

The Great Oak

By Ellen Thomas

Less than a mile SE of here, just down the Katy Trail, stands the National Champion Burr Oak—estimated to be some 350 years old.. This is a BIG tree, 90 feet tall with a 130 foot spread. Burr Oaks are thought to be able to live as long as 400 years, but of course, doing so means surviving many challenges.

Let's think for a moment about this particular tree's lifespan. When it was an acorn on its parent tree, somewhere in the middle of the 17th century, this was an area populated by Missouri and Osage Indians, both semi-sedentary, both engaging in agriculture in their villages, but also hunting and gathering. The Osage hadn't been here long—they had been pushed West by Fox and Sioux Indians. But there had been native peoples living here since about 12,000 bc. At that time, the Missouri River was very different. It was much wider and shallower, frequently changing course, a shifting braid of channels and sandbars in a huge floodplain, unbound by levees, locks and dams. Somehow this tree managed to grow in its place, without being washed away by flood or covered by silt.

When it was just a sapling, Marquette and Joliet, the French explorers, made their famous journey down the Mississippi River, and for the first time, the word "Missouri" appeared on a map. Within a few decades, this land was claimed for France, and so our tree became French.

It was an adult tree 100 years later, when the territory was transferred to Spain, and it became a Spanish tree for about 40 years. France briefly reclaimed it, but in the early 19th century, the Louisiana Territory, of which this was a part, became part of the young United States. Less than a decade later, the Osage signed a treaty ceding this land to the U.S., and they moved west. For the rest of that century, our tree, now American, witnessed increasing European exploration and settlement.

With this settlement came a new set of challenges for our tree. First came the railroad, a straight line about 200 feet from the tree. I know that many great trees were felled as the railroads pushed through. My own home contains many pieces of furniture made by my great-grandfather, a surveyor for the railroads. When beautiful old Walnut trees were in the way of the spreading tracks, he marked them and had them hauled back to Columbia to his workshop. They weren't considered to be of any significant value then, but today, such great walnut trees almost don't exist.

Next came the road, built only yards from the tree. Today, much of the traffic is people making pilgrimages to the great oak for picnics, photographs and even weddings.

For five generations, the land around the great tree has been farmed by the Williamson family, and it is now a single giant in acres and acres of soybeans or corn.

We can't really know what storms and floods and severe weather the tree has survived, but we do know it bears the marks of a number of lightning strikes. In 1993, it stood in 9 feet of water for 6 weeks of the great flood. Last summer, for the first time, the Williamsons hauled water to the great tree to help it survive the terrible heat and draught. It's a very different world, too, from that of the mid 17th century. Human population, now at about 6 billion, was only 470 million worldwide then. The average American today (and there are nearly as many of us as there were people worldwide when our tree sprouted from its acorn) uses resources at a rate that the most powerful and wealthy presettlement person couldn't even dream of.

We don't know how much longer the tree will be with us—it is well into its 400 year lifespan, after all. It has been cloned, and so trees with identical genetics will go on, and of course, for centuries now it has produced annual acorn crops. Because it stands in a cornfield beside a road, there aren't any progeny nearby, but who knows where, perhaps down the river a bit, some of its offspring stand?

Please take a moment and think of the world 350 years from now, when an acorn that fell off the tree last fall has reached the size of this mighty tree. The Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy contains the admonition, "In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations." Those seven generations of humans would only see out about the first half of the life of our new tree. How are we doing? The great oak came to be in a land which had been inhabited by humans for 13,000 years. Are we living in a way that will allow its offspring to have a chance to awe and inspire the humans, so far in our future that we can't even imagine them, who will occupy this place when it reaches its full 90 foot potential?