

Our oldest oaks — a living heritage

By WALTER E. SCOTT

Some 27 years ago Prof. Robert S. Ellarson (U.W.-Madison) published his paper on The Vegetation of Dane County, Wisconsin, in 1835. He found the most widespread and abundant plant association described in the original land surveys to be what was called oak openings, "in which the oaks, primarily bur and white, but often black, are the dominant members of the association."

These government surveyors, working in December, 1834, where the State Capitol now stands, reported in their field notes, "timber black, white and burr O. Undergrowth same." For this reason it was felt a survey of the oldest oaks within eight miles of the State Capitol would have special significance at this time.

Also, in connection with the American Revolution Bicentennial this year, a Wisconsin Committee on Forest Heritage had been formed with L. G. Sorden of Madison as its chairman. Cooperators included the U.W. Extension, Department of Natural Resources and State Historical Society, while the data was to be collected through the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters. One of the many possible projects this committee recommended was location of living trees which might be 200 or more years old. The Four Lakes region seemed ideal for this type of search.

Based on annual growth ring studies of oaks which had been cut in this

vicinity, minimum criteria was established requiring circumference of trunk at 4½ feet above the ground to be at least 10 feet on burs and whites and, because of faster growth, 11 feet on the black-red-pin group. Although some oak trees in very favorable locations may grow this large in fewer years, others this size may be even older. Surprisingly, a total of 250 oaks which met this size requirement were found: 132 burs, 59 whites and 59 of the black-red-pin group. The largest was a red oak over 16 feet in circumference and there was a total of 42 oaks over 12 feet.

Without question, the Madison area has a rich heritage in these venerable trees which are a living link with our past and a challenge for the future.

How many can we preserve for the Tricentennial in 2076? This would require a determined effort to keep them alive and well along with a willingness to allow a place for them in an environment rapidly filling with asphalt and concrete developments.

Some years ago, Charles K. Dean of Boscobel recognized this need for his large white oak tree when he dedicated one-third of an acre of land to the tree so long as it should live. It became known as the "Dean Oak" and was the subject of a painting which hangs in the Boscobel library.

In 1820, William H. Jackson of Athens, Ga., expressed a similar sentiment for his white oak when he wrote



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in his will: "For and in consideration of the great love I bear this tree and the great desire I have for its protection for all time, I convey entire possession of itself and all land within eight feet of the tree on all sides." This deed is recorded in the clerk's office there and an engraved monument next to the tree carries the words.

Fortunately, at least 100 of the big oaks found in this Madison vicinity survey are on public lands or areas where preservation should be assured such as cemeteries, golf courses and school grounds. Even the State Department of Transportation carefully designed the I 90-94-Milwaukee Road intersection to protect several fine bur oaks in divider islands.

The U.W. Campus has at least 12 trees and the U.W. Arboretum 15, while city parks and parkways have many fine specimens under their care. Hope also can be expressed for the big trees on private lands where most are appreciated and cherished. But there are a score or more which seem to be ignored, misused and even abused. These are in danger of destruction by careless land development or lack of nourishment.

Wisconsin's first scientist and scholar, Increase Lapham, ably expressed man's relationships to trees when he wrote an article on "The Oak Trees of Wisconsin" in the Wisconsin Farmer over 120 years ago. He pointed out that "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 grow near our homes — thus increasing our love of home, and improving our hearts."

It is obvious that numerous farmers and other landowners in the Madison area agree with this sentiment. As will be seen on the distribution map, there are several groups of big oaks where old farm homes are or were. Also, many big trees are concentrated along former Indian trails which later became Territorial roads and now are main highways. Many with impressive trees have learned to love them, and some homeowners have built terraces or gardens around their specimens.

At Walter Atwood's home in Indian Hills, where an old Indian trail marker oak is located, a lovely bed of ferns has been planted at the base of the tree. This tree is one of the trails Black Hawk and his people used when fleeing toward the Wisconsin River and no doubt was seen by them in 1832. Unfortunately it is a little too small to be included in this survey report. However, two other trees on the adjacent Blackhawk Country Club are listed.

Recently the Maple Bluff Garden Club searched for the village's big and historic trees and about ten of the oaks they measured had large enough circumference for 200-year status. President Dorothy Koltes arranged to have all the big trees named and marked and the project is continuing.



This red oak is near the Eagle Effigy Mound on the Mendota Hospital grounds.

A similar investigation was made of the Spring Harbor neighborhood and seven qualifying oaks were found within about a one-mile radius. This led to the discovery of the "Spirit Oak" on the Blackhawk Country Club which fell in September, 1974. The stump was so large it was left where it fell and

named oak (white) is in the U.W. Arboretum, dedicated to one of the founders, Col. Joseph W. Jackson.

According to a government publication of 1938 on "Famous Trees," unusually old or large trees often play an intimate part in human experience

Old oak tree list is available free

A list of the 250 old oaks within 8 miles of the State Capitol, complete with locations and sizes, is available free from Walter Scott, 1721 Hickory Dr., Madison, 53705. Anyone knowing of old oaks which might qualify for the list is asked to contact Scott so they can be included in the report!

landscaped. The rings of this bur oak, 12 feet two inches in circumference, were counted carefully at the Forest Products Laboratory. The tree was 227 years old and in 1776 was already over five inches in diameter.

L. J. Markwardt, honorary president of the Blackhawk Country Club, loved this tree so much he wrote its "Autobiography" in an illustrated booklet. Another inventory recently completed and pending publication in a report on the "Trees of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Campus" by R. William Thomas and Prof. Edward R. Hasselkus. They refer especially to the President's Oak (bur) on Observatory Hill and the Governor Harvey Oak (black) in Camp Randall. Another

Walter Scott, former assistant to the secretary of the State Department of Natural Resources, kept records on big trees in the state for over 20 years. He is now retired.

and this is a fact in every country. By their very nature they frequently are landmarks and often they become memorials. Their associations carry through several generations of man and inspire poets and artists to creativity. There are trees under which Indian treaties and councils were held and others where famous battles were fought. Many date back to Revolutionary times and others even earlier.

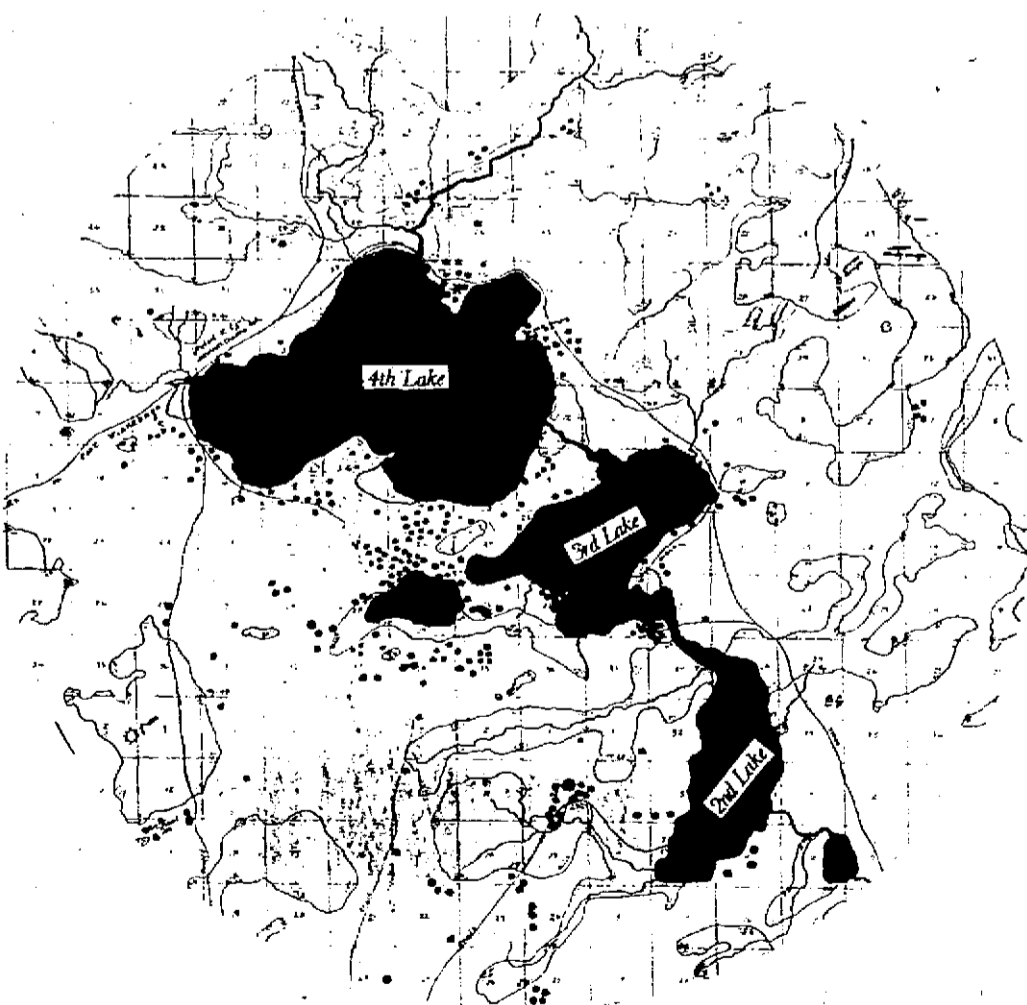
Some of these include the Lafayette White Oak in Connecticut and another in that vicinity where George Washington held council in 1780. This publication reports the Wye Mills Oak in Maryland at 391 years in 1930 and a white oak near Salem, N.J., 300-400 years old.

It is said that the bur oak tree under which Madison's first settlers, the Eben Pecks, built their cabin in 1837 still was standing in 1919. Frank Custer, Capital Times historian, claims to have information as to when that tree came down.

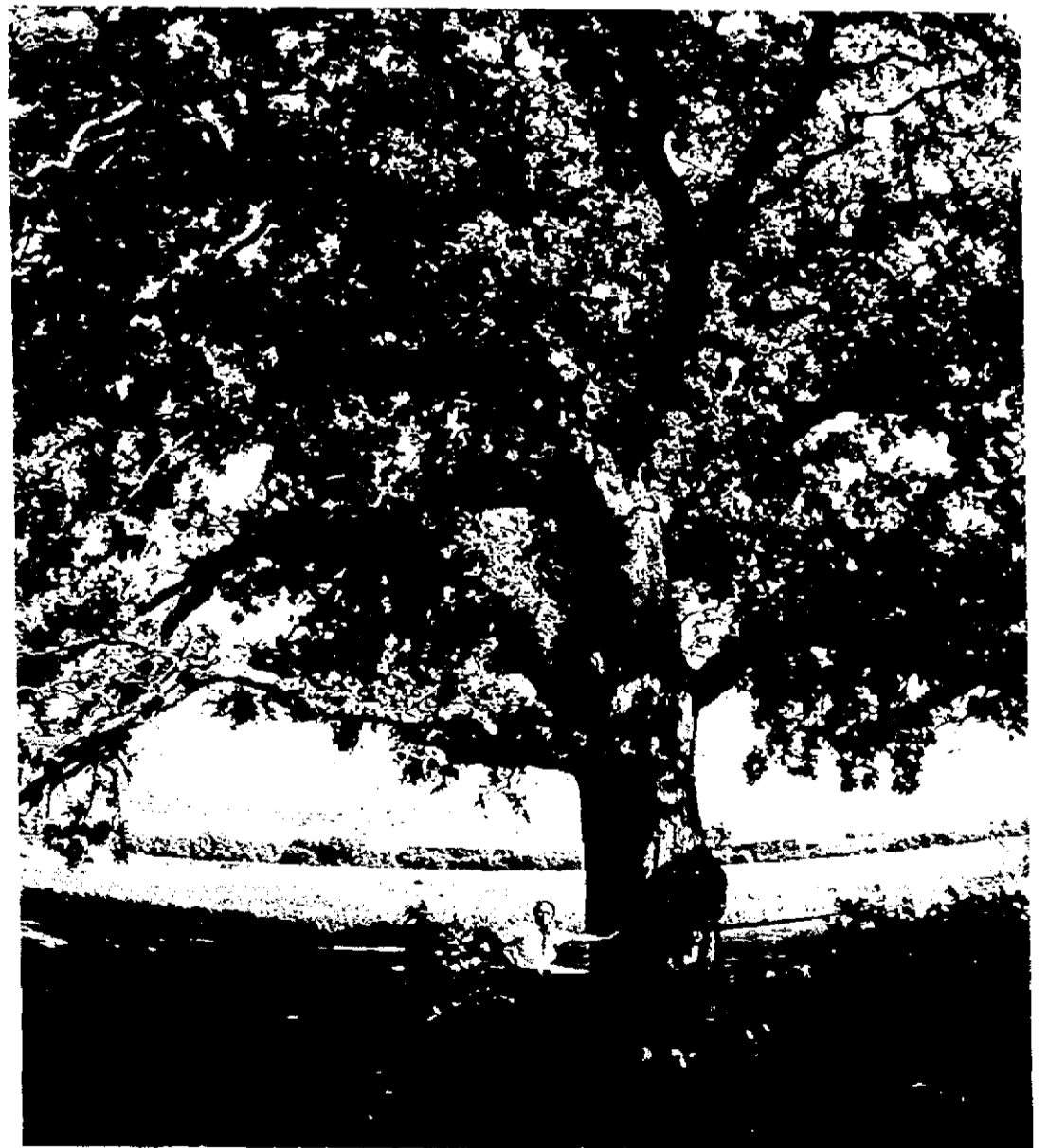
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Mrs. Duane Smith is dwarfed by this white oak tree, growing at 602 Pine Street, the largest in the Madison area.



This copyrighted base map reproduction of Madison four lakes country on which 250 old oak tree locations are noted with black dots is used courtesy of Historic Madison, Inc., which has 20x24 inch color copies available for sale at local bookstores and the State Historical Society. The map covers 19 by 24 miles and shows prairies, marshes, lakes and streams as they were 143 years ago.



The second largest bur oak in the Madison area is this one at 6566 Nesbitt Rd.

Staff photos by Fritz

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This recent survey found another bur oak in the present State Capitol grounds which was only a short distance away from the Pecks' home. It too is historic in that Judge J. D. Doty platted Madison Village in its very shadow and the Pecks and other early pioneers walked nearby. There are many other old oaks located at historic sites and deserving of recognition such as:

- The big red oak on Waconia Lane in Middleton near where the Indian Trading Post was located and where the Winnebagos listened to Col. Dodge and Capt. Brown counsel them not to join Black Hawk in his 1832 uprising.

- The second-largest bur oak near Madison on the old stagecoach road which also had a stopping place nearby on what now is Nesbitt Rd.

- The many fine old oaks on Edgewood College groups where Increase Lapham very probably tethered his horse, Adelaide, while surveying the Indian Mounds there over 120 years ago.

- The patriarch of bur oaks on the U.W. Campus — the President's Tree just southeast of Washburn Observatory — said to have been used as a long-range rifle target by Union soldiers stationed at Camp Randall during the Civil War.

- The many landmark oaks in Maple Bluff and on the Mendota Hospital grounds which stood as sentinels for many decades prior to arrival of white settlers while the Indians moved to and from their nearby maple sugaring grounds each Spring.

- The black oak across from 3310 Monroe St. in the U.W. Arboretum, on the edge of the former stagecoach trail which passed Plough Inn and the Old Spring hotel.

Looking to the future, it seems obvious that our oldest oak trees will become more precious and highly prized as the years go by. Those responsible for their health and safety will be reading another kind of Extension Service bulletin called "The Care and Feeding of Old Oaks."

Organizations will help see to it that these specimens are given adequate

The 12 largest oaks near Capitol

BUR OAKS

Location	Circumference at 4 1/2 feet
1. In crop field opposite 2927 Oregon Rd. (within 100 yds. of Co. Hwy. MM)	14' 1/2"
2. 6261 Nesbitt Rd.	13' 4"
3. 1419 Vilas Ave.	12' 11"
4. 2846 Oregon Rd.	12' 10 1/2"
5. Observatory Hill — UW Campus (President's Tree)	12' 10"
6. Town of Fitchburg Park — Wildheater & Dragonwick	12' 7"
7. 2402 Oregon Rd.	12' 6 1/2"
8. N.E. Roadside at Jct. Milwaukee road & 190-94	12' 6"
9. 1410 Drake St.	12' 5 1/2"
10. 4201 Buckeye Rd. (Allis School)	12' 5"
11. 5916 Oncken Rd.	12' 4 1/2"
12. No. side of Vilas Park (in park) near Grant St.	12' 4"

WHITE OAKS

1. 602 Pine St.	12' 8 1/2"
2. 1715 Waunona Way	12' 8"
3. 233 Lakewood Blvd. (Maple Bluff)	12' 7"
4. Turville Park	12' 6"
5. South side Co. Trunk "M" near Six Mile Creek	12' 5 1/2"
6. Mendota Hospital Grounds — SW Road to Governor's Island	12' 2"
7. Behind Mausoleum in Forest Hill Cemetery	11' 8"
8. 1305 Mathys Rd.	11' 7 1/2"
9. 5302 Arrowhead Dr.	11' 7"
10. E. Side Mausfield Rd., So. of Co. Trunk "M"	11' 5 1/2"
11. 223 N. Baldwin St.	11' 4 1/2"
12. Corner of N. Brearly & E. Gorham Sts.	11' 3 1/2"

BLACK, RED AND PIN OAKS

1. Near Eagle Effigy Mound on Mendota Hospital Grounds	16' 1"
2. Near Entrance to Governor's Island on Mendota Hospital Grounds	14' 7"
3. East Side of Old Middleton Rd. at St. Dunstan's Parish	14'
4. 1234 Wellesley Rd.	(at 3 ft.) 13' 10"
5. At Entrance to St. Mary's Hospital, Brooks and Beacon Sts.	13' 7"
6. Near Entrance to Governor's Island on Mendota Hospital Grounds	13' 6 1/2"
7. SE Corner Edgewood College Campus near Edgewood Dr.	13' 2 1/2"
8. Near Entrance to Governor's Island on Mendota Hospital Grounds	12' 8"
9. Northern Section of Mendota Hospital Grounds	12' 6"
10. 4218 Green Ave. on roadside	12' 5"
11. 81 Cambridge Rd. (Maple Bluff)	12' 4"
12. 1601 Wild Oak Circle	12' 3 1/2"

nourishment and fences to prevent crowding and impaction of the soil near their roots. From the finest and best oaks wise persons will secure acorns for planting, as offspring from the Jackson Oak and the President's Oak (as well as other choice specimens) will become more meaningful than some trees with less character.

It is significant that Aldo Leopold found a wealth of Sauk County historical reminiscences in the 80-year-old black oak which grew near his shack from 1865 to 1945 when it was cut. He also said much more with his title of this essay in A Sand County Almanac which is "The Good Oak." One might even ask, what other kind is there?