

The Muir Locust

Madison

It was beneath a black locust tree, which stood along Observatory Drive near North Hall (the first building) on the University of Wisconsin–Madison campus, that John Muir, famous naturalist and father of the national park system, had his first botany lesson from a fellow student.

Muir, a Scottish lad from a farm near Portage, had come at age 19 to the new University seeking a college education, though his previous schooling had been slight. A fellow student took Muir to observe the blooms on the locust tree, explaining to the fascinated farm boy some of the rudiments of botany. It was June 1863. Here is Muir's own account of the incident from his autobiography, *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*:

I received my first lesson in botany from a student by the name of Griswold, who is now County Judge of the County of Waukesha, Wisconsin. In the University he was often laughed at on account of his anxiety to instruct others, and his frequently saying with a fine emphasis, "Imparting instruction is my greatest enjoyment." One memorable day in June, when I was standing on the stone steps of the north dormitory, Mr. Griswold joined me and at once began to teach. He reached up, plucked a flower from an over-spreading branch of a locust tree, and, handing it to me, said, "Muir, do you know what family this tree belongs to?"

"No," I said, "I don't know anything about botany."

"Well, no matter," said he, "what is it like?"

"It's like a pea flower," I replied.

"That's right. You're right," he said, "it belongs to the Pea Family."

"But how can that be," I objected, "when the pea is a weak, clinging, straggling herb, and the locust is a big, thorny hardwood tree?"



John Muir
Wisconsin Historical
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Griswold then introduced to the receptive student the principals of taxonomy, the classification of all plants by shared characteristics. Muir's eyes were forever opened to the remarkable orderly world of botany. The big, thorny hardwood tree, relative to the weak clinging pea, in tribute to Muir's stature, as a protector of the natural world was later named the Muir Locust.

Muir died in 1914. In 1918 the Board of Regents dedicated Muir Knoll, across Observatory Drive from the famed tree. A red granite boulder marks the site. Charles H. Vilas delivered the dedication address, and Muir's "teacher," Judge Griswold, and roommate Charles F. Vroman spoke of their recollections of the great naturalist.

Unfortunately, in 1953, amid considerable controversy, the University cut down the tree, by then 12 feet 1 inch in girth. Many, including Walter Scott and Wakeland McNeel, argued forcefully, yet futilely, to save it. The justification provided for its removal by G. William Longenecker, professor of horticulture and landscape architect, was that the tree's heart was dead and its trunk filled with pitch, and that further efforts to save the tree would be useless as it had already lived many years past its prime. Professor Walter Rowlands made the wood into gavels, letter opener knives and other similar objects. Then President E. B. Fred passed these souvenirs on to friends of the University who had some contact with the Muir legacy.

In researching this story R. Bruce Allison recovered long forgotten, damaged photographs of the tree and its removal stored as negatives at the UW photo laboratory. On a hunch, he delved into the dust-covered files of the late E. B. Fred stored in the lower basement archives at Memorial Library. Looking for thank you note responses to the souvenir gifts, he came across one particularly poignant letter that told the story of the conflict of the tree's removal.

In response to receiving one of the gavels, Wakeland McNeel, then supervisor of the Upham Woods Project for the University and who was also known as Ranger Mac on public radio, wrote:

I do not know what we are going to do now that the tree is gone. It stood there as a tangible, effective, though silent spokesman of a turning point in a man's life; of a time of decision that made the outdoors his University and gave the world John Muir.

A gavel shouts for order. This tree, in the grand, silent manner of its waning strength, secured order like prayer. To stand beside the distorted tree body, to pat its wrinkled skin, to throw your arms about its scarred body, and then to tell the story, was a memorable way to impress young folks gathered about that there lived a man like John Muir, and that trees can do divine things.

I do not know now what we are going to do to accomplish these results. But I feel highly pleased that you remembered me with a portion of the flesh of this tree, shaped in the beautiful form of the gavel. I have placed the gavel on the shelf along with his books with the silent prayer that the memory of the accomplishments of this great man, and the accomplishments themselves, will never go the way this tree had to go.

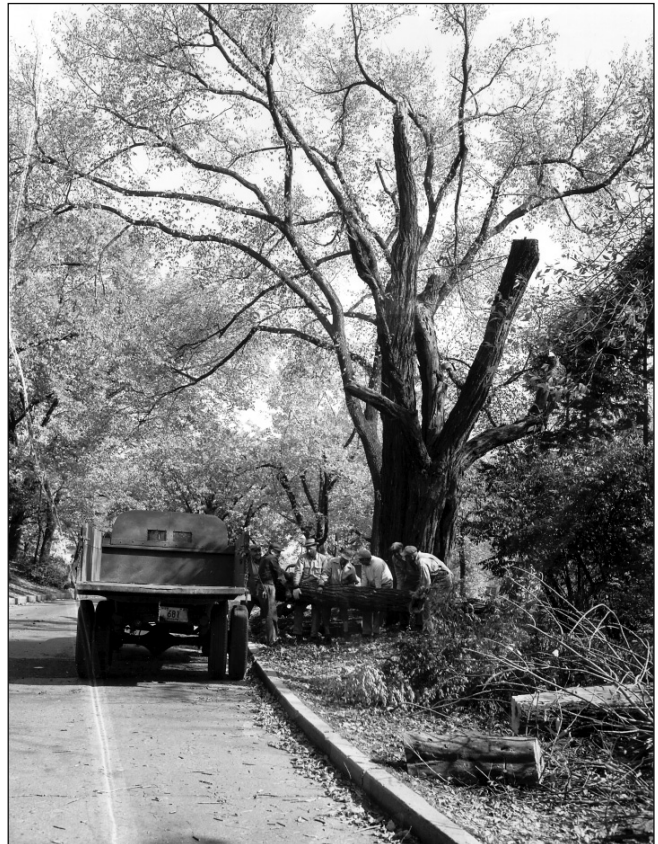
It was most gracious of you to remember how deeply I hold in reverence this foster son of our state.

Muir Park, including the knoll and about seven acres formerly known as Bascom Woods, was dedicated on February 8, 1964, as a laboratory for the study of flora and fauna of the region. The speaker, Professor Grant Cottam of the botany department, described the spot as “One of Nature’s history books ... representing a thousand years of vegetational history.”

Muir himself left the University after four years without actually receiving a degree. Later he wrote in his autobiography:

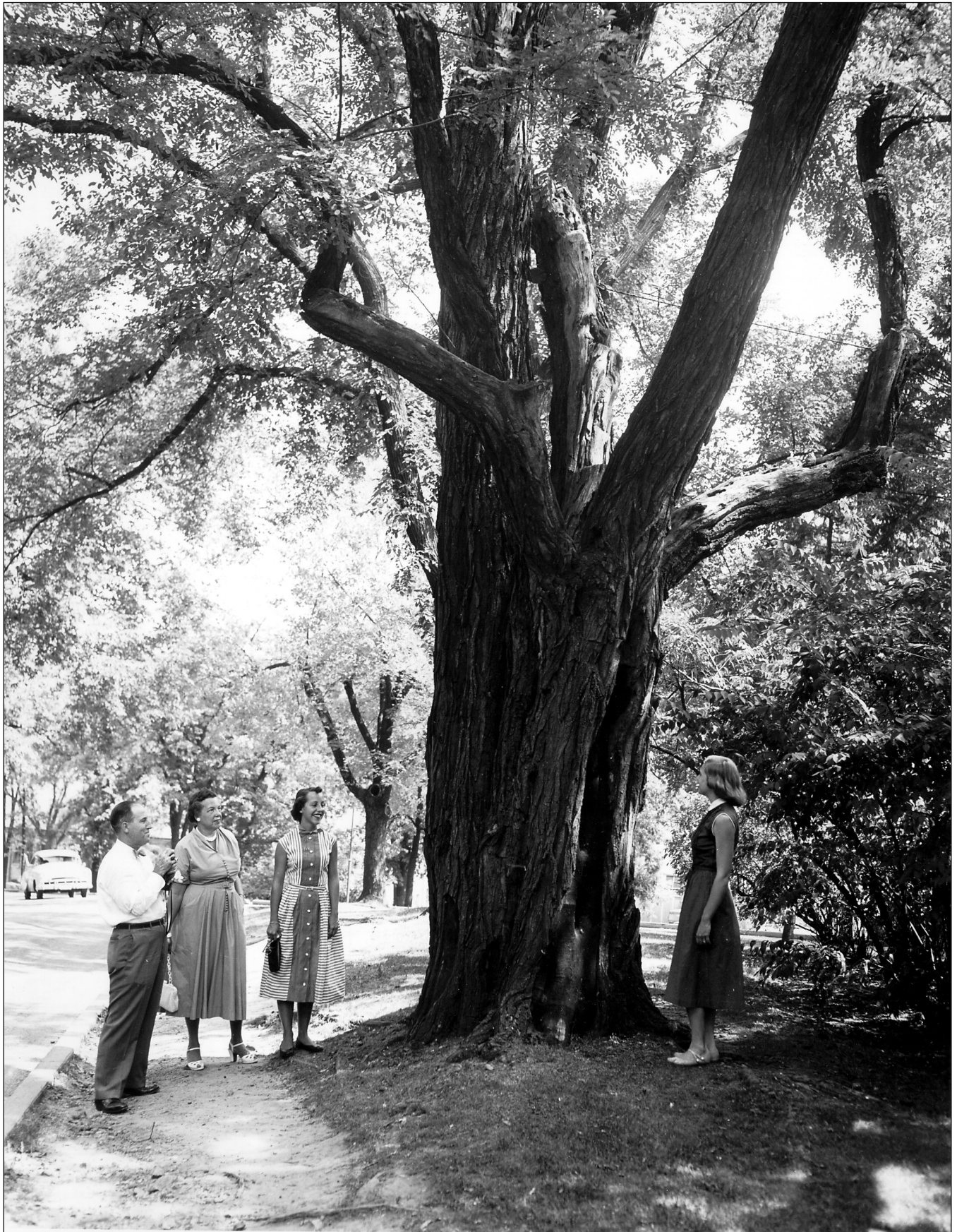
From the top of a hill on the north side of Lake Mendota I gained a last wistful, lingering view of the beautiful University grounds and buildings where I had spent so many hungry and happy and hopeful days. There with streaming eyes I bade my blessed alma mater farewell. But I was only leaving one University for another—the University of the Wilderness.

Source: Frank Cook, Madison



Muir Locust

University of Wisconsin—Extension (1955)



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