

The Coffin Tree

Rusk County

A tale worthy of a Halloween telling involves a large, hollow basswood tree, a forest near Ladysmith in Rusk County and two loggers, Art Charpin and Walter Latsch, who were scared out of their wits on a February day in 1926. It was first told by a Rusk County weekly.

The day started out innocently enough. The basswood had been marked by a timber cruiser for cutting and Charpin and Latsch were wielding the saw. They noticed a large hole in the tree some 30 feet above the ground, but they felled it anyway, figuring they'd get a 20-foot log out of it. The trouble started when they tried to saw through the trunk. The saw bound up against something hard. They came in from another angle. The saw again hit a rocklike center. At this point they were curious about a rock inside a tree, and turning the log as needed with a cant hook, they managed to saw all the way around the "rock" and pull the end of the trunk away. The wrinkled face of a man stared up at them. Shaking, they hightailed it back to town.

Eventually their story was believed and a party of four went into the woods to investigate. Sure enough, when the trunk was completely removed, they found the body of a man, fully clothed in coarse

homespun and buckskin, which fell away when touched. The head, covered with long hair, still wore a coonskin cap. With the mummified body the men found an old muzzle-loading flintlock rifle and a fancy muzzle-loading pistol. Pieces of paper found on the body at first seemed to identify the man as a Captain D' Artagon who had been with the Marquette-Joliet party seeking a route to the Pacific Ocean in 1673. This seemed totally implausible, however, as the exploring party never came near Rusk County, and if the man had been lost, it is not likely that he would have continued to travel westward, away from the Wisconsin River.

The finders of the grisly surprise finally theorized that the man, whoever he was, had been pursued by Indians, had taken refuge in the hollow tree, and unable to get out again, had died there.

According to the Rusk County weekly, the body was supposedly shipped to the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The two loggers vowed never to return to the haunted forest near Ladysmith.