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Arbor Day

April 25 is Arbor Day.
Plant a tree.
It may grow
to be a champion.



Publication
prepared
by Monica Nehm



He Who Plants an Oak:

Scott received a Conservationist of the Year award from American Motors. Besides big trees, his interests covered the entire field of natural resources. He worked as assistant to the director of the old Conservation Department and was often referred to as the department's conscience.

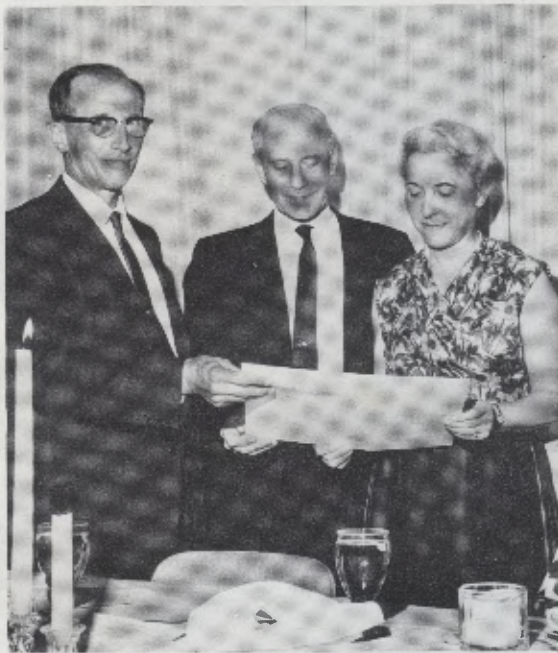
■ I see him in his backyard arboretum planting yet another species or digging up a seedling as a gift for a favored guest.

■ When Walter Scott died in 1983, Wisconsin lost a true gentleman of the conservation movement. He especially loved trees—Wisconsin trees had a good friend in Walter. He unsparingly used his creative energy, his considerable speaking and writing skills, his position in the state Conservation Department and later DNR to advocate tree appreciation and protection. When I think of Walter, I see him cruising his urban neighborhood, wrapping his steel tape measure around big tree trunks, seeking not board feet

Cover: Wisconsin's record white pine before its demise. Photo by Scott Nielsen

WALTER SCOTT— LOVER OF TREES

R. Bruce Allison



Walter Scott and his wife Trudy were given a distinguished service citation by the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters. Before his death, the two were co-editors of the Academy's publications for 10 years and Scott served as president in 1964. Photo courtesy of the Appleton Post-Crescent

but candidates for the record book. I see him producing articles and presenting speeches to encourage the preservation of significant Wisconsin trees. I see him perusing stacks of state history books for tidbits of information to distinguish a tree as famous or historic.

Such appreciation and advocacy for trees is remarkable and unusual but not unique. Walter had many precedents from which to draw inspiration. Consider Oliver Wendell Holmes conversing with fellow boarders in *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*:

" 'I wonder how my great trees are coming on this summer?'

'Where are your great trees, Sir?' said the divinity student.

'Oh, all around about New England. I call all trees mine that I have put my wedding ring on, and I have as many tree wives as Brigham Young has human ones.'

'One set's as green as the other,' exclaimed a boarder, who has never been identified.

'They're all Bloomers,' said the young fellow called John.

(I should have rebuked this trifling with language, if our landlady's daughter had not asked me just then what I meant by putting my wedding ring on a tree.)

'Why, measuring it with my thirty-foot tape, my dear,' said I. 'I have worn a tape almost out on the rough barks of our old New England elms and other big trees.' "

Walter Scott began putting his "wedding ring" on Wisconsin trees forty years ago, to measure trunk circumferences and determine their eligibility for the big tree record book. It started in 1941 after the American Forestry Association initiated a big tree contest. At that time, Fred G. Wilson, the Wisconsin Conservation Department's chief of cooperative forestry, was put in charge of a program to collect information on record Wisconsin specimens. Walter enthusiastically measured them and submitted nominations until he was drafted into the army in 1943. On returning to WCD in 1946, he inherited the job of big tree record-book keeper and kept it for 28 years, until his retirement in 1974.

The purpose of the champion tree program is to focus attention on trees—their pleasantness, inspiration and worthy companionship in our environment. Again, Oliver Wendell Holmes expressed it this way:

" 'Don't you want to hear me talk trees a little now? That is one of my specialties.'

(So they all agreed that they should like to hear me talk about trees.)

'I want you to understand, in the first place, that I have a most intense, passionate fondness for trees in general, and have had several romantic attachments to certain trees in particular. Now, if you expect me to hold forth in a scientific way about my tree lovers, to talk, for instance, of the *Ulmus Americana*, and describe the ciliated edges of the samara, and all that, you are an asinine

individual, and I must refer you to a dull friend who will discourse to you of such matters. What should you think of a lover who should describe the idol of his heart in the language of science.

'No, my friends, I shall speak of trees as we see them, love them, adore them in the fields, where they are alive. . . .'

Walter Scott heralded tree love stories like the one about the Dean Oak whose owner, Charles K. Dean of Boscobel, bequeathed his favorite tree and the land on which it grew so that no future owner could abuse it. But trees are often endangered by human expedience and Walter also mourned the tragic demise of magnificent trees that were cut down uncompromisingly. For example, a giant hackberry was felled in 1950 despite local residents' objections—in order to widen highway 30.

Yet overall, identifying historic trees and encouraging their preservation is a Wisconsin tradition. Increase Lapham, the state's earliest scientist and scholar, wrote in 1856:

"Trees, besides being useful, are ornamental; they enter largely into the material of the landscape-gardener. Desolate indeed would be our dwellings were their environs entirely treeless. They are associated with our early recollections and become in a great degree companions of our lives; and we unconsciously form strong attachments for such as grown near our homes, thus increasing our love of home, and improving our hearts."

Lapham, as chairman of Wisconsin's first forestry commission, in 1867 again counseled tree preservation in the "Report on the Disastrous Effects of the Destruction of Forest Trees, now going on so rapidly in the State of Wisconsin."

Ernest Brunken, secretary of the special forestry commission that drafted legislation to establish Wisconsin's original forestry program in 1898, also saw the importance of preserving trees. In an article about "Some Remarkable Trees in the Vicinity of Milwaukee," he writes of notable trees and suggests that "it would be well if a record of them was made by people interested in fine trees."

Walter did his share of recording such trees. In December 1974, school children studying the history of Walter's home neighborhood along the southwestern shore of Lake Mendota, asked his help in locating large oaks that might have "witnessed" the retreat of Black Hawk and his followers in July 1832. Walter went one step further and spent the Christmas-New Year's holiday conducting an extensive survey of all trees within a one-mile radius. He measured and recorded more than 700 trees, then compared his observations with those made in 1835 by government surveyors. Not only did he locate large and historic trees as requested, but he also came to some interesting conclusions about changes in vegetation that had occurred during the 140-year interval.

The year of the American Bicentennial, Walter conducted a survey of oak trees within an eight-mile radius of the state Capitol in search of 200-year-old and older oaks. His list upon completion included 365 of the great trees.

In fact, it is not surprising that Walter, when pressed by a newspaper reporter one Arbor Day, chose oak as his favorite Wisconsin tree. It wasn't that he neglected other species—his backyard arboretum at Hickory Hill House contained more than 100 different species. Nevertheless, I can believe that it was oak which he enjoyed planting most, for, as Washington Irving observed long ago in *Forest Trees*:

"He who plants an oak looks forward to future ages, and plants for posterity. Nothing can be less selfish than this. He cannot expect to sit in its shade, or enjoy its shelter: but he exults in the idea that the acorn which he has buried in the earth shall grow up into a lofty pile, and shall keep on flourishing, and increasing, and benefiting mankind, long after he shall have ceased to tread his paternal fields." ■

Wisconsin big tree society

■ "Hunting big trees is awe inspiring," says Chad McGrath, one of the founders of the recently organized Wisconsin Big Tree Society. "Standing next to a champion humbles anyone."

Six tree enthusiasts met last September in Wisconsin Dells to organize the society. "The purpose of the group is to bring together people interested in the history and heritage of Wisconsin's trees and forests," says Jerry Lapidakis, DNR private forestry specialist and keeper of the state champion tree records.



The Wisconsin Big Tree Society at its first meeting. On the left, from front to rear are Ted Pyrek, Fred Peter and Robert Mahotka. On the right, Tim Yanacheck and Jerry Lapidakis.

This group will cooperate with DNR's Bureau of Forestry in coordinating the Wisconsin champion tree program. Members will also promote the protection and wise use of Wisconsin's forests.

"We will inform the public about the importance of our trees by relating their history to our state's future," says McGrath. "That may help us put today into the framework of forever."

Other organizers of the group include Tim Yanacheck, Madison; Ted Pyrek, Horicon; Fred Peter, Marshfield; and Robert Mahotka, West Salem.

For more information on the group contact Jerry Lapidakis, DNR, Box 7921, Madison, WI 53707 (608-266-2289). ■