

Trees That Stood in the Way

According to Walter E. Scott, noted discoverer and cataloger of Wisconsin trees, "Mature men wept to see the desecration of beautiful trees during the 1950 road-widening project on Highway 30 in Waukesha County."

Mrs. Otton L. Prime, a woman who lived along that road, did everything she could to save what was described as "the most beautiful hackberry" in the state and probably the largest, as well as oaks, maples, black walnuts and butternuts. All were over 100 years old, some 200 or 300. Angered spectators, brought together by the incident, decried the callousness and undue haste with which the destruction of "that scenic, mile-long arborway" was destroyed.

Road-widening projects are still taking their toll of old trees, and often whether cutting is necessary or not is a matter of personal opinion. Some years ago, Mrs. Herbert Mohns of Brodhead offered to pay any price for the parcel of land on which a 300-year-old roadside elm, 21 feet in circumference and over 100 feet high, stood. The owner refused her offer with a rude "The g—d— tree has to come down!" and proceeded to cut it. Mrs. Mohns later wrote an "Ode to the Old Elm Tree" that was published in *Prairie Farmer*.

The Monona Drive widening project in Madison caused the destruction of several trees, among them an old bur oak, despite the objections of residents led by Mrs. F. I. Elliott. In a plea before the city council, she stressed the aesthetic value of trees to the community.

Around 1980, several old prairie oak trees along Wilkinson Road in Dunlap Hollow in the Township of Mazomanie in Dane County fell to ax and saw. These giants predated the arrival of the settlers who found their way into the groves of open-grown oaks and built their homes of native limestone near their shade. The cutting included a huge black oak whose stump was almost 13 feet in circumference. An added legal question involved in this case was who gets the wood when trees are cut along roads on private property?

Folks sometimes go to great expense to preserve a tree they love. Many years ago, a man named Harry Netherwood lived at the corner of Garfield and Chandler Streets in Madison. He liked to look out the windows of his home at the beautiful, large bur oak growing in a vacant lot across Chandler. When the lot went up for sale in 1911 he bought it, and subsequently paid taxes on it every year until 1942. Netherwood, who had enjoyed the tree's presence for 50 years, undoubtedly thought the cost well worth it. Eventually as an old man he had to sell his property, and the tree was, of course, cut down to make way for a new building.

In 2003, Eileen Potts Dawson, as a Friend of the Madison School Forest in Verona Township, Dane County, fought valiantly to save ancient twin oaks from a road-widening project. The battle lost, she memorialized the trees in the poem *In Memoriam, July 23, 2003*, excerpted below. It speaks for all those who lament the loss of trees that stood in the way of progress.

*They survived the footfalls and the hooves,
the sharp-clawed paws, the insects and the
droughts,
the lightning, the winds, the wagon wheels.
They spread their yearling limbs while Henry
David Thoreau and John Muir were writing
of the splendor, the fragility of nature, and our
responsibilities for caretaking.
The oaks grew tall and strong and straight,
while near and far other woods disappeared, farm
fields sprouted rows of green and gold
Concrete described a little roadway.
They survived, they thrived, they flourished.*

*In time, standing side by side, these twin oaks
became
Sentinel trees for all who came to walk their
forest home.
They were the symbols of what lay just ahead,
down one path or up another,
this forest of black oak and white, bur oak and
red, hickory and cherry, sugar maple and
pine.
Survivors
asking nothing of us except respect for their being,
giving us so much in return.*

Sources: Mrs. Dennis Lenzendorf, Mazomanie
Eileen Potts Dawson, Madison