

Witness Trees

When surveyors came to Wisconsin in the early 1830s and '40s to survey the territory prior to statehood, they often sought out trees as markers or "bearers." In the south, bur oaks, already growing on the prairie because they were resistant to fire, were most often used. Some of these trees were large landmarks even then. At other times, the surveyors bent young trees into abnormal shapes to mark the property lines. There are undoubtedly many of these trees still standing, but we know about only a few of them. For example, Dunn, St. Croix, Jackson, Jefferson, Waushara and Dane Counties have all reported finding identifiable witness trees.

Resurveys of property that necessitated finding the old bearing trees have resulted in the entering of some updated descriptions into the official records. From Oakland Township in Jefferson County are two such references:

Found Original Bearing Tree, measured distance & angle to the corner dug down 1' and found the Stone ... Tree age by boring is over 250 years as of date below (1975) and in good shape....

A very large Bur Oak fits original Bearing description, but was unable to see any markings on the tree, Bearing would be to the Southeast of the concrete marker.

A rare bearing tree with a sideways "A" carved into a blaze on the trunk stood on the property of an old-time logger, J. M. Rustad. Its location marked the survey line between Albany and New Hope Townships in Portage County.

In the southwest corner of Section 30 in the Town of Richford in Waushara County, a black oak served as a witness tree. While resurveying around 1980, the county surveyor found the measurements precise to the old tree, which had served as the section corner point since about 1850.

Sources: Mrs. Hugh F. Gwin, Hudson
Ray H. Hansen, Coloma
Lawrence Jones, Black River Falls
Hannah Swart, Fort Atkinson