

The Great Oak of the Landis Arboretum

by Fred Lape
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The following article is taken from the Landis Arboretum Newsletter covering April, May, and June of 1982. In it, Fred Lape, who passed away in 1985, describes a huge oak, called the "Big Oak" that, at that time, was designated the official Logo of the Landis Arboretum by the Board of Trustees. It remains the Logo to this day, but is now called the "Great Oak." The George Landis Arboretum is located on a hillside above the village of Esperance, New York, and overlooks the Schoharie River Valley. Its 97 acres are home to more than 2,000 species of trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants. The Arboretum demonstrates the unity and diversity of plant life through its living collections and educational programming.

The Big Oak of the Landis Arboretum is an Eastern White Oak (*Quercus alba*). The species ranges from Maine to Georgia, but flourishes best in the section from southern Connecticut and Long Island through eastern Pennsylvania where it is often the dominant tree. It is not common in New York State north of the Mohawk Valley.

The Big Oak must have been an outstanding forest tree when the land, now the Arboretum, was cleared about 1840, for it was singled out by the first owner to be left standing in the open. My first memory of the tree dates from about 1910, when I was getting old enough to pay attention to trees. It seems to me now in memory that its trunk was as large then as it is now, but early life memories usually magnify with time. There were already two lightning scars, which wriggled like gigantic snakes down the

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east and south faces of the trunk; the traces of which still remain.

It was probably one of the features of the farm that induced my father to buy the property, for he loved far views. He immediately named the place Oak Nose Farm, and always took visitors to see the views up and down the Schoharie Valley, which one gets from the knoll upon which the oak stands. The knoll itself is part of a glacial moraine that was dumped across the valley during the last glacial retreat.

We have never taken borings of the tree here at the Arboretum to ascertain its age. From comparing the size of the trunk and branch spread with that of certain famous oaks in southern New England and on Long Island, whose ages are roughly known from certain historical events which happened near or under them, we guess the Big Oak to be from 350 to 500 years old.

It was a flourishing tree until 1940. Then a natural disaster overtook it. That year there was an ice storm. It rained steadily and heavily day and night for three days, the rain freezing as it fell. By the end of the storm, every blade of dead grass in the fields was coated with solid ice to the thickness of a man's thumb, and all the branchlets of trees were equally coated.

I have never lived through a major earthquake, nor a tornado or hurricane. The last night of the ice storm was the greatest natural disaster I have ever experienced. Few persons on these hills slept that night. From late afternoon of the third day, when the large limbs of trees began to give way, and all through the night to the next morning, there was a constant bombardment from the crashing of limbs as they broke loose from trees and fell.

On the fourth morning the storm had ended and the sun came out. I walked over toward the Big Oak to see the damage. On the way up to the knoll one looks over a section of the wood-lot that had always been the sap bush, with large maple trees that had furnished sap for maple syrup for a hundred years. There was not a single large maple left standing, only the stripped tops of trunks and the mass of fallen branches glistening in the sun. The Big Oak lost all of its branches on the northeast side, about half of its crown.

If, at the time, I had either the money or the experience to repair the damage after the storm, the tree could probably have recovered completely, for it was then a vigorously growing tree. I had neither and did nothing. So in a few years the open wounds left along the trunk by the pulled out bases of the falling limbs began to rot inward. Once water was able to reach be-

yond the growing layer of the wood, the rotting inward and down accelerated, and has continued ever since. Coons began to nest inside the hollow trunk.

In the meantime the tree has continued

to grow vigorously. But during the last four years, large lower branches have broken off without even a high wind or a heavy snow to cause the break; merely the weight of the branches overpowering the now shallow moorings which they have in the trunk. Whether anything could be done now that is worth doing is doubtful. The very lower section of the trunk still seems solid, but the upper section is completely hollow, and one can look up from the lower holes to light in the upper ones.

Even as it stands, the tree may live another hundred years, for the white oak is a vigorous species. However, the climax of its life definitely came at the end of three days of freezing rain in the winter of 1940, and from then on its way has been downward.

Thanks to arborist Fred Breglia of the Landis Arboretum for finishing this story and photograph. Fred reports that the tree is still strong, more than a half century after the big ice storm.

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photo by Fred Breglia

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