

In the Lifetime of a Bur Oak

In the year 1762, which marked the close of the Seven Years War and the subsequent cession of Louisiana to Spain, the region that became the State of Iowa was a wilderness of prairie and forest untouched by plow or ax. Save for a few adventurers and fur traders who had made cursory excursions by way of the principal streams, only the native Indians had seen the land. Probably many years passed before a white man appeared at the future site of Iowa City where the wooded hills crowded close to both sides of the river. Casual hunters, both red and white, must have noticed the tall white oaks and spreading elms that crowned the bluffs. Hickory, walnut, and bur oaks covered the lower slopes. Some of the trees had lived for more than a century, and others were slim little saplings. Among these bur oaks there was one that had sprouted in 1762 and was to witness great changes in its surroundings for almost two hundred years.

By the time the colonial patriots signed the Declaration of Independence, the little bur oak beside the Iowa River was fourteen years old. It was already four inches in diameter. It stood

among others of its kind just over the crest of the ridge away from the river, in a shallow ravine which angled away to the southeast where it joined the little valley of a creek which turned to flow into the river farther south. The bluff, bounded on the west by the river and on the south and east by the creek, merged on the north with a semi-circle of hills which surrounded the creek valley like a vast amphitheater. From the position atop the hill where the young oak stood, the view up and down and across the river was unobstructed. There the Old Stone Capitol stands today.

Little occurred to alter the appearance of the countryside until 1837, when the first squatters arrived in the vicinity. Napoleon, a tiny settlement two miles south beside the river, served as headquarters for the settlers. While a few land claims were staked out in the neighborhood, fur trading was still the chief business. Indians were numerous. The site was still far west of the settled areas in May, 1839, when it was chosen for the capital of the Territory of Iowa.

The Capitol itself was to be located only a few rods southwest of the bur oak, by that time a sizable tree some ten inches thick. In its shade, on the Fourth of July, 1839, a celebration was held at the new seat of government in honor of the

sixty-third anniversary of American independence. About a hundred people joined in an open-air dinner and subsequent festivities.

Work was soon begun on the stone Capitol. The rhythmic thud of axes broke the silence of the forest. The air was filled with the acrid smoke of burning brush piles. Heavy explosions at the limestone quarries reverberated down the valley. The little ravine on the brink of which grew the bur oak was filled with the dirt excavated for the foundations of the Capitol. It was a hazardous place for a sturdy tree to be growing. Surveyors located Clinton Street perilously close to the grove of bur oaks. Solid logs were in demand for the many houses that were being raised. But with the thinning of the woods the bur oak prospered, its rings becoming twice as wide as before. By 1841 Iowa City had become a flourishing frontier town with 700 inhabitants.

During the years while the Old Stone Capitol served as the seat of the Territorial and State governments, until 1857, the tide of settlement passed far beyond this erstwhile outpost. Highways converged at the capital, the railroad came to Iowa City, and many brick and stone houses superseded the original log cabins. Just to the north across Jefferson Street ten-inch oak beams were used to support the floors of a fine stone mansion. The

wild animals had disappeared and with them went the Indians and the fur traders. The character of life that moved about the bur oaks had changed.

Meanwhile, Iowa City was enjoying the height of its importance. Politics filled the hotels with interested citizens and attracted business enterprises. Hundreds of immigrants westward bound disembarked at the railroad terminus in the capital city and continued their journey in stagecoaches. As the population shifted farther west, energetic speculators in rival towns started the agitation for the removal of the State capital to a place nearer the geographical center of the Commonwealth. The railroad was extended to Marengo and beyond. In 1857 the capital was moved to Des Moines. Only the presence of the State University lent distinction to the community otherwise destined to become an agricultural market place like hundreds of Iowa towns.

Nevertheless, the venerable bur oak standing in the afternoon shadow of the Old Stone Capitol, occupied a favorable position to witness important events in the new era. The quiet, primeval years of its youth had passed into oblivion; the sudden bustle and turmoil of political activities were fading in the memory of the pioneers; and on the eve of the centennial of the life of the towering tree the career of an institution dedicated to high-

est aims of civilization was dawning beside it. The Capitol grounds were transformed into the campus of the State University. South Hall was erected for the growing collegiate classes and another brick building containing the chapel and library occupied the corresponding position just north of the Capitol.

Climate and rainfall, however, were matters of greater importance to the bur oak tree. For forty days rain fell almost constantly in the summer of 1851. The deluge began in May and did not subside until July. There was no need for so much rain in Iowa. During the previous year the rainfall was estimated at forty-nine inches which, according to modern records, was about eighteen inches above normal. The ground must have been full of water in the spring of 1851. Trees and shrubs grew rapidly. High above danger from flood waters, the clump of bur oaks on the Capitol grounds must have flourished during two successive seasons of abundant moisture. Proof of such favorable conditions may be read in the unusual width of these annual growth rings. At the end of one hundred years the oak measured sixteen inches in diameter.

Perhaps the tree was also sensitive to the change from pure woodland air to the smoky atmosphere of the growing city. At first wood was

used almost exclusively for fuel. In the seventies many cords of hard wood were piled on the campus. Earnest students working their way through college sawed and chopped the logs into firewood and carried it to the classroom stoves. Soon thereafter, the native woodlands having been depleted, coal was substituted for oak and hickory — a change which may have been perceptible to the tree and doubtless retarded its growth.

Nor did pigs and cattle frequent the campus as had been their wont in the earlier years. Sometime in the sixties the University authorities purchased a dog to keep stock off, and later a fence was built for a similar purpose. In 1870 another improvement was made near the bur oak when Clinton Street, long notorious for the depth of its mud, was paved with macadam.

As the country became more thickly inhabited, the natural wild life of the forest changed. The otters, minks, and beavers had gone long ago. Even the coons, wolves, and foxes were too shy to be seen near town. Only the squirrels and the cottontails remained. The upper branches of the strong old oak no longer bowed with the weight of passenger pigeons. Robins sometimes nested in its boughs, but the gayer song birds lived in more secluded spots. No one knows when the first English sparrow arrived, perhaps within twenty

years after it was brought to this country in 1850.

For about three-quarters of a century the burr oak stood in full view of University building operations, particularly during the expansion into the three blocks just east of the main campus between Iowa Avenue and Jefferson Street. A medical building was erected south of the Old Stone Capitol in 1882 and several neighboring oaks had to be removed that Science Hall might be built west of the old bur oak in 1883. Separate buildings for the dental college and homeopathic medicine followed, and the University Hospital, now East Hall, replaced the Mechanics' Academy.

More exciting, from the tree's standpoint certainly, were the fires which burned the library in 1896 and the medical building and Old South Hall in 1901. But the ruins were soon removed and better buildings rose in their places. In 1898 a fine bur oak called "the pride of the campus" was cut down to make room for Liberal Arts Hall. The first of the modern stone buildings, it formed the southeast unit of the Pentacrest. Seven years later Old Science Hall was moved across Jefferson and Capitol streets to clear the space in the morning shadow of the bur oak for the new Natural Science Hall, now Macbride Hall. Pentacrest was completed with the Physics Building in 1912 and University Hall in 1924.

With the advent of these modern structures came the central heating system. Though the tall chimney carried the black soft-coal smoke high into the air, the southwest wind often blew it across the top of the old bur oak. More serious, however, was the big tunnel that conveyed the steam pipes to the buildings east of Clinton Street. It cut through the roots of the big tree only a few feet north of its base. The constant heat dried up the moisture and baked the earth in that direction. During the severe drought of 1934, however, its thirst was partially quenched by constant sprinkling of the campus lawn. On several occasions that season its leaves were choked with dust from the great plains unwisely cultivated by the sons and grandsons of pioneers who may have passed the old bur oak in Iowa City on their way west.

At last in 1936, the ancient bur oak died from a diseased condition in its upper branches. A cross-section of the trunk was presented to the University Department of Botany, that its rings might be counted and its age thus determined. The trunk measured thirty inches and the rings showed 175 years of life. One old bur oak still stands — the lone survivor of the clump that originally grew on the edge of the little ravine.

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