

Hoy Audubon Society

Trees We Love, 2016

(Narrative: Sue Schuit)

Spring, 1771

I am the King of trees, the pride and glory of the forest. Yet my birth was humble and went unnoticed. I was tiny and inconsequential as I emerged in the midst of many kings. The foraging squirrel had long forgotten my hidden acorn buried in anticipation of the coming winter. There was no notice taken as I appeared from the rich, loamy forest floor – I was a mere sapling among countless others.

I did not concern myself with the wider world. I neither noticed nor cared, that the birth of a nation was occurring – men and their activities were of no consequence. My energy, my roots, my very existence in the midst of my nursery of dense oak forest was all-consuming.

Against all odds, I am a survivor. I am not merely a survivor but a mighty patriarch, a gift of nature, a magnificent Bur Oak. My infancy was tranquil and I flourished in the deep silence and shadows, broken only by the whims of the weather, the changing seasons, and the calls of the wild. Occasionally my forest was startled by the sounds and movements of the Sac and the Fox Indian tribes. With some trepidation we stood as silent sentinels even then aware of the destruction that humans can create; nevertheless their activity was minimal and land was cleared only enough to build small camps. Our world was so rich, our numbers so profuse, there was no cause for worry when we were notched for trails.

In 1835 I was little more than a juvenile prince in my realm of kings when our world changed. White men came from the east with oxen. They worked hard to clear the wilderness to plant crops and build homes. Cleared land yields better prices and Mr. Ives and Mr. Strong purchased the land, built their homes, planted their crops and they in turn sold the land for taverns and homes and crops, and so it goes. My world now had a name familiar to you, Ives Grove.

The first white child was born in 1838. My forest was pruned as country roads were made. Wagons bogged down in the low lands and to remedy the problem men once again came to my forest to plank the roads with pine and oak. In 1858 an important road extended from Racine to Rochester and Plank Road became my new neighbor. Wagons of farm products pulled by three pairs of oxen loaded with shot or lead from the mines in Southwestern Wisconsin rolled by me and, at harvest-time, trains of 50 to 100 wagons would pass by my branches.

Ives Grove grew while my forest shrank. Plank Road was a toll-road and toll-gates, inns and taverns were built. A tavern was erected by the Finan family and the Edward Noble farm was settled within my domain. I believe it was around 1850 when the hotel was built and the timbers were hewn from oaks and walnuts felled in my woods. Stage coaches were common and Ives Grove was a stopover to change horses; more taverns, a blacksmith shop and a grocery were constructed. A frame school was erected; my forest was diminishing.

In 1855, the railroads began lifting the strain from those who passed by me on the Old Plank Rd., but many county farmers still hitched up the horses for the trek to Racine. Eventually the plank road and its tollgates were abandoned and the hotel was sold to Mr. Green. Mr. Green also owned the grocery store and post office but ultimately the store was given up, the mail was distributed by the carriers and the old places gradually went to pieces.

My forest became farms, roads and settlements. Many settlers of this time were also horse breeders and numerous contests and bets were won and lost on the old race tracks. A favorite racing horse died, and a headstone was erected. Time passed and I silently stood watch. The racing field was plowed and cultivated and the headstone became a doorstep.

In 1900 I came of age. Ives Grove came and went and all that remained was the area where Highway 20 and County C intersect. My world looked very different. I was now one of a few noble reminders of my former forest of kings. My trunk was now tall, straight and proud, my root system ran deep and my canopy was widespread. I was the king; my vast woods were now but a recollection. In 1913 a large Home coming was held in what is now all that remains of my ancient forest – Evans Park.

In 1930 the old tavern became a thing of the past and a modern house was built. 1969 was the centennial celebration of the Ives Grove Methodist church. I was striking. My winding, serpentine branches were stretching towards the earth, my large leaves and acorns and my deep shade were well-known and admired. I was held in high esteem.

Today, 2016, my place of honor is assured. I am the King, the Venerable Old One, the Guardian Oak and the living tale of the time of my time.

Folklorist Ruth L. Tongue tells the Somerset folktale of an ancestor oak that helped a girl escape a cruel king, by sending a bough crashing onto his head. The king's men come to fell the tree, but meet with a sorry fate:

*Oh they rode in the wood, where the oaken tree stood
To cut down the tree, the oaken tree
Then the tree gave a groan and summoned his own,
For the trees closed about and they never got out
Of the wood, the wonderful wood.*