

The Lunde Chestnut Trees

Trempealeau County

The American chestnut, undoubtedly one of the nation's most loved species of tree, enhanced by folklore, nostalgia and literary allusion, is commonly thought to be as extinct as the dodo because of the chestnut blight introduced from Asia in the very early years of the twentieth century.

It is true that most of the country's chestnut stands, certainly those in the eastern part of the country, were completely wiped out before 1940. This total destruction of a native tree species was something never witnessed before that time. But contrary to what most folks believe, chestnuts are alive and living in Wisconsin. They make up a significant portion of the genetically pure American chestnuts left in the world.

A large grove of them, many nearing the hundred-year-old mark, grows in western Wisconsin, on the farm of Einar Lunde, three and a half miles east of Trempealeau in Trempealeau County. There are also small groves of fruiting chestnut trees in Green Lake and Sauk Counties, and single chestnut trees are scattered from Kenosha to Bayfield.

These Wisconsin trees are outside the chestnut's native zone of 20 eastern states. During the years of the blight's scourge, they were protected by the

effective barrier of 500 miles of open country. Prevailing westerly winds also helped keep the fast-acting and fatal fungus, for which no cure is presently known, out of Wisconsin until recently.

The trees on Einar Lunde's farm provide more than just esthetic enjoyment, though the sight of them covered with snowy white catkins about the first of July is a thrilling one. Their copious harvest of nuts is also gathered, both for the delicious eating and for their use by forest researchers in efforts to breed a blight-resistant chestnut.

Chestnut trees have received frequent mention in the annals of Wisconsin history. Increase Lapham, the state's first scientist, recommended over a hundred years ago that chestnuts be planted because of the value of their nuts, favored by humans and beast alike. There is evidence that early settlers brought the chestnut to Wisconsin because they cherished not only its fruit and the beauty of its flowers, but also its all-round usefulness for fence posts, shingles, poles and ties, charcoal, etc.

In 1859, it is recorded, a farmer named Jacob Lowe, from Columbia County, won a prize from the State Agricultural Society for the first chestnuts produced by his young trees.