

Red Oak, White Pine, Yellow Birch: an Essay on Longevity

BY JULIA SHIPLEY

On the upper west side of Manhattan, on the first floor of the Museum of Natural History, sequestered in a dim corner is a slice of a mammoth sequoia, God's torso, I think as I gawk at this hunk which germinated from an infinitesimal seed in the year 550 AD, the year St. David converted Wales to Christianity. The year it was cut down, 1891, was the year the zipper was invented. None of us staring at this shard of a sequoia had even been born yet.

When it was exhibited at the Chicago World's Columbian Exhibition in 1893, according to the museum's docent, people were incredulous that a tree could ever grow so big, and disgruntled that it had been severed for their viewing pleasure.

The cross section—displayed on end showing the growth rings, all 1,342 of them, one for each year of the tree's life—is broad as a Cadillac Coup de Ville and tall as a UPS truck. Were it to somehow flop over and appear as it had in the forest the day it was finally cut from the stump, its dimensions would match that of our town's stout gazebo, a lone edifice on the Common where small orchestras play in the summer. In my mind's eye I grow the Gazebo into a sequoia tree that looms hundreds of feet over the town ground. Then I imagine my neighbors standing under its canopy—some would gaze up and see a valuable resource: lumber for building a new town garage; and money, from the sale of its surplus timber, for a new town truck and 5,500 yards of sand to throw over icy winter roads. We could cover salaries, which means livelihoods, which means families.

My other neighbors would see a deity, something too astonishing, too meaningful, valuable for its mere existence, for its extraordinary longevity, to harvest.

But here on the east coast of the United States, these matters were settled long ago. The old growth forests, whose greatest specimens were marked on their trunks with a broad arrow as property of the King's navy, are mostly extinct and the scarce second growth and more prevalent third and fourth growth now clothe what's known as the North Woods.

And yet, people like Stuart LaPoint, Ross Morgan and Jim Moffatt know of big trees that lurk in our midst, trees which have mastered the quiet, but noteworthy act of persistence.

RED OAK

Stuart LaPoint, the owner of a landscaping business and assistant tree warden for the town of Craftsbury, gets around—meaning he drives the back roads a lot, keeping an eye out for something big. In 2010 he put together a group of photographs showing 12 of Craftsbury's most majestic specimens. After some pestering (I'd rib him when I saw him at the General Store, "Hey, I'd love to go check out those trees.") he agreed to let me come along.

It helps I happen to have two of the biggest trees in town, or rather, they have me, whichever way you look at it: they are the oldest things I live with—these huge red oaks, with limbs as tall and thick as regular trees. In the fall when they're tawny, the one on the left has goldish leaves, and the one on the right's are more russet. As I spend the weekends of October and November raking up their endless bequest, I ponder how old they are.

Big is not necessarily old, Ross Morgan, a consulting forester has gently and repeatedly explained to me. Even core sampling a tree is inadequate means of gauging age and the only way you know for sure a tree's age: count the stump rings. To this end I call up Dave Rodgers over on Whetstone Brook who has two cross-sections from the maples of an old sugar bush and says I'm welcome to come over. They are leaning like spare tires in his barn, one much broader than the other. I squat on the concrete beside them and begin in the center, year one, and count out to the perimeter under my breath, using a pen tip to keep track. Years enclose years so snugly. The broader slab is just 100 years old and the smaller hunk is, to my surprise, its elder by another 50 years.

So one day in March, when Stuart calls up and asks, "How's tomorrow?" I tell him it's perfect. We are going to visit the biggest living trees he knows about within five miles of the town gazebo. He's called all the landowners; we're cleared to visit.

As he pulls in the driveway the next morning, my big oaks throw zebra stripe shadows all over his pickup truck. As we gaze 70 feet up into the trees' canopy, I tell Stuart how recently a

tree-size limb wrenched loose and how I hired a guy named Karl Nitch to help take it down and how Karl used tree spikes to climb sixty feet up and fell the monstrous limb. The whole time I worried what I might have to say to Karl's surviving wife, but in the end, he returned to the ground of his own accord and I had enough bucked up chunks to heat the house for half the winter, and to give to my neighbor Dave Brown, who churned out eight oak bowls on his lathe. As my Dad and I split firewood together, we marveled at the pretty pink flesh of the oak—oh, so this is why they call it "Red." And when folks come over for dinner, I'm sure to tell them how these bowls grew in the yard.

The second stop on our tree tour is a just up the road, by the Whitney Brook, and there it is: strong, straight and tall, growing impossibly from the bank of the brook. Standing beside it you can see the Atwood's silo and the power pole running current up to the barn.

Stuart announces, "It's a Hoyt Spruce."
A Hoyt Spruce?
"Yeah."
Hoyt?
"Hoit."
Oh, you mean 'White'?
"Yup, and 32 feet high if I had to guess. You'll look hard to find one bigger. Should live another 30 years. I just happened to see it from the road one day as I was going by."

And then, quick as a wink, we are back in the car headed further up the Creek Road toward Albany, to get a look at Bruce Butterfield's Hop Hornbeam (also known as Ironwood) off near a clearing, and then his American Linden (also known as Basswood).

Standing beneath the Hornbeam I am blasé—its stature seems unremarkable, neither broad nor tall, but as I learn later reading Donald Peattie's *A Natural History Of Trees of Eastern and Cen-*

tral North America, my nonplus is dipped in ignorance, as Peattie writes, "Only occasionally does this tree grow 30 feet high," and here Stuart has located this "occasion" right in our neighborhood. Meanwhile, he defends the Linden growing nearby, stating, "I don't think that it'll be a wonder, but it's pretty big—look on the trunk, its got some girth, close to 42 inches I'd guess."

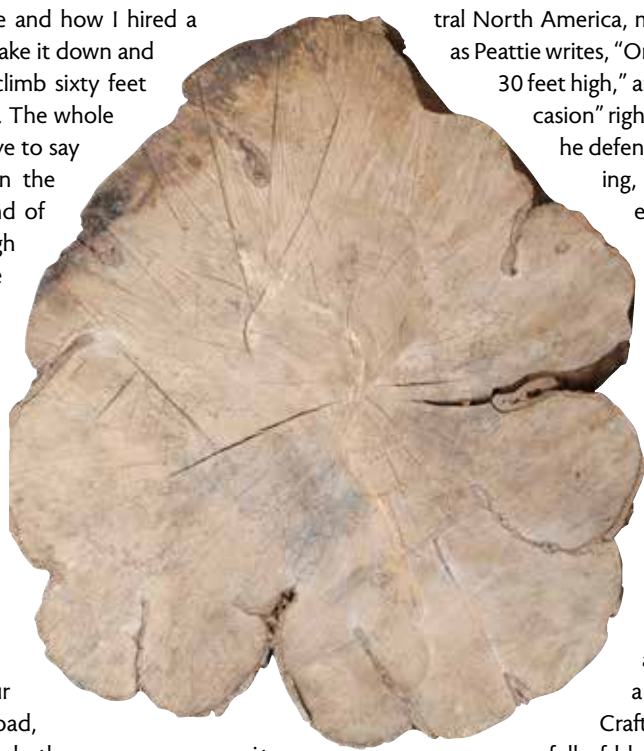
On with the tour, we buzz back toward town, merely driving by the jumbo Paper Birch on the roadside near Ron Geoffroy's East Hill Auto and the Quaking Aspen in the bank by the Midi's 20 feet from the intersection of South Albany and Ketchum Hill Road.

So often I simply see "trees" and not individual species, as in a stadium I simply see "people," a human blur. When I moved to Craftsbury eight years ago, the town was full of blurry people, but in the intervening years, or in arboreal terms: eight growth rings, I've learned names and personalities, so it is fitting that each tree Stuart introduces is linked by its name to a neighbor, as I start to see the forest through the trees.

On the other end of town, we leave the main road and jolt over a jeep road through a cow field and park on the crest of a hill. Here is the Ryan brothers' white pine, a 200' tower of a tree, its straight trunk surging sure as an arm reaching up to pinch the cheek of sky; Stuart guesses it's, "Oh, I really don't know, 150 years?" Part of it is a jagged snag where a lightning strike may have sheared off a significant limb.

We stare at it: a celebrity tree with an audience of sometimes cows and open fields and surrounding hills. "Either it's quite resistant or just lucky," Stuart wonders aloud as to why that wasn't taken.

Big trees exist in the first place because they are inconvenient to get to—else they would've been smoke or siding or shingles or paper or the bones of a home by now. Or they grow big when all the other trees around them are cut, allowing them sudden and unlimited sunlight and space.



OPPOSITE: My brother's children inhabit a neighborhood where suburban postage-stamp backyards grace cookie-cutter tract homes not unlike those in the neighborhood where I grew up.

Next we motor north to visit a Cherry tree across the town line into Albany. Unlike the diva Pine, the plus size Cherry is hidden in a patch of scrubby saplings and shrubs. I feel an immediate fondness for it and obviously, I'm not the only one—someone has built a small platform up in its boughs, where a hunter spends the hours of November, abiding with the Cherry, hoping for deer.

Next Stuart brings us to the Hemlock growing along the flank of Eligo Lake and I am hushed into wonder. Soaring 125 feet tall amid other hemlocks and cedars, it feels like we're within a cathedral, or maybe cathedrals were built to make one feel as if you were in the presence of an immense hemlock. Beams of sunlight are fringed into bright motes by the hemlock's trillion needles and I remember a poem by Greek poet by Yannis Ritsos who describes the "tree fluttering its branches" as angel's wings.

The last three trees we whisk over to visit are also handsome and memorable: The Cedar by The Fox's place on Little Hosmer Pond is wholesome and imposing. Its bark looks like long, sinuous hanks of grey hair.

The Ash tree is also unquestionably big. Even from a distance one can see the mound of its canopy flourishing above the other trees in the woods between Ketchum Hill and Calderwood Hill. And it has a kind of gravitational force that makes you want to throw out your agenda and spend the rest of the day beneath it.

Finally, the sugar maple beside the funeral home on the Common is the oldest tree hidden in plain view, a tree that has been changing sunlight into sugar since 1800 when John Adams was president, Middlebury College was chartered and horseback was a damn fine way to run some errands.

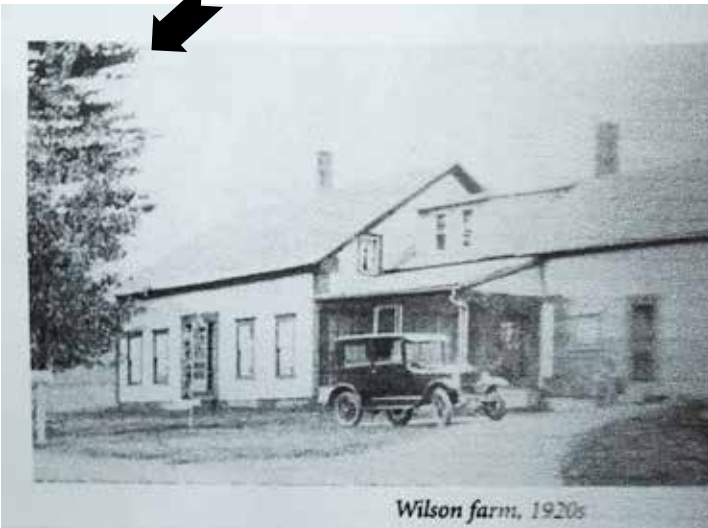
Then the tour is over and I've made the acquaintance of twelve substantial trees. I feel as if the world is smaller and bigger, both, and I feel less alone within it. Who knows, there may be even more trees out there, also growing quietly, beings that have withstood winds, weathers, generations, everything.

WHITE PINE

The photo, taken in twenties, shows a house next to a tree belonging to William and Annie Wilson who ran a boarding house called "A Week on the Farm," for folks from the city who wanted to try the rural life, helping out with chores and sharing meals around the table. Even back then the pine's pliant limbs flare over the farmhouse roof.

Another picture from the 30's shows the tree sturdier, thicker, taller. The Wilson's son, Earle is in high school; a Model T Ford is parked in the drive.

Half a century later, decades after Earl marries one of the girls who helps out on the farm, Mary, and decades after all the dairy cows are sold, and just a few years into the Earle and Mary Wilson's own retirement, sometime around 1980, Earle warns the neighbors who skidoo and four wheel across the Wilson's property to "get the hell off" (or some "not nice" version thereof),



ABOVE: My brother's children inhabit a neighborhood where suburban postage-stamp backyards grace cookie-cutter tract homes not unlike those in the neighborhood where I grew up.



because as they ride through the snow and mud, they're damaging the saplings.

Not long after, on Halloween night someone sneaks into the yard with a saw, approaches the white pine, and cuts a circle all the way around the tree, thereby preventing the water and nutrients from traveling up the tree. This is called "girdling" a tree, a quickly accomplished and foolproof method of starving it to death.

Though taking a tree can be as simple as picking a flower, the quick work of an axe or saw and it's done, the ramifications of that action can be more profound than mere vandalism: the loss of a tree's life can feel like a direct blow, a deep wound to those who cherish the tree.

Some arbor-cides are so atrocious their stories are borne out through national media and are the subject of entire books. For example, in Austin, Texas in early 1989 a man named Paul Cullen poisoned a 500 -year old live oak tree with Velpar, a potent herbicide. His motive was unrequited love. He was charged with felony and sentenced to nine years in prison.

John Valliant's meticulous book, The Golden Spruce describes how in 1997 in British Columbia, Grant Hadwin cut down a 300- year- old Sitka Spruce, a genetic mutant with golden needles,

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dles, a tree integral to the Haida mythology. Hadwin's actions were an attempt to draw attention to the abuses of the forest industry. He disappeared before his hearing, and is presumed dead.

In 2010, in Toomer's Corner, Alabama, Harvey Updyke allegedly poisoned two 80+ year old live oaks with an herbicide called Spike 80DF, by injecting it into the soil around the landmark trees, which are regularly festooned when the home team, Auburn State University, wins. Updyke is accused of applying 50 times the lethal dose of Spike following the Ironbowl in 2010, in which Auburn State beat Updayke's favorite, University of Alabama. As of this writing it is not clear if the trees will survive. Updyke, whose trial has been postponed repeatedly, faces charges of criminal mischief, desecration of a venerated object and unlawful damage of a crop facility. If convicted he faces up to 42 years in prison.

And most recently in Longwood, Florida in January, 2012, the 3,500 year old bald cypress known as The Senator, the fourth or fifth oldest tree in the world, burned when a 25- year- old

woman taking shelter in its hollow, allegedly lit a match or a lighter so she could better see the drugs she was attempting to take.

In the wake of these all these tragedies, each community has articulated the meaning of having a venerable tree in their midst, speaking of the loss as if it were a friend or family member. One man described The Golden Spruce's demise as like "a drive-by shooting of the Little Prince." Outside the gate enclosing the remains of the ancient cypress, someone left flowers and a little note: "Rest in Peace Senator."

The Wilsons can understand these kinds of sentiments—they have a photograph showing all their grandchildren crowded around the swing hanging from the branches of their tall, silent, long-lived Pine.

Though the damage to their white pine was intended to be lethal—miraculously, it was not. With the help of a bridge patch, their tree "jumped the girdle" and continued growing for twenty more summers and then, as it began to drop its thickest boughs, Bryce Wilson made two calls. The first was to Karl Nitch, a tree surgeon, to come and cut it down. And the second was to Will Strong who owns a portable mill called a Wood Mizer.

Audrey Wilson, Bryce's wife, lists all the places the tree abides with its the fourth and fifth generations of the family. Their daughter Lisa used the lumber for a table, a bench, and new flooring for what was her daughter's bedroom. And that grown daughter, Lindsey, uses a slab of the family tree for a counter top in her kitchen in Rutland.

And where it stood, between the house and the road, where its branches used to flare by Audrey's window, is a stump the width of a fridge. Audrey uses it as a pedestal for those pretty red geraniums, whose fragile flowers won't last through the first frost.

On Tuesday, July 24th, 2012 forecasters warned of a thunderstorm with high winds and the storm hit Craftsbury around 4 pm. Our electricity went out and the next day, as I left the house with sauce pot to scoop up a catchment of rain water for cof-

fee, I encountered a technician from the power company. He noted the power was about to be reconnected, and that he had never seen a tree so large as the one that had fallen, pulling down the power line. The white spruce.

After securing permission from the landowner, I planned to spend Saturday

with my boyfriend, Howie, using the biggest chainsaw we could find to take off a hunk of that white spruce, the one Stuart had shown me, growing thicker than a tractor tire and tall as the nearby silo, surging impossibly up from the side of the brook, the tree Stuart had said, looking directly into my eyes, "Now you keep an eye on it cause this tree's still got some more growing in it, beyond my lifetime anyway." By slicing a cross section off the trunk of the downed spruce, we'd at least learn how old it was.

However, when I got home late Wednesday evening, and opened the door I instantly smelled something clean-sweet with a spicy twinge of sap -- I turned the corner and there it lay, upon the wide boards of the living room floor, a huge wheel of solid wood, with a piece of notebook paper thumb-tacked to its face, in Howie's handwriting, "Start Counting!"

I got to ninety-four when I knelt down and counted. In 1918 Woodrow Wilson was president, America was immersed in WWI, and influenza was on the rampage when the seed of a white spruce sprouted on the bank of the Whitney Brook.

When I consult Mr. Peattie's book about the natural history of a spruce, he begins with a grand description of the multitude of white spruce flanking the hills along St. Lawrence River, calling it "the most beautiful approach to the North American Continent." And concludes with the reality that you are probably reading this on paper made from the pulp of white spruce, its fibers broken down by grindstones or with sulphite, the way a crisp apple is lost under gnashing molars and saliva.

Howie has hauled the spruce wheel into the room off the kitchen, and set it on top of the maple chopping block, the one we killed ten chickens on. I watched him wash off the business end before installing it as a base under the round of spruce: our new coffee table. It is here that I spread out my books and learn how Vermont's original native forests were all mostly cut by 1870 and here that I study the copy of a "Wallings" map of Vermont published in 1859, showing three houses, including mine, clustered in the vicinity of the Whitney Brook. Then there is one more building marked: sawmill. Perhaps the shoulder-width soft wood floorboards of this house grew by the brook, and were milled by the brook, where the white spruce grew.

The way that trees grow: showing their lives by successive circles, from the most recent outer year, all the way back to the sapling heart—it reverses my sense of being one individual, living inside this old house made of local trees and beneath the canopy of the old oaks, living inside this community of woods and people, living inside of the great remnant forests of the northeast.

The tree rings hidden inside the trunk or laid bare by the chainsaw show the repercussions of germinating: a sense of place encompassing a sense of place, here wrapped around here, which makes it the most persistent resident, which makes it a quiet teacher, a witness to everyday for sometimes, centuries.

YELLOW BIRCH

Ross Morgan, a consulting forester and savant when it comes to trees, has a passion for black ash. He don't like to see them cut and sold for pulp.

Twelve years ago, Ross's friend, an Adirondack pack basket maker was searching for a new source of his ideal material: black ash. Ross happened to know that Bruce Martin was cutting some, so they all met on the log landing next to two tractor trailer loads ready to head for the mill. While the basket maker was striking a deal with Bruce for the lumber, Ross backed away and took a look at the loaded logs. He started to count the rings on one of them and got to 261 before he hit rot.

I do the math: twelve years ago was the year 2000 minus 261 is...the year 1739 (or earlier)—when no one of European descent has yet staggered through the wilderness that won't be called Craftsbury for 50 more years. In other words: these trees, of which a few may still stand, are the perhaps the oldest living things around, holding out limbs, hosting birds' nests, making and tossing off leaves, season after season while a piece of paper called Declaration of Independence is signed, and the looms of the Industrial Revolution shudder and clack, and the wooden wheeled Model T's roll away from Detroit, Michigan, and Lindbergh's lands in Paris, and Armstrong puts his boot on the moon.

In other words, when we ask ourselves, well, how shall we live now? How may I comply with the changes to environment, society, the world as we know it? Perhaps the black ash has some answers.

Recently Randy Martin, Bruce's brother, got a hold of Ross and said, "My mother heard you're interested in the black ash on our property. Her first reaction was, "What the hell, we need to make a buck off of them"; then she thought, "We'll, wait a minute, go call that Morgan up and get him to come down here so we know what we've got."

The Martins log their land annually for firewood. As I join Randy and Ross on a recent late afternoon, we follow an old logging road into the woods. Randy tells us, "We got enough wood out of here to heat my home, Mom's and Bruce and Mike's place last winter." He also recalls the words of his late stepfather, Robert Anderson as we walk along Robert's old roadway, "I remember him saying, 'Don't cut that Black Ash because it won't burn worth crap. Regular Ash burns nice, but the Black Ash never dries out.'" The woods, for all that they've given to the family over the generations, are still full of grand trees: sugar maple, white ash and yellow birch.

As it happens, Randy's got a bum ankle and the black ash are deeper into the woods than we thought and night is coming on, so we head back toward the car, leaving the colonial trees unascertained, unclaimed, in private, building another growth ring around their inner centuries.

"In the early days of pioneering in the northeast, the "land-lookers" brought back tales of a tree of gigantic height, which grew in the wildest and remotest recesses of the great North Woods"—Donald Peattie A Natural History of Trees of Eastern and Central North America

The last time Jim Moffatt saw the Yellow Birch was about a year ago. These last few years he's gotten behind on some of his winter woods-work—and counting backward, he's had five hip operations; then there was a winter with so much snow he couldn't get into the woods, so he took his skidder apart to make some adjustments and put it back together; and the winter before that he spent going down to Fletcher Allen Hospital in Burlington to take his wife, Joan to her appointments.

As we climb into his Ford pick up he tells me was born in the house. The land came into the Moffat family when Jim's father bought the estate from Daniel Dustan, a descendant of the founding families of Craftsbury. And Mr. Dustan had purchased the parcel containing the Yellow Birch upon his return to Vermont after a stint in the South at outset of the Civil War. In a diary kept by Mr. Dustan, he describes building a sugarhouse. Back then, the Yellow Birch must have been surrounded by giant sugar maples. To form into a soaring tree, straight and tall, the Yellow Birch had to bide its time in the shade of older trees, and then shoot up, "released," as the others died off.

We are driving north through Moffatt's Tree Farm. Acres of Christmas trees grow on both sides of the road. What began as a sideline enterprise to dairy farming when Jim's father started cutting wild balsams in old pastures has turned into a full-time

cultivated tree farm operation under Jim’s management. Now Jim’s son, Steve is responsible for 100,000 trees on parcels of land spread out over five towns.

We travel down a side road and pull over as Jim hops out to open the gate across his right of way, then climbs back in. Entering the leaf -shingled shelter of the woods, we lurch along a cobble cluttered- skidder road. Jim recollects, “The first time I looked at the Yellow Spruce was in the 1960s after I bought the parcel from my father... I thought there was some lumber in it, but it was too much, more than my equipment could handle to bring it down.”

Though Jim’s father never mentioned it at the time, he too knew about the Yellow Birch. Eventually Jim learned his father had seen it years before and also thought it large, too large to take down with the equipment they had.

Back in 1972, a man named Jeff Freeman, then a professor at Castleton State College, began making a list of Vermont’s largest trees. In 2001, Loona Brogan of Plainfield, Vermont founded the Vermont Tree Society, a group and website celebrating Vermont’s largest trees. And now the most up to date list, with more than 110 species and varieties, is maintained by Vermont Department of Forests Parks and Recreation. Jim Moffatt’s tree is not on this list. There is an even bigger Yellow Birch in Victory, Vermont. But Jim’s may be the oldest.

“It must be three hundred years old. I’m 75 and it is relatively unchanged in my life time.”

We get out of the truck and walk a ways up the road, and then he stops and says, “There.” Though it sits back amid the woods of other sturdy trees, I am absolutely certain which tree he means.

It’s like coming across an I-beam in a box of tooth picks: it rises with authority; and it has a demeanor, emanating a sort of warmth and feeling, the way a person does. It seems far more sentient than anything else around it and indeed, it has convinced three centuries of appraising men that it’s not meant to be felled by saw.

When Jim leans against the Yellow Birch’s broad trunk for a photo, he does in a companionable way, and lets the trunk take some of his weight, an intimate gesture, more personal than simply standing beside it; and he favors the right side of the trunk, as opposed to the center, as if to leave room for where Joan would have stood, or still is standing, in some way.

Peattie concludes his chapter: “Frequently when a Yellow Birch comes to the end of its life span, it stands a long time, though decay is going on swiftly under its bark.”

Jim puts this truth another way, “You can see the inside’s rotten—one day the winds are going to bring it down.”

As we back away I ask, “Does it have a name?”—as the cypress was called the Senator or the chunk in the Museum of Natural History was from a tree named Mark Twain.

“No, it’s just the Yellow Birch.” After a pause he adds, “But if it did, I guess it would be ‘Joan,’ after my wife, as it represents so much about of our lives together.”

Then, once more, as has happened for hundreds of years, we turn away to leave, and the Yellow Birch remains.

I like to imagine one day, Steve’s boys, Jim’s grandsons, will grow up and bring their children here.

On page 36 of the 2011 town report, the Craftsbury Municipal Forest Committee notes that Stuart LaPoint received a grant from the Preservation Trust of Vermont to plant twelve trees. He planted one in the village and the tucked in eleven others on the Common, surrounding the lone gazebo and the hidden -in- plain- site- ancient maple. Stuart planted red maple, river birch, flowering crab, blue beech, hop hornbeam, Princeton elm, Japanese tree lilac and serviceberry. How about that? The man cruising the roads looking for the biggest and oldest being in the woods, is also cruising through town making sure the youngest have a chance to grow into something substantial, maybe even large, maybe even old, and hopefully recognized years, decades, maybe even centuries from now.



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