



## Trail Marker Trees

It's hard to imagine Wisconsin, a tourist state, without its ubiquitous highway signs of every shape, size, and description. But even early residents of the region needed help to get where they were going.

Trees marked trails and pointed out river fords, burial grounds and other places of interest. There is debate today among archeologists as to whether Indians or early settlers actually manipulated trees to cause them to grow into unusual shapes pointing toward landmarks. But even without scientific evidence of accuracy, fascinating legends have developed around these unusually shaped trees.

An article in the *Wisconsin Archeologist* in 1965 by Phil Sander, a naturalist and conservationist, suggested that most permanent marker trees were made from hardwoods such as oak, hickory, maple and elm, because of those trees' flexibility and strength. According to Sander, the tip of a sapling might be

buried in the ground or tied to a stake by twisted vines or strips of hide. As the tree continued to grow, the tip would die off and the trunk would assume a bent position. Usually a new upright trunk formed from the old tip. As the tree matured it took shape as a "living road sign that could be easily recognized and would last the life of the tree."

A distinctive tree was found at Twin Lakes in Kenosha County near the top of a high ridge overlooking the northeast bay of the lower lake. Oriented south, it pointed toward the land bridge separating the two lakes and toward the site of an old village and cemetery. Sander discovered another unique tree in Adams County in 1977. Located in Springville Township, the tree was a few miles east of the Wisconsin River bridge on the south side of Highway 82 in a picnic area. It pointed west.



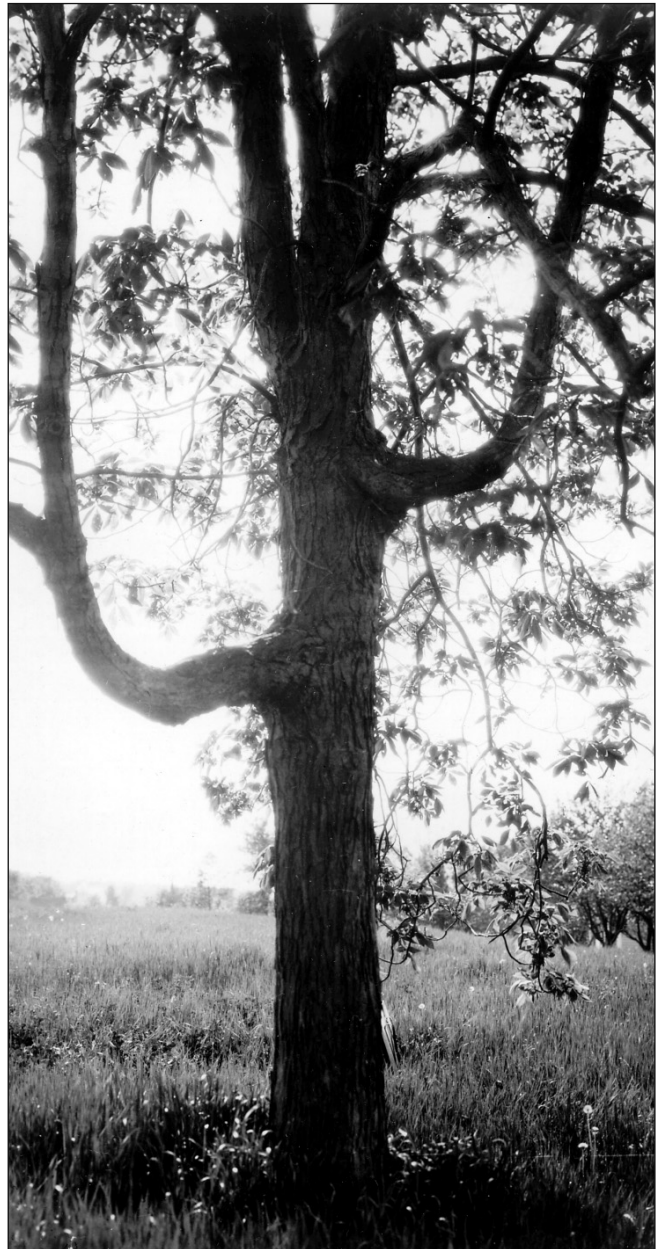
*Twin Lakes Trail Marker Tree discovered by Phil Sander* (1965)

At Green Lake, on the Victor Lawson estate, trees indicated an old trail passing through those grounds.

Two fine examples of trees that may have marked trails were found in the Horicon Marsh area. One, at the west end of Horicon, was a large oak with a massive branch pointing in one direction. Just west of Highway 28 on a farm was a large bur oak, possibly upwards of 200 years old, with interesting branches twisting in several directions.

Southeast of Brodhead, near reconstructed Highway 81 alongside Skinner Road, stood a white oak that dated back to pre-settlement days. Its odd bent shape suggested that the tip of the tree had been tied at ground level and a new terminal shoot had grown up at right angles to it. According to some stories, this tree helped Indian runners mark the trail from the Great Lakes to the Mississippi River, a trail that is now followed by cars on Highway 81 between Beloit and Monroe. Myron Olson, who grew up near Skinner Road, recalls playing on the tree as a youngster. His grandfather operated a blacksmith shop nearby. Another tree thought to be a marker tree, at Bluff View Park, came down some years ago when a new road went through.

An oak in the yard of the Walter Atwood home in Indian Hills, Madison, was also thought to be a trail marker tree. Now just a short distance from the golf course at Blackhawk Country Club, this tree may have marked the trail Black Hawk and his followers used to flee towards the Wisconsin River in 1832.



*Mercer's Addition Trail Marker Tree* Wisconsin Historical Society, WHI(X3)38163

A possible trail marker tree once stood in what was then called Mercer's Addition in Madison, near West High School. A hickory, it marked the crossing of two trails, and its branches, rather than its trunk, appeared twisted to point in four directions.

Another vanished tree is a beech that once stood near the corner of Wells and Thirteenth Streets in Milwaukee. Into the trunk was cut an Indian figure with a bow in one hand and an arrow in the other. The arrow pointed to the Menominee River.

Sources: Mrs. Walter Atwood, Madison  
Dorothy Gessert, Brodhead  
Phil Sander, Kenosha