

One White Oak

by Jill Vickers

I live close to Lake Champlain on the level land that lies along its eastern shore. This clay plain, once the bottom of the Champlain Sea, is cleared for farming on its mineral rich soil. Dairy farms continue to produce milk and grow grass and corn as they have for generations, so the land is open, the vistas wide. Most of the forest is gone, gone to build fortifications, cabins, bridges, barrels, and boats and to feed the limekilns. Only the mountainsides remain thickly forested, with just enough woods on the plain, spared in swamp and on riverbanks, to provide passage for the bear, deer, coyotes and bobcat.

One individual tree I share this patch of clay plain with is nearly three arm-spans around at my shoulder. On the southern bank of a wide, shallow creek about a quarter mile from where it flows into Lake Champlain, the oak took root four centuries or so ago. The land was covered with forest then, and the young white oak grew in a huge community of plants and animals that had been around since the last ice age. This species is a climax tree of the north, one of the last to arrive, but the last left standing if left undisturbed. The seedling will tolerate the shade from the birch, hickory, maple and pine, slowly, slowly rising toward the sunlight, till it's above the rest, and then will live on for several hundred years or more.

Reproduction of this eastern forest giant is not easy. The flowers don't appear until after its twentieth year. The male flowers are dense, drooping catkins growing on lower branches of the oak. The spiky, reddish females appear on the uppermost branches. On a spring day with light wind, the golden mist of pollen from the catkins must float upward to find a receptive stigma to begin the formation of a seed. The number of acorns varies greatly from a handful to ten thousand in a mast year. Survival of the seed on the ground is another challenge. The hungry squirrel, chipmunk, mouse, duck, raccoon, and crow raid and consume the small nut or hide it away. Those nuts spared this fate will grow a tiny taproot and sprout in autumn of that same year.

We met, the oak and I, soon after I moved here from across the lake a dozen years ago. With my spaniel, I walked a rutted farm road across from the house, a road locals use to access the creek. Only part of the path was visible from the road. It had been a wet fall, so I waited for a dry day that November, having lived there long enough to know, the sticky clay when wet can root one to the ground. The road took me straight back between two fields of corn stumps with their shallow pools of sky between the rows. From there it made a right angle between more fields, then came close to a grove of tall pines where the path ran rusty with their long needles. Hive boxes behind wire fencing marked a winter place for bees. The beekeeper had told me bears are drawn by the smell of cow carcasses and follow the scent from the forested mountains to the clay plain. Honey and bees would also be a target. There by the hives I saw a ravine used

by humans for dumping cardboard boxes, white plastic bags, pieces of thick foam, and bones. I held the dog as we passed to keep her from rummaging for the rotting beef.

The road narrowed to a path here and turned to the north passing through an open area of low-lying scrub. When I released her, the dog disappeared to hunt partridge and rabbit. The creek wasn't visible yet, but a stout osprey nest balanced on a platform pole, placed there for that purpose, stood out against the sky. The hum of traffic was still audible in the distance, but muffled by the trees close to the bank. The tap, tap, tap of a small woodpecker announced my approach as it hopped up a tree, tiny chips flying off in its wake. The shady ground was home to hundreds of burdocks whose brown burrs with their tiny hooks hitchhiked along the path. A great blue heron watched for its prey, a statue at the edge of the weeds along the muddy shore. I too fell still becoming part of the landscape. There back a dozen yards from the creek stood the enormous white oak. Prior to this I'd made a point of visiting trees in my travels, ancient ones I'd learned of from visitor information, trees protected and revered. To find such a tree close to home and undocumented astounded me. And unlike the places of the ancient ones I've stopped to see in my travels, this one promised privacy.

This oak was nearly as broad as she was tall, and the chill wind tousled her fall leaves like auburn curls. Her branches, silhouetted by the afternoon sun behind her, were long and graceful, reaching out in all directions. She towered over the trees and bushes below. Being close to the creek she had avoided the plow.

This oak was old enough to have felt sound waves from Samuel de Champlain's *arquebus* that marked the dramatic arrival of Europeans in a land inhabited by Abenaki for ten thousand years. A hundred and twenty-five years after Champlain, an English settler, my ancestor Ephraim Ranney, arrived in this valley to settle along the lake named for the Frenchman. White marble slabs mark the remains on my mother's side, family who lived out their lives here. Ephraim had come up from Connecticut with his bride and served as Captain of the Militia in the War of Independence. Four sons served as well. One son Daniel survived to have a first son Daniel, who had a third son Daniel and so on in a direct line to my grandmother. Family stories go back to the time of this tree's middle age.

In my sixties, I do more rambling outdoors and in. This has uncovered stories of my ancestors in old documents and letters tucked away in a drawer of the house I grew up in, packets and albums that are now in my house. Not far from where I live now an uncle on my father's side had a layover on a farm during his bootlegging days in the '30s. He reported back to the extended family that he'd discovered paradise, and thus began a migration of family members out of the city to the land of creeks and woods for vacations. Years later, married and with his wife expecting a baby, my father left the city and moved back to the place he'd loved as a child. Consequently, with my three siblings, I grew up between a creek and a wooded ridge imagining islands as pirate hideouts and clearings as kingdoms. I was nurtured by the timeless embrace of the land.

Since I've been coming to the oak, the two longest and oldest limbs, one as thick around as a man, have broken off and dropped to the ground. Two huge wounds in the plates of bark, one still raw-looking, persist where they grew from the trunk. Was it a windstorm or

accumulated layers of ice? I see no sign of lightning's heat. I think it was age along with some disease that took them down. My parents died about the time the oak branches dropped, very old and sick. They did not want a monument and gave their bodies to serve as cadavers for medical students. The scars on the living oak and the two old branches now lying beneath, crisscrossed on a pyre of leaves, serve as markers.

I visit this living memorial often and thought I'd see other branches drop as well with passing seasons. That was half a dozen years ago now though, and no branch has fallen in this time. Older ones lie on the ground, a small graveyard of limbs in various stages of decay, nurturing the fibrous root system of the oak and its neighbors. These roots are grafted into a community of trees.

One time a salty sting came to my eyes and a guffaw escaped from my lips, the way in which an enormous carp will rise from the bottom of the creek and, with a thud, jar my canoe. Oh, I realized, I am in the next layer of branches to drop. That is my generation making up the lowest, oldest branches.

Following one of the oak's stately branches to see how the younger ones shoot out from it, forking, and then forking again, I notice a pattern like dendrites inside my head. I've read that, in the healthy elders of sixty and seventy, dendrites in the brain's hippocampus increase, forming more points of contact, more connections among cells. If so, and I'd like to think it is so, these connections are to my ancestors, human and plant, the survivors my life depends on. This phase of expanding connection means a time to learn the stories of this place, my heartland, and to pass them on. Many, many branches remain on the tree, an ancient tree still rich with leaves in summer and, in good years, flowers and fruit.

Jill Vickers taught literacy in an area public school and now dabbles in documentary filmmaking.