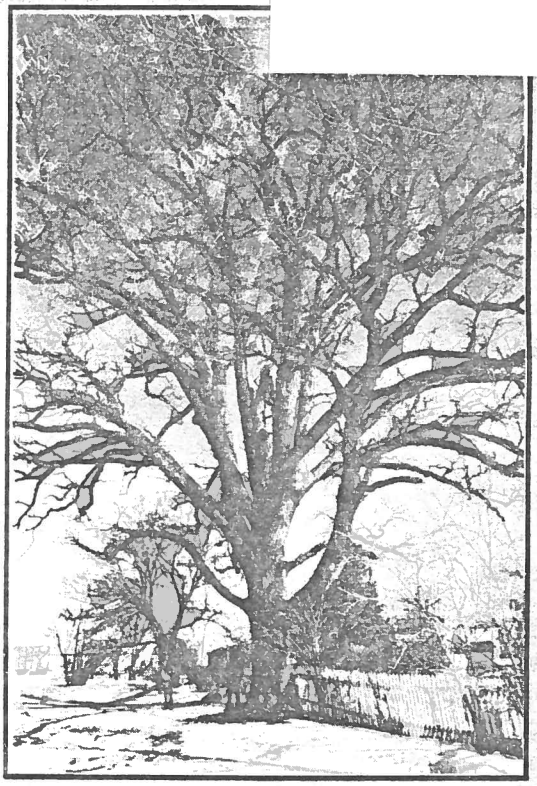
ILLINOIS TIMES

Downstate Illinois' Weekly Newspaper March 7-13, 1985 Vol.10, No. 27

An old tree's story



"Once upon a time—about 224 autumns ago—a bur oak acorn fell to the ground in Champaign County, and nothing ate it.

Continued on page 4

A witness tree

Champaign County's oldest bur oak has deep roots in the past

by Sandy Henderson

◄ *continued from cover*

The gray squirrels, the deer, the wild turkeys, the chipmunks, mice, blue jays, and blackbirds all found other nuts to crack. When the soil warmed the following spring, a sprout split the acorn and grew down through the old leaves and twigs into the soil.

The new tree sent up its first leaves at the south edge of a large prairie grove, among hazel bushes, compass plants, and other weeds and shrubs that thrive at the boundary between prairie and timber. The young tree thrived too. It survived the autumn fires that roared across the prairie faster than a horse could run. Not having to fight its way up to the sun like trees in the denser forest, it spread its branches wide. By the time the first white settlers came to Big Grove in the 1820's the bur oak was large enough to tower above the brushwood.

It's still there—you can visit it. Drive east on Main Street in Urbana, past the Solo Paper Cup Company, past the nursing home. Across the street from the county buildings, a large sign announces "SALE—LEASE. 2.5 acre zoned business-apartments." The tree stands at the eastern edge of that vacant lot, right against the picket fence separating the property from the big white house next door. A small sign is nailed to the trunk.

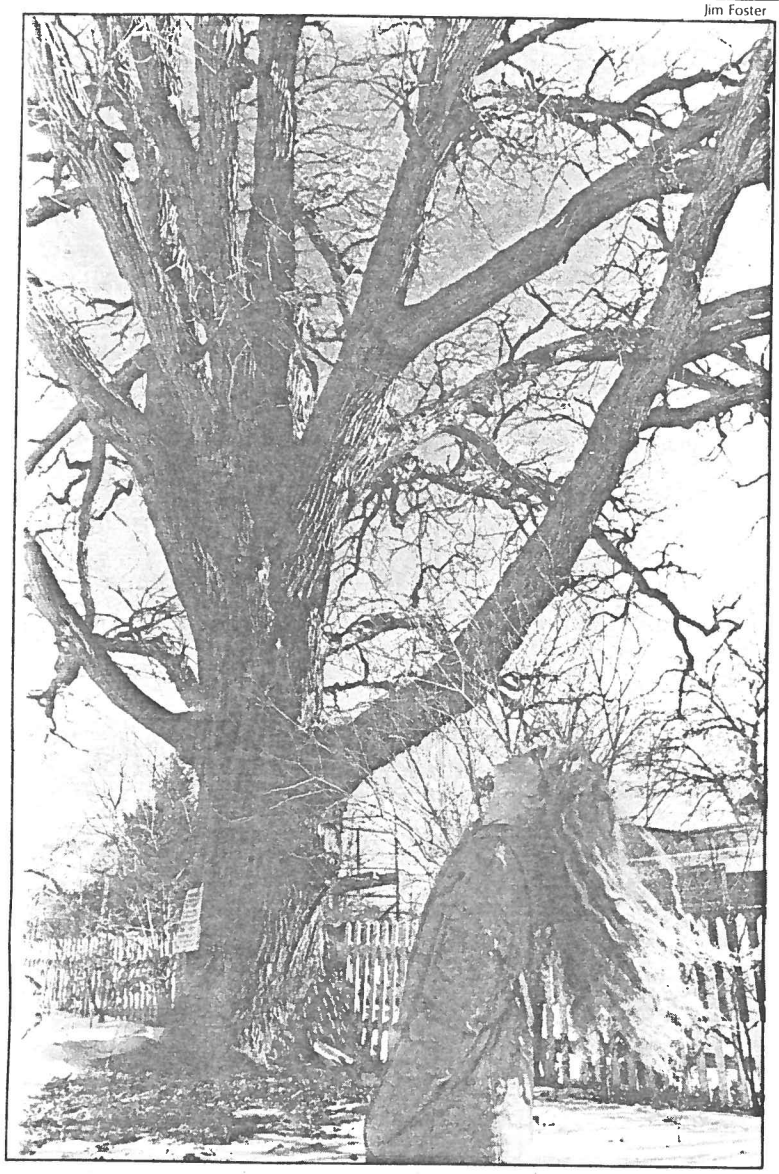
From the street the bur oak doesn't look that much bigger than its neighbors on the empty lot. But park your car and walk toward the tree, and it seems to expand: its branches spread wider, its girth swells, until you stand beneath it and realize that you and several friends could not stretch your arms around it. You look at the deeply furrowed bark, the great branches above you—any one of them large enough to make a good-sized tree—and realize that you are standing by the oldest living inhabitant of Urbana. How often can we touch something still alive that is older than our grandfathers' grandfathers? It was here before anyone thought of a town called Urbana, or a state called Illinois, or a country called the United States. A lot of Illinois' history has passed by that tree in the past two and one-quarter centuries—from Indians to interurbans, and including Abraham Lincoln. If the oak had a memory, it could remember when the trees of Big Grove grew for miles along the Salt Fork, while the prairie flowed away to the southern horizon. When we touch it, we can feel the past.

Bur oak leaves have rounded tips and a distinctive top-heavy "hammerhead" shape. The tree's acorns, the largest of the native oaks', nestle in deep, heavily fringed cups that give *Quercus macrocarpa* its common names "bur" or "mossy-cup." Empty acorn cups are strewn around the roots of the big oak tree on Main Street, leftovers from squirrels' fast-food lunches.

Bur oaks have lived on the Illinois prairie for thousands of years, since the glaciers retreated from Champaign County, and the oaks followed the spruce trees northward. Then, as the climate became even warmer and drier than it is today (about 6,000 years ago), prairie grasses took over and the oaks again retreated from central Illinois. But about the time that Christopher Columbus was planning a sea voyage to the Indies, Illinois was becoming cooler and wetter, and groves of oaks and hickories began to reappear along its streams.

Bur oaks are the pioneers of the oak family: they grow farther north and west than other

Jim Foster



Author's daughter, Robin Henderson looking up at the largest and oldest bur oak in Champaign County; 15½ feet in circumference, 97½ feet in height, and its spread averages 107 feet.

species of oak, invading the prairies from Saskatchewan to Texas. Their thick, corky bark helps protect them from prairie fires. After the long dry spell, oaks were no doubt among the earliest trees to return to the curving banks of the West Branch of the Salt Fork of the Vermilion River. The creek watered them and protected them from fire, and a substantial grove of trees grew up along it and nearby. One of those first trees could have dropped the acorn that grew into the tree on Main Street. By the time white settlers arrived in the 1820's, Big Grove measured about eight miles north and south, by twelve miles east and west. Local chronicler J.O. Cunningham described it in the 1850s as "22,000 acres, or about a township of very superior timber."

When the bur oak acorn sprouted in 1761, a band of Potawatomi Indians spent the summers on the south edge of Big Grove, which they called Mashaw Montuck, or "Big Woods." This tribe had come from the forests of Michigan, harrying the weaker Illini Indians southward until they retreated to the protection of the French along the Mississippi River. The Potawatomi, like the earlier Illini and the later white settlers, set up their villages on the edges of forests, near both streams and prairie. Here they built wigwams of saplings covered with bark or reed mats. They spent the warm months hunting deer, elk, and beaver; and growing corn, squash, beans, tobacco, and pumpkins. After the fall harvest they would move away to smaller winter camps in sheltered valleys.

Our bur oak was just a few years old, a sapling among the brush, when the Potawatomi who would keep the peace locally between red man and white was born a few miles to the west ("under a big tree behind the old *Courier* building," one local historian explained to me). The pioneers knew him as Chief Shemauger, "the Happy Warrior" or "Old Soldier."

In those days, the late 1700s and early 1800s, Big Grove didn't change much from one year to the next. The boy who was to be Chief Shemauger grew up, and learned to hunt and fish and fight. The tree grew, and dropped its own acorns among the hazel brush, where birds and small mammals found them in the fall and winter. Thunderstorms raced across the prairie in the spring and summer, fires

continued on next page ►

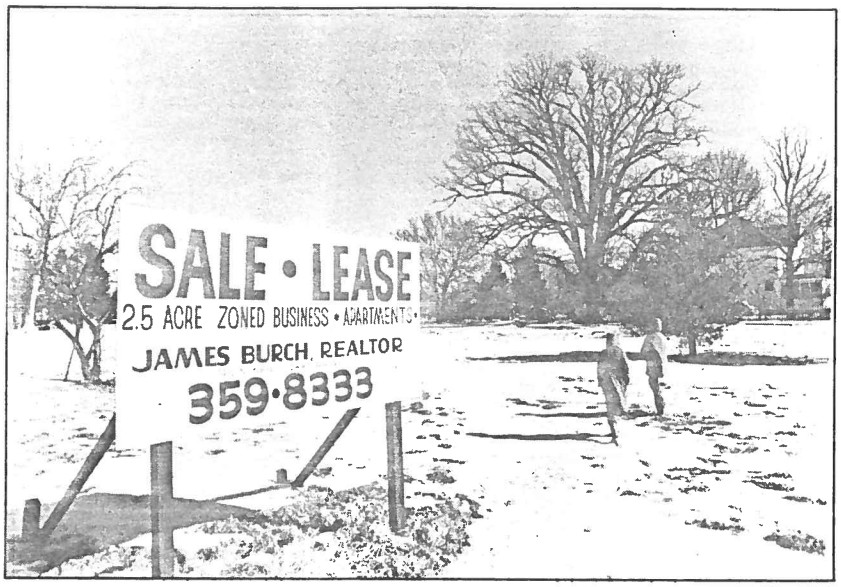
in the fall, snowstorms in the winter. Deer browsed, wolves prowled, migrating birds swarmed through the trees.

On hot summer days the Indian men would sometimes build ladders into the treetops and climb up to escape the mosquitoes and catch any breeze that might be moving across the prairie. (The women stayed on the ground, working,) As the bur oak grew larger, perhaps someone used its broad branches as a resting platform.

The buffalo had already moved west. The Indians learned to sell furs to white traders and to wear cloth, not leather. But there was little to suggest the changes to come. Within thirty years, the Indians and the wolves would be gone, the deer almost gone. Big Grove would become farmland and town.

In 1822 deputy surveyor Benjamin Franklin Messenger surveyed Urbana Township, and Runnel Fielder, the first white settler, settled northeast of present Urbana—several miles from the bur oak, by now a large tree, sixty or seventy feet tall.

Jim Foster



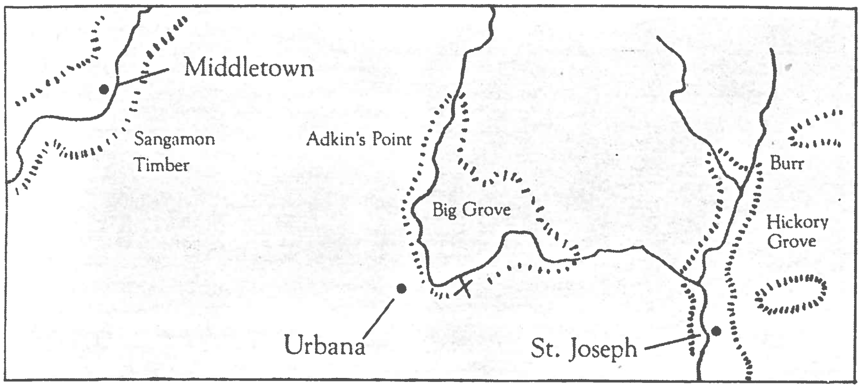
The property where the tree stands is for sale. Hopefully the buyer will appreciate it and take care of it, as property owners from the Smiths to Ed Gordon have done.

William Tompkins, "the first permanent settler of Urbana," as J.O. Cunningham labels him in his 1905 history of Champaign County, moved from Shelby County, Kentucky, to the south edge of Big Grove in 1829. Other Shelby Countians followed Tompkins: Matthew Busey, Issac Busey, William T. Webber, Nicholas Smith and his son Jacob.

Chief Shemauger acknowledged that the Potawatomi could not drive the white settlers back, and encouraged his people to welcome the newcomers. The Indians gave them food when they ran out, and helped bury their dead. Local historian Clayton Daugherty recounts that Shemauger and his followers even helped the settlers build their cabins.

The Potawatomi did not join the Black Hawk rebellion of 1832, but they suffered its consequences anyway. After the war, the Potawatomi had to give up eastern Illinois, but they kept numerous small reservations, as well as hunting rights on lands not yet bought up by

courtesy Urbana Archives



Portion of Champaign County showing towns and groves, about 1850. "X" marks the location of the bur oak, a few miles east of Urbana.

white settlers. Within a year or so, however, continuing white distrust forced the Potawatomi west across the Mississippi. By 1835 Indians no longer hunted the banks of Salt fork or rested in the bur oak.

These early white settlers in Big Grove, like those throughout central Illinois, avoided the open prairie. They needed the grove. Wood from its trees built their houses, fenced stock, kept them warm, cooked their food, provided furniture and plowshares. The grove protected them from the winter winds and the implacable summer sun; its streams gave them water.

In 1833, Margaret Beatty Smith came with her husband Jacob from Shelby County, Kentucky, to live at the south edge of Big Grove. She was nineteen years old and had been married ten months. Jacob bought the land where the bur oak stands, and they built a cabin—maybe in its shade. Nearly sixty years later, Margaret Smith recalled, "We first lived in this cabin with two rooms and a lean-to with a lynn bark loft, puncheon floor, no windows. We were happy and thought we were fortunate in having such a good house."

Nevertheless, life on the south edge of Big Grove was a struggle for the newcomers—and not simply against cold, heat, drought, storms, and prairie fires. In the summer settlers became ill with "fever and ague"—malaria carried by mosquitoes that bred in the prairie marshes. The flies were so bad, Champaign County historian Clayton Daugherty remarks, that "traveling had to be done at night, and if the moon shone brightly, they would still annoy." Livestock attacked by flies sometimes died from exhaustion and loss of blood.

Stock that escaped the flies might fall prey to the wolves that prowled near the settlements and would attack even full-grown hogs. One pioneer farmer killed twenty wolves in five days. As late as the 1850s, J.O. Cunningham watched a wolf run the length of Market Street in Urbana, outracing hunters toward Big Grove.

Many settlers did not survive those early years. Jacob Smith's father Nicholas died in 1834, three years after he came to Big Grove. But Jacob and Margaret did well—Margaret bore ten children and lost only two.

courtesy Illinois State Historical Library

In 1833, Margaret Beatty Smith came with her husband Jacob to live at the south edge of Big Grove.

At the beginning of 1833 there was no town of Urbana (and Champaign was still twenty years in the future). But that year Champaign County was carved out of eastern Illinois. Big Grove, near the county's center and with a number of homesteads scattered around its edges, was to be the spot for the already-named new county seat. But which side of the grove? Northside settlers seemed to have the edge: there were more of them, they'd been there longer, they had a post office and the only public road in the county. On the other hand, the south edge several miles away where the big tree stood was, as Cunningham described it, "an out of the way place with no advantages whatsoever"—a place full of hazel brush and weeds with no roads and hardly any people.

Yet somehow Issac and Matthew Busey and William Webber persuaded the county commissioners to put Urbana at the south edge of the grove—perhaps, disgruntled northenders suggested, by means not entirely aboveboard, involving liquor and a bit of bribery.

The commissioners wanted to use some of Matthew Busey's land just south of the bur oak tree. If he had agreed to sell his homestead, the tree would have been near the heart of the new town of Urbana and would have long since disappeared under concrete. But instead the Buseys and Webber donated land a couple miles west, still on the south edge of Big Grove. Urbana would not reach the tree for another century.

In 1837 the Illinois legislature decreed that a State road should run from Urbana to Danville. It was not much of a road: at first just a furrow plowed across the prairie for the wagons to follow. But it did pass right by the bur oak. Along this road in the 1840s and 1850s Abraham Lincoln rode the Eighth Judicial Circuit, on horseback or buggy. He and the other lawyers traveled with Judge David Davis, whose legal decisions were said to be as weighty as his 300-pound bulk. Their horses ambled past the towering tree, past the farmstead of Jacob and Margaret Smith, with its yard full of children and its new frame house (Jacob had built it to replace the two-room cabin in 1837, sawing the flooring and making the lath by hand). By Lincoln's time the road was an

continued on next page ►

established one worn by hundreds of hooves, feet, and wheels of wagons and buggies. But it had never been graveled, graded, or paved.

In 1854, when the Illinois Central Railroad built its line southeast from Chicago, it didn't take the trouble to go through the little town of Urbana. The line passed a few miles to the west, avoiding Big Grove altogether. Such calculations brought life or death to small nineteenth-century towns. This one created the new town of Urbana Station or West Urbana (later Champaign), and it should have meant the death of Urbana. But the city fathers—determined types like those who had obtained the county seat twenty years earlier—refused to give up. They worked to get a rail line through Urbana, *too,* and they succeeded.

The Illinois Central had no noticeable effect on life around the bur oak tree, but the new line did. Begun as the Danville, Urbana, Bloomington, and Pekin Railroad, it was finished in 1870 as the Indianapolis, Bloomington, and Western (known locally as the "I'd Better Walk," says current Campaign City Council member, writer, and historian Dannel McCollum). The IBW paralleled Main Street—the old state road—and passed only a few hundred yards north of the bur oak, now over 100 years old. If railroad surveyors had drawn their lines just a bit farther south, the tree would be gone.

courtesy Illinois State Historical Library

When the bur oak sprouted in 1761, a band of Potawatomi Indians spent the summers on the south edge of Big Grove. They set up their villages on the edges of forests, near both streams and prairie.

But the tree, having survived the settlers' needs for fuel and fencing, survived the railroad crews too. Probably the men laid down their picks and shovels and ate their lunches in its shade. Later the breeze of passing trains would rustle its leaves, and their whistles must have startled the birds and squirrels. Trains still travel on those tracks, which some locals call "the Big Four" for its past existence as the Cleveland, Cincinnati, Chicago, and St. Louis. (It is now Conrail.)

Between 1855 and 1875 the railroads transformed the area near the big tree. The prairie to the south became cattle pastures, as the railroads provided a way to get the stock to market. The population of Urbana and Champaign County more than quadrupled in ten years—Urbana growing from about 250 in 1850 to over 1,000 in 1860.

Jacob Smith died in 1854, but Margaret continued to live in their house; her sons farmed nearby. Only the tree seemed not to change—it just grew more slowly as it passed its first century. Most of its companions from Big Grove had been cut. No young oaks grew up under its shade. The hazel brush had become pasture and homestead; robins instead of warblers chirped in its branches; children rather than foxes chased squirrels up its trunk.

In the 1890s, the city of Urbana paved Main Street with bricks. About the turn of the century, lightning struck the tree twice, but the scars healed and the tree continued to grow. In the fall of 1902 the Illinois Traction System (McKinley Lines) built tracks for its electric trains down Main Street past the tree. According to a local account quoted by McCollum, hundreds of people came to see the construction. "During the hours of [Sunday] afternoon teams lined the public road so completely it was almost impossible to get through the road, but no accident occurred."

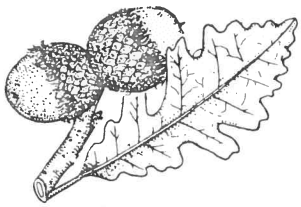
The 1929 Champaign County Atlas shows no new houses near the bur oak's spot, although the area had been subdivided. In 1946 Charles Wheat and his wife built what became a popular restaurant—Wheat's Steak House—about fifty feet west of the tree. Realtor James Burch, who is now in charge of selling the property, remembers crowds of U of I alumni coming to the restaurant on big football

weekends. "You picked your own steak out and they'd cook it for you."

The tree was not as famous as the restaurant during those years, but someone cared about it. Someone painted a white metal sign and nailed it to the tree, recording its growth in those forty-four years and estimating its age (too high) as "at least 300 years."

In 1976 the Urbana Tree Commission—sparked by its chairman E.B. Himelick and Urbana city arborist Bruno Schielzeth—set up stone markers to commemorate two "significant trees." The trees were both bur oaks, both near Main Street—the one by the Steak House, and another by Long's Garage at Main and Maple. The International Society of Arboriculture chose the bur oak by the restaurant as one of fifty "bicentennial trees' in the country. That year Himelick measured the tree and found it to be 14.71 feet around and ninety feet tall. Its branches spread eighty-three feet. By counting the rings in three sample borings, Himelick decided that the tree was 214 years old—not the 300 years on the sign, but still the oldest tree known in Urbana. (Despite its size, the bur oak is not the largest in the state: that honor belongs to a thicker but not so tall tree in Pike County.) Ed Gordon, in 1976 the owner/manager of Wheat's Steak House, agreed to have the city prune and fertilize the tree, Himelick remembers.

That was a big year for the bur oak. It made the newspapers twice—once at the dedication, when photographers took a picture of Gordon and Himelick under its branches, and later that year, when an electrical fire burned Wheat's Steak House to the ground. Fifty feet away, the tree survived. "I don't think it's even scorched," retired fire chief C.E. Paris told the *Courier*.



That tree has outlasted the axes of settlers, the lines drawn by railroad companies and street builders, the disasters of lightening and fire. Only a few fellow relics of Big Grove are still here, scattered throughout Urbana and clustered in nearby forests—Brownfield Woods, Trelease Woods, and Busey Woods. Himelick believes this tree to be the largest and oldest bur oak in Champaign County. This winter he measured it again: since 1976 it has grown 6½ inches in circumference, 7½ feet in height, and its spread now averages 107 feet, greater than any other bur oak he knows of. The tree is strong and healthy. "Unless something disastrous happens," says Himelick, "it could live for quite a while—a hundred years or more."

Urbana City Arborist Bill Kruidenier hopes that the city may someday give official protection to its "historical trees." Perhaps, he muses, property owners could be encouraged to give or sell a developemnt easement to the city for the area under the dripline (the branches' spread) of their tree. The city would then be responsible for taking care of the tree, but the owner would not be free to cut it down or build so as to damage its roots.

Tree Commission chairman Himelick describes how the commission worked with Long's Garage to save that big oak tree, persuading its owners to redesign a planned addition so that it would not cut into the roots of the tree. Himelick feels that the pressure of public opinion could probably preserve any tree in town: "There are a lot of tree-conscious people in Urbana."

But the property where the tree stands is for sale. Will the buyer appreciate it and take care of it (or at least leave it alone), as property owners from the Smiths to Ed Gordon have done? Realtor Burch thinks so: "I doubt very seriously that you'd find anyone that wants to cut that tree down. It's an asset, not a detriment to the property. You'd build *around* that." With luck, the big old bur oak will give many more years of solace to hungry birds and squirrels, and to people who long to touch the past. ✓