



Walter Scott in front of boxelder at Hickory Hill B-Wolfgang Hoffmann (1979)

## Walter Scott's Hickory Hill *Madison*

*What is a weed? A plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson  
in *Fortunes of the Republic*, 1878

To some people the boxelder is a messy, over-competitive weed tree species. But Walter Scott, whose fondness for Wisconsin trees was a life-long passion, found virtue even in this representative. In the dooryard of Hickory Hill House, the historic Madison home in which Walter and his wife, Trudi, lived for over 40 years, stood a remarkable 100-year-old boxelder. Its gnarled trunk had the character of

an oak, its crown all the spread of a chestnut, and in height and stature it rivaled the pride of an elm.

When the state record book of big trees was begun in 1941, this tree was one of the first to be measured and entered as a state champion. During the years he served in the Wisconsin Department of Conservation (later to become the Department of Natural Resources), Walter was an enthusiastic participant in the big tree program. He served as an official record keeper for 28 years until his retirement in 1974. Even though his boxelder was displaced in the record book by larger contenders, he faithfully measured the tree on the first day of spring each year and recorded annual growth rates.

As one would expect, there are many other trees in Hickory Hill. In fact, it is a veritable arboretum with more than 100 species represented. One tree of special interest was an American spindle tree (wahoo) that was grown from a cutting taken from the state record specimen beside Aldo Leopold's shack in Sauk County.

Another dooryard tree that is probably as old as the house itself is a lilac. Years ago a coal truck broke off part of it, but it still thrives and blooms each spring.

The home was built outside the city limits of early-day Madison in 1842. John G. Hicks, who came from the East, was its first owner. It is now a designated Landmark Madison home and typifies the sturdy stone farmhouses of the time.

The location of Hickory Hill (its original acreage bordered the southwestern shore of Lake Mendota for one half mile) is certainly historic. In December 1974, school children studying the history of their home neighborhood solicited Walter's help in locating large oaks that might have "witnessed" the retreat of Black Hawk and his doomed followers in July 1832.

Walter went one step further and spent the Christmas and New Year's holidays conducting an extensive survey of the trees within a one-mile radius of his house. He measured and recorded more than 700 trees, then compared his observations with those made in 1835 by the original government surveyors. Not only did he locate the large and historic trees as requested—the 200-year-old oaks—but he also came to some interesting conclusions on the changes in

vegetation that had occurred during the 140-year interval. These were published in an article in the Botanical Club of Wisconsin newsletter in April 1975.

As part of the Bicentennial celebration in 1976, Walter began a study of oaks within an 8-mile radius of the capitol, looking for oaks over 200 years old. He established a size minimum of 10 feet in circumference at 4½ feet above the ground for bur and white oaks, and, because they grow faster, 12 feet for black, red and pin oaks. Scott figured that all trees at least the minimum size would surely be at least 200 years old. Approximately 443 oaks in Madison met or exceeded this minimum size.

In 2001, R. Bruce Allison carried on the tradition of the Bicentennial Project. He attempted to relocate Walter Scott's original "bicentennial oaks" 25 years later, and was able to find about half of them. The others were either gone or couldn't be found because the city had grown, or because of changes to road names or locations. Those oaks that Allison was able to locate are now recorded using satellite-based Global Positioning System (GPS) coordinates to make these links to our past easier to find.

Walter Scott died in 1983. One of the two main scaffold limbs of the Hickory Hill dooryard boxelder fell shortly after Walter's death. The other main limb fell when his wife, Trudi, moved away.