

FEATURE STORY

10/1/53

Muir Tree
Knoll

FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN NEWS SERVICE, MADISON 6, WISCONSIN
RELEASE: Immediately

MADISON--The tree that helped shape the career of one of the University of Wisconsin's most famous students has reached the point in years where it has become a hazard and must be removed, University officials revealed today.

The old landmark is the Muir locust, a century-or-more old locust tree that in 1863 inspired John Muir to take the road that led to world fame as a naturalist.

The tree stands near the northwest corner of North Hall, in Muir's day a men's dormitory, and at the edge of the road climbing Bascom Hill from the Memorial Union.

It was in the spring of 1863 that John Muir and a fellow student named Milton Griswold stepped from North Hall, fascinated by the spring foliage and bloom of the locust tree.

Griswold reached up and plucked a branch of the tree, and explained to Muir the relationship in form that existed between the locust flower and the flowers of members of the pea family.

Muir wrote in his memoirs that "this fine lesson charmed me and sent me flying to the woods and meadows in wild enthusiasm...."

-more-

one--Muir locust

He made long excursions around the Madison lakes gathering specimens, and one of his favorite spots is said to be the area on and near the south shore of Lake Wingra where the University Arboretum is located. He kept his specimens fresh in a bucket in his North Hall room and studied them at night, a stone's throw from the spot where he received his first lesson in botany.

The heart of the old Muir locust is now dead, according to University officials, and further efforts to save the tree would be useless. The trunk is filled with pitch, and the limbs have been supported with more and more cables as the years have passed.

Located as it is at the edge of the campus drive, the old tree may actually constitute a danger.

G. William Longenecker, UW professor of horticulture and landscape architect, reports that seeds from the Muir locust have been germinated and planted in other spots on the campus and Arboretum in memory of Muir, and the wood from the giant tree will be processed into mementos of the man who devoted his life to preserving the beauties of nature.

Prof. Longenecker points out that the locust has already lived many years past its prime.

"The tree is in much better condition than most locusts of that age. Throughout the years it has been the recipient of special attention. We hate to lose it because of its historical interest and beauty," he adds.

Born in Scotland in 1838, Muir came with his father to America in 1849 and settled on a farm in Green Lake County, Wis. From 1849 to 1860 he worked on the farm and then enrolled as a student at the University.

He did not take a regular course of study. At first he decided to pursue medicine, because he was impressed by the inadequate health facilities at nearby Camp Randall, through which thousands of Civil War soldiers passed. His interest in nature, however, changed his mind.

~~two~~---Muir locust

He pursued those subjects of greatest interest and use to him, particularly chemistry, mathematics, physics, Greek and Latin, botany, and geology. Charles R. Brown, who wrote a short biography of Muir, says: "He had no thought of getting a diploma or of making a name for himself."

Muir was also an inventor, and two of his clockwork creations built while he was at the University have given many a student a chuckle. One was a bed that would turn him out on the floor at the appropriate time each morning, and the second was a combination desk and bookshelf that dropped a book to Muir at the time he appointed to study the subject. The Wisconsin Historical Museum has preserved both inventions.

Muir left the University after four years, and started on a 1,000-mile walk to the Gulf of Mexico, the beginning of his famous travels throughout the West. In later years he described his departure from the University campus with these words:

"From the top of a hill on the north side of Lake Mendota, I gained a last wistful, lingering view of the beautiful University grounds and buildings where I had spent so many hungry and happy and hopeful days. There with streaming eyes I bade my blessed Alma Mater farewell. But I was only leaving one University for another--the University of the Wilderness."

He became famous for his discoveries, his voyages to the arctic regions, and his work in forest conservation and in championing the establishment of national parks and reservations. He was sought out in the Yosemite Valley by such men as Emerson and Theodore Roosevelt. The latter roughed it with Muir in Yosemite, and later added 148 million acres to forest land, created five national parks, 16 national monuments, and established the government as the guardian of natural resources.

Many of these symbols of America's abundant natural endowments now bear Muir's name: Muir Woods National Park in California, Muir Glacier in Alaska, the John Muir Trail in the High Sierras, the Muir Pass and shelter cabin in Utah, and Muir Knoll on the UW campus.

ed three--Muir locust

Muir was the first to describe the magnificent Redwood groves on the West Coast, and he called the Kings River country more majestic than Yosemite.

Wherever he went, he took along little more than wild animal would need. Traversing virgin wilderness, he never took a gun and carried only tea, dry bread, and a few other necessities. When grizzlies or other animals were nearby, he whistled or made other noises as he walked along so as not to come upon them by surprise. He became a mountain finder and namer, calling one California peak after his friend Emerson, and a newly found Alaska glacier after the railroad builder, Harriman.

He climbed granite slopes without special equipment, and lay down to sleep where nightfall caught him, on mountain summit or high, rocky shelf, at times using a tree root or rock fragment to keep from rolling out of bed.

By the end of his life he had written 60 journals, covering a period of 44 years of travel and scientific exploration from 1867 to 1911. His writings show that he was prose poet as well as naturalist.

The name Muir Knoll was given to the site where the tree stands by the Board of Regents in 1918 in honor of the world famous naturalist, changing the name of the spot from Story-Teller's Hill which it had been called in previous years. Dr. Charles H. Vilas delivered the dedication address, and Muir's friends, Judge Griswold, '63, and another former fellow student, Charles E. Vroman, spoke at the occasion. Another memento to Muir now stands on the staircase of Birge Hall on the campus; a bronze bust of Muir by C. S. Pietro, the gift of Thomas E. Brittingham, which was unveiled in 1916.

###