

UT Arboretum – recent events and the Indian Trail Tree

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on October 13, 2009)

The most significantly visible event for 2009 was the new parking lot that has just been completed. Until now the Arboretum has been served by a simple and small gravel parking lot. The new parking lot was the last of several improvements that were funded by the \$114,000 grant from the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation through their Recreational Trail Program.

While the most immediately visible aspect of the grant is the parking lot, the primary focus of the grant was to improve the existing walking trails and construct additional trails. With this funding 1.7 miles were added to the 5.5 miles of existing trails, new trail signs were installed, 38 new trail benches were added, bridges and culverts were placed to bring the trails up to a standard suitable for casual walks throughout the Arboretum's forest areas and plant collections.

The trails system is one of the most appealing and heavily used features of the Arboretum. Rain or shine, early or late, there is usually someone walking the trails. The recent improvements to the trails have made hiking in the Arboretum even more enjoyable.

Two of the Arboretum's trees have been recognized and recorded as Tennessee State Champion Trees by the Tennessee Division of Forestry. They are the European Alder and the Japanese Elm. Do you know where the record Sycamore Tree is located in Oak Ridge? It is located on the bank of the East Fork Poplar Creek in the Horizon Industrial Park on the west end of Oak Ridge. It is recorded in honor of the person who located it, Joe Lenhard.

As promised, here is Richard Evans' commentary on "Pointing the Way – Indian Trail Trees:"

"One may not appreciate how ingenious Native Americans were, or they may ascribe to the notion that America was just one big wild impenetrable forest. In fact, America's forests were crisscrossed with Indian trails by the time Hernando de Soto (1492-1542) and early Europeans arrived. Indian usually walked single file and heavily used trails were often 10 inches deep. Indians use a unique way of marking their trails – Trail Trees! Other names for Trail Trees are: Thong Trees, Signal Trees, Marker Trees, Treasure Trees, Bent Trees, Message Trees, Horse and Rider Trees, and Boundary Trees."

"The purpose of these trees was to mark trails and point to other trails, springs, caves, river crossings, sources of game, danger, food, other tribes, trading routes, etc. What does a trail tree look like? Generally, these trees are bent trees or trees that have been configured into odd, but easily recognized, shapes. These shaped trees are un-natural looking and different from trees that have been deformed by natural events. Variation in shapes depended on the type of tree used, the tribe, the geologic area of the United States, the age of the tree, and what they point to. Styles varied over hundreds of years. Most of the bent trees have evidence of a "nose" on the pointing end of the tree trunk. Not every bent tree in the forest is a Trail Tree. Trail Trees are usually oak species, especially white and red oaks."

"Indian Trail Trees are found just about all over the United States - especially in the eastern, southern, and mid western parts of the country. The internet is a great source of information about Trail Trees, what they commonly look like, and where some are located (reference:

<http://www.indiantrailtree.com/bio.html> , http://www.mountainstewards.org/project/internal_index.html).

There are concentrations of Trail Trees in northern Georgia, Arkansas, and Oklahoma. Several organizations and groups have joined forces to locate, preserve, and protect these historical features."

"The Trail Tree at UT's forest resources research and teaching laboratory lies within that portion of the property that is off limits to the visitors, i.e. beyond the public Arboretum portion. However, a special

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occasion is being planned to host the public on a tour to see this interesting and special tree. This tree is an old white oak and it bears all the signs of an Indian Trail Tree. A count of growth rings places its age at around 180 years old. The tree is in the "bent tree" style, with three upright limbs, or sub-trunks off of main trunk. One of the upright "trunks" on the end portion broke-off in 2004. An addition tell-tale sign is the stubbed-off nose on the pointing end."

"This tree stands in a small ridge gap almost mid-ways in the big bend of the Clinch River, as it swings-around Haw Ridge. What the tree points toward is open to speculation. It could have marked an overland shortcut between the river crossing near the Oak Ridge Marina, the same place as the historic Emery Trace crossing, and another point downstream toward the Freels Cabin and Freels Bend area of what is now Melton Hill Lake. Additional possibilities are that this particular tree points the way toward the nearby springs, or toward a good hunting spot or food source."

"Curiously, there is a nearby old wagon road that runs the length of Chestnut Ridge from the direction of the old Emery Trace river ford and ending near Kerr Hollow (Ker Hollow is the valley in which the Arboretum office is located). This wagon road can be seen on 1936 aerial photos. The photo reveals that the road was not being used as a travel route during the 30's, apparently permanently abandoned. Possibly the old wagon road was just too rutted and deep to be traveled by automobiles of the time, or maybe subsequent private property ownership patterns conflicted with rights-of-ways."

"The UT Forest Resources Center is dedicated to protecting this tree from the usual causes that befall Trail Trees - urbanization, development, road construction, the axe and saw, and soil erosion. However, storms, ice damage, tornados (it is located in an area that was narrowly missed by the tornado of 1994), old age, and disease are some natural causes of death which cannot be protected against. Look for future announcements of a planned tour to see this interesting and historic tree."

Now, there you have a wonderful dissertation on a uniquely historic tree in our area that would NEVER have even been noticed had not Richard Evans been keenly interested in the forest he manages. We are truly blessed to live in Oak Ridge where such unusual things as this are common place.

Finally, let me tell you about a special effort now being conducted to provide ongoing funding to enhance the UT Arboretum's future. The effort is known as, "Looking to the Future' The UT Arboretum Endowment Campaign."

A \$3 million endowment campaign has been initiated to secure future funding for the UT Arboretum. The Rogers Group has pledged a Founding Gift of \$500,000 and the University of Tennessee Arboretum Society continues its longstanding support, contributing annually to the Endowment fund.

The endowment will fund critical features of a comprehensive vision for the future of the UT Arboretum. It will include:

- Expanded collections of plants
- Creation of an Arboretum Coordinator position
- Improved facilities for public access and enjoyment
- Enhancement of the grounds, displays, and trails
- Perpetuation and care of existing plant collections
- Creation of vibrant education and outreach programs

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You can help by:

- Becoming an ambassador for the Arboretum and talk with others about the Endowment
- Include the Endowment in your estate planning
- Help campaign partners identify potential donors
- Discuss the importance of the Arboretum to you, your children and your community
- Honor loved ones with memorials through the Endowment

You may want to become a member of the society, donate to the endowment or just ask questions.

Please go to the web site: www.utaboretumsociety.org .

I hope you have enjoyed this visit through *Historically Speaking* to one of our city's most beloved treasures, the source of solitude and relaxation, of exercise and enjoyment, of wildflowers and mushrooms, of trails and resting benches and so much more. It is truly a source of much pride and pleasure for citizens of Oak Ridge and surrounding communities. We can be proud of the history of this nature sanctuary and the proud, yes, BOLD, future that is being planned for the UT Arboretum, Oak Ridge's pride and joy.



Richard Evan's Indian Trail Pointer Tree

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Most recent improvements include a greatly expanded parking lot