THE ROOSEVELT ELM

Michigan State University East Lansing, Michigan May 24, 1983



PRESIDENT THEODORE ROOSEVELT

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Planted by President Theodore Roosevelt May 31, 1907, celebrating the 50th anniversary of Michigan Agricultural College (MSC, 1925, MSU, 1955)



HE ELM TREE PLANTED BY PRESIDENT THEODORE ROOSEVELT on the Michigan Agricultural College campus May 31, 1907, is dead and gone. For 40 years it grew and flourished, almost incognito, but finally became the vicprogress. So healthy and genetically endowed, the shapely

tim of progress. So healthy and genetically endowed, the shapely tree withstood the devasting Dutch elm disease, but was helpless against the shock of maturity transplantation and the ravages of the chain saw.

During its thirties and forties, the grown-up tree was beautiful to behold. Planted in the open, its naturally spreading limbs gave it a sturdy, symmetrical appearance. The lower limbs, approximately 12 feet above the ground, spread outward, seemingly oversized for its trunk. Countless thousands of students, parents, and campus visitors admired or revered the tree in all its symmetry, many perhaps little realizing that the beautiful tree had been planted by the 26th president of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt, in the third year of his second term in office. Few knew its history because, for 30 years, the tree was shielded from publicity, the authorities fearing vandalism, initial carving, or souvenir clipping. Yet, many revered the tree, knowing that as a sapling it had been touched by the dynamic, trust-busting President.

On homecoming, November 13, 1937, Robert S. Shaw, President, Michigan State College, formally dedicated the Roosevelt elm (8) thirty years after its planting. That day the weather was non-co-operative, temperatures ranged from 42 to 53°F with a precipitation of .11 inch. Without umbrella protection from the drizzle, President Shaw read the brief dedicatory speech. A few faculty and spectators in hats, raincoats, and umbrellas witnessed the ceremony. Apparently the ceremony was arranged by the Forestry Club, which had placed a bronze plaque at the base of the tree. The plaque read:

HUNTINGTON ELM
planted by
PRESIDENT
THEODORE ROOSEVELT
May 31, 1907
on the fiftieth
anniversary of M.A.C.
erected by The
Forestry Club

The Huntington elm plaque presentation in 1937 was of special interest to Thomas Gunson (9), who was present May 31, 1907, handed the spade to President Roosevelt, and assisted in the actual planting.

Incidents leading to President Roosevelt's planting the tree

The story of the actual tree planting and the various incidents leading up to the occasion furnish a classic example of the co-operation, not only of the faculty, but of local citizens and of renowned institutions of learning as well. First of all, Jonathan L. Snyder was president of Michigan Agricultural College, 1896 - 1915, and second, during his regime the 50th anniversary of the oldest agricultural college in the world was to come to pass.

Naturally, a golden jubilee celebration was in order. The faculty concurred most enthusiastically. President Snyder was imaginative, thorough, got things done, believed in the potentiality of the institution, and proposed a jubilee celebration second to none. Plans snowballed. Basically, the celebration would be a 3-day affair, terminating on commencement day; representatives and speakers from leading educational institutions would be invited; the best musicians in America would concertize on the campus; President Theodore Roosevelt would be invited to be the speaker at commencement; and in keeping with the dignity of the entire affair all official invitations were to be engraved by Tiffany, New York.

Inviting President Roosevelt

Inviting President Roosevelt to be the commencement speaker at the 50th anniversary of M.A.C. was President Snyder's idea (3,4). With skill and dignity and no little pride, President Roosevelt was persuaded to accept the invitation. In retrospect, it was easy; there was nothing to it. After all, under the conditions, who could turn down President Snyder's invitation? Early in 1906 President Snyder arranged an appointment with the President. At the appointed hour, President Snyder and his invitational committee were ushered into the President's office by "Uncle Joe" Cannon, Illinois, long-time Speaker of the House (6). The party consisted of President Snyder, his nine-year-old son LeMoyne, Dean Charles F. Curtis, Iowa Agricultural College, and a select few Michigan officials. President Roosevelt was in a jovial mood, frisking young LeMoyne upon introduction. The ice was broken. Jonathan L. Snyder, President of the pioneer land-grant college in America, extended the invitation. Charles F. Curtis, Dean, Iowa Agricultural College, and current president of the Agricultural Experiment Station Association, assured President Roosevelt that if he accepted the invitation just extended, Dean Curtis would guarantee that no further invitations to speak at other agricultural colleges would be forthcoming. Essentially, "When's the date?" was President Roosevelt's acceptance.

The President "planted a tree"

President Roosevelt was on the M.A.C. campus only 4 hours and 30 minutes. During that time he circled the campus in a Reo driven by Ransom E. Olds; met 60 guests at Snyder's house, No. 1 Faculty Row; partook of a 5-course luncheon; delivered the commencement address to an audience of 22,000 - "about one hour and 15 minutes" (without loud speakers or amplifiers); personally handed out diplomas to 96 graduating seniors (who "were happily surprised to receive their parchments from the hand of President Roosevelt, who seemed delighted to do them this honor") (12); eagerly watched the presentation of Doctor of Science degrees to seven distinguished leaders of American Agriculture and Doctor of Laws degrees to nine illustrious benefactors of education; - and "planted a tree". According to the record, President Roosevelt paused to plant the tree on his way to take part in the commencement exercises. President Snyder duly reported the entire affair to the Board of Agriculture. Concerning the procession to the platform and planting (12), he stated:

After dinner the battalion was drawn up in front of the president's residence, and as President Roosevelt came forth the cadets presented arms. The President acknowledged this with the accustomed military salute. The battalion then quickly formed two lines from the steps of the residence to the platform from which he was to speak. Between these lines the President and other guests marched to the platform, halting for a moment midway while the President planted a tree. This young elm was about an inch and a quarter in diameter and seven feet tall.

Kuhn (7) briefly states: "After lunch in the Snyder home, the President of the United States strode down to the platform, pausing momentarily enroute to take a spade from Thomas Gunson and hastily plant an elm." In his detailed history of Michigan Agricultural College, which included an account of President Roosevelt's 1907 visit to the campus, Beal (3) makes no mention of President Roosevelt's having planted a tree. Neither does Kedzie (4).

The M.A.C. Record (8) published a full account of the M.A.C. semi-centennial, commencement day, President Theodore Roosevelt's participation and his entire speech, but did not mention the tree-planting ceremony.

Location of the planting

The tree was planted north of West Circle Drive, southeast of President Snyder's house, No. 1 Faculty Row, and southwest of Professor Vedder's House, No. 2 Faculty Row. For safety of President Roosevelt, President Snyder had provided a guarded corridor extending from the front steps of, his residence to the speaker's platform. Roosevelt planted the tree within or beside this corridor before crossing the highway. Thus the planting site was about half way between the two houses and West Circle Drive (slightly south of the present site of Gilchrist Hall).

The Tree

Some controversy exists over the species of elm planted by President Roosevelt. Thomas Gunson, manager of the college greenhouses (site of the present main library, west wing) and former instructor of horticulture, selected the tree, genus elm. President Snyder (12) did not name the species either. He reported briefly that "this young elm was about an inch and a quarter in diameter and seven feet tall". Thus the elm must have been four or five years old when planted by President Roosevelt.

The tree has been referred to as an "American elm." Definitely, the tree was neither the "white elm" nor the "red (slippery) elm." The wood is too dense and hard for those varieties. Furthermore, the bark of the Roosevelt elm is more closely serated than that of the white or red elm. The bark somewhat resembles that of white ash. Yet the Forestry Club plaque designated the tree as a "Huntington elm". Specimens of the Roosevelt elm were submitted to experienced botanists and dendrologists for proper identification and for the significance of the term "Huntington," apparently first used 30 years after the planting.

Parmelee (10) identified the Huntington elm as a hybrid. originally from Holland. He pointed out Rehder's (11) botanical description of the tree:

Of unknown origin. -U.h. vegeta (Loud.) Rehd., var HUNTINGDON E. Tall tree with usually forked stem and rough bark; suckering; young brts. glabrous or sparingly hairy; lvs. elliptic, 8-12 cm. long, acuminate, very smooth and glabrous above, glabrous below except small axillary tufts; petioles 6-8 mm. long; fr. ellipticobovate with closed notch; seed above the middle.

Winburne's (15) Dictionary of Agricultural and Allied Terminology defined "Huntington elm" as

Huntingdon elm. *Ulmus hollandica* var. *vegeta*, a generally hardy variety of Dutch elm, used for shade and ornament. See *Belgian elm*.

The reader will note at once the discrepancy in the spelling of the name of the Roosevelt elm. The Forestry Club bronze dedicatory plaque bears the name "Huntington," whereas the botanist and the lexicographer agree on the "Huntingdon" spelling. Which is correct? Was the Forestry Club in error? Is the "t" version the American way of spelling the Dutch "Huntingdon"? Or did the foresters name the tree that President Roosevelt planted after a prominent local resident? The correct answer is not readily forthcoming. However, the writer is inclined to favor the botanists, spelling the last syllable "don" instead of "ton". The dendrologists' descriprion of the Dutch hybrid elm, fitting so admirably with the observed growth pattern of the Roosevelt elm, lends support to this decision.

Certain characteristics of the Roosevelt tree fit well with Rehder's and Winburne's description of the Huntingdon hybrid, specifically a) its use as a shade tree; b) beauty and symmetry; c) forked stem; and d) suckering. The dense foliage made it a good shade tree and its branching made its symmetry. Furthermore, after the tree was transplanted, those who trimmed its dying branches noted later the large number of suckers sprouting at the cut.

This suckering characteristic fits well with dendrologist Rehder's description of the Huntingdon elm. Thus the Huntingdon elm planted by President Roosevelt seems to have been properly identified, not only by competent botanists but by observers as well.

The Dutch hybrid and MAC

Despite scientific identification of the tree, the mystery remains as to Michigan Agricultural College's access to the hybrid elm which Tommy Gunson provided for President Roosevelt to plant. One must look to Beal's record for the possible answer. W.J. Beal, Michigan Agricultural College's botanist of world renown at the time, was the first to discover the phenomenal increase in plant vigor resulting from hybridization, particularly with corn (14). Yet a review of Beal's (2) yearly reports, five years prior to Roosevelt's campus visit and planting, yields no information of his interest in hybridization of elm, let alone importation of the Holland hybrid. Perhaps pertinent information exists, but this writer has not found it.

In 1901 Beal (1) botanically identified all the trees and shrubs on the Michigan Agricultural College campus and recorded their location. He listed five species of elm, the Huntingdon not being amongst them. These were American, English, Scotch, red (slippery), and Rock.

So, if the tree planted by President Theodore Roosevelt on the campus on May 31, 1907 was a hybrid elm out of Holland (and data seem to substantiate this postulation), the Huntingdon variety must have been imported between 1902 and 1907. Regrettably, the writer could find no record of such importation.

Eye-witness recollections

Mrs. Ruth N. Ludwick, sister of Professor Chace Newman, recalled Mr. Thomas Gunson bringing the tree for the President to plant. She reminisced (5):

> In September 1903 I entered MAC as special student in Home Economics, and lived at brother Chace Newman's house on East Michigan Avenue. In 1907 I saw my class graduate at MAC. The commencement

speaker was President Theodore Roosevelt. He and forty guests were entertained at President J.L. Snyder's home on the campus and I was one of the Domestic Science Class to serve the lunch. Professor Gunson brought a tree for the President to plant. It was a hot day and he came to the back door to ask for a drink of water. He had a Scotch accent and did not look like a professor so was stopped by a Secret Service man. He asked if I could identify Mr. Gunson, which I did and gave him a drink of water. The President shook hands with all the girls and after a tree-planting ceremony near Snyder's home, we followed to reserve seats in front of the speaker's platform on campus.

In his memoirs LeMoyne Snyder, son of President Snyder, gave an excellent detailed account of the planting of the tree, as well as of his nurturing it afterwards (13) He recalled:

About halfway from our front steps down to this was a nice open space, and the college had decided that it would be a wonderful thing to have President Roosevelt plant a tree. So, that was arranged, and the afternoon before this happened, a Mr. Wilcox, whom everyone knew very well, but who worked for the college grounds, came and dug the hole, and made all the arrangements for the tree planting

Now, Catherine Vedder, who lived next door, and I were very much interested in seeing Mr. Wilcox dig this hole. It would be about 2 feet across, and maybe a foot and a half deep, or something like that, and he smoothed the dirt out very carefully all over the bottom, and arranged all the other dirt in a very neat pile. And among other things, they had a brand new spade for the President to use while planting this tree. I thought this was an unnecessary extravagance at the time, but nevertheless that was done.

One thing I remember with a good deal of interest is Catherine Vedder and I watched Mr. Wilcox spread the dirt very carefully on the bottom of this hole to make it look nice, and among other things, left a stone in this dirt at the bottom. Now, this stone was about the size of an egg, but we asked Mr. Wilcox if he wasn't going to

remove that stone, which was in the bottom of this hole. And he said no, that was fine, leave it there, it provided drainage, or something or other.

However, after he'd gotten all done and left, why Catherine Vedder and I went and got that stone out of there and threw it away and smoothed the dirt over again, so well, we thought this was plain sabotage, that was all.

So, after the luncheon was finished, President Roosevelt walked down with my father, and stopped where my father held the tree. It was an American Elm, and Teddy Roosevelt shoveled in the 4 or 5 shovelfuls of dirt around the roots and they went on down to the place.

That elm grew, and it was my job, oh, for several years, to make sure it got plenty of water. We didn't have a hose long enough to reach it, so once a week I would have to carry down 10 buckets of water and put on that thing. The tree grew and flourished, and became a beautiful tree. The college never put any sign on it to indicate that it had been planted by Theodore Roosevelt because they were afraid that visitors and vandals and curiosity seekers would whittle it up and carve their initials and all that sort of thing, so actually, very few people ever knew that that tree had been planted by Theodore Roosevelt.

Years later, the tree was in an area where they wanted to build a new dormitory for women, so it was removed, and I haven't any idea what happened to it. I never knew where it was transplanted to, or whether it survived, why the Dutch elm disease would long since have taken care of it, but it was quite an event at the time.

In the way of progress

The tree stood in the way of MSU's post-World War II building program. A girls' dormitory to be named after the 1901-1913 Dean of Home Economics, Maude Gilchrist, was about to be erected on the site.

Removal of the tree was inevitable. Understandably, a tree, having an indefinite lifespan and constantly subject to disease, might well be sacrificed. The historic Roosevelt elm could be sacrificed. Standing in the midst of a choice building area, the tree had to be moved or cut down. To the credit of the administration, heroic efforts were made to save the tree. The year of decision was 1945 —38 years after planting and 8 years after dedication. Meanwhile, the 1 1/2 -inch sapling had grown to a diameter of 12 inches with lower limbs of 6 inches diameter.

To transplant the fully-grown tree was unthinkable; such an undertaking was impossible. Nonetheless, by means of derricks and modern machinery, the huge, dormant tree was moved from the north to the south side of West Circle Drive, where it was transplanted on the slope of the band parade ground, not too far removed from the highway.

Since the elm had a characteristic, spreading-root system rather than a central tap root, it lent itself to being skidded sideways. Accordingly, a suitable trench was dug across West Circle Drive to the desired site, a distance of perhaps 200 feet. Tractors were used to drag the tree to this site.

The Herculean task was done; the operation was successful, but the newly planted tree settled out of plumb. The following spring the leafage was not vigorous. The beautiful elm now reflected dejection; it had a sickly, forlorn look; its fate was sealed.

Roosevelt elm felled; and final disposition

If memory serves the writer correctly, the Roosevelt elm was cut down by the Building and Grounds Department late one afternoon in mid-autumn, 1947. By mere chance the writer was driving on West Circle Drive at the same time and was shocked to see that the historic tree had just been cut down. Already chain sawyers had segmented the trunk and were de-limbing the top.

"You men have cut down the Roosevelt elm?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," came the reply. "You don't happen to be Professor Herbert of the Forestry Department, do you? He wanted a piece of the tree".

"No, I'm not Professor Herbert, but I'd like a piece, too" was the response.

Fortunately, a 24-26 inch section of the bole and two equally long pieces of limbs were obtained. These segments have been dry-stored for 35 years. Should they not be returned to the University for posterity? Cross-section medallions of authentic wood from the tree planted May 31, 1907 on the Michigan Agricultural College by President Roosevelt might well be placed in the University museum and in a few administrative offices. Such disposition would seem to humanize the history of Michigan State University and provide coming generations with concrete evidence of an earlier Michigan Agricultural College.

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Disposition of mementos

Mementos from the Roosevelt elm (cross-section plaque and/or mini-crate or puzzle) have been presented to the following:

Anderson, James H., Dean of Agriculture and Natural Resources

Breslin, Jack, Vice President, Michigan State University

Dawson, Lawrence E. Acting Chairperson, Food Science and Human Nutrition

Dewhurst, C. Kurt, Director,

Michigan State University Museum

Hannah, John A., President Emeritus,

Michigan State University

Mackey, Cecil, President, Michigan State University

Shingleton, John D., Director, Placement Services, Michigan State University

Tombaugh, Larry W., Chairperson, Forestry

Trout, G. Malcolm, Professor Emeritus,

Food Science and Human Nutrition

Webb, Charles H., Executive Director,
Michigan State University Alumni Association

Acknowledgment

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Special gratitude is due Mr. Everett Alchin, Carpenter Shop, and Mr. Jack Mick, Paint Shop, for their outgoing, generous endorsement of the project by sawing, kiln-drying and lacquering cross-sections of the bole of the tree, as well as making finished lumber of the remainder. Thanks are due Dr. Frederick L. Honhart, Director, University Archives and Historical Collections, and his staff, for their personal interest in ferreting out special collections pertinent to the subject, Dr. George W. Parmelee, Professor, Botany and Plant Pathology and Curator, Woody Plant Collection, for his ready identification of the Huntingdon elm; and Dr. Robert J. Geist, Professor Emeritus, English, for his painstaking reading and editing of the manscript.

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Seldom has the writer found such wholehearted, selfless help among busy people. Beyond their own work, they radiated genuine joy in sharing their special talents to bring the project to successful completion. The writer is indeed indebted to them all.



Cartoon by DING, "The long, long trail" Des Moines Register, January 6, 1919

Colophon

The Art Department, Michigan State University, specifically the Alphabet-26 Press printed this historic document on May 24, 1983. California is the predominate type face, printed on 70 lb. wove finish, buff paper. One hundred copies were made available of which this copy is No. 54.

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Project
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G. Malcolm Trout, Professor Emeritus
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and
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of the

MSU Retirees Club

