thought that one of the most important things in a building was the way light changed throughout the day. He sited his

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buildings so that the interior was always changing with the time of day and with the seasons.

"The other thing Wright did so well was to manipulate space. He gives you vistas down hallways and into the outdoors. He has you come through a small space and enter into a large, grand room.

"It was very important to him that as you moved through a building, you would see different things. You entered different spaces and he was telling you what to do in those spaces by ceiling height, placement of windows and things like that.

"In the places where you were to be seated, he tended to have low ceilings. In the more open spaces—the public spaces where people would be congregating—he gives you higher ceilings.

"I've met people who say: 'Well,

Wright designed the buildings and the roofs leaked, so how good was he?' I think that misses the point, because Wright's buildings really pushed the technology of his time to the limit, and yes, some of his roofs leaked. The Johnson Wax building leaked. But once rubber roofing became available, his roofs didn't leak anymore.

"The thing that I'm most impressed with after viewing just about every one of Frank Lloyd Wright's buildings in Wisconsin is how much the owners love them. Just like my friend and her family in Tennessee.

"No matter how much trouble a building has been to them along the way, leaky roofs or whatever, no matter how much expense—and some people have gone through great expense—I haven't run across anyone who wants to move out of their Wright building. These people have a sense of living in a very special place. They're happy to be there. They say they don't want to be anywhere else." ■