

# George Landis Arboretum Newsletter

Volume 10 • Number 1

Winter 1991

## The Big Oak of the George Landis Arboretum

Fred Lape

*To our readers: In this issue, our focus is on the White Oak, a species represented by an historic specimen here at the Arboretum. The story of our Big Oak is best told by Fred Lape, founder of the GLA. Reprinted here, his article first appeared in the second issue of the newsletter, published in Spring 1982.*

*Our celebration of the oak continues with an article on the species by our current Director, as well as some changes you'll notice in the newsletter, and a new oak logo which will soon grace our publication.*

The Big Oak of the George Landis Arboretum is an Eastern White Oak (*Quercus alba*). The species ranges from Maine to Georgia, but flourishes best in the section from southern Connecticut and Long Island through Eastern Pennsylvania where it is often the dominant tree. It is not common in New York State north of the Mohawk Valley.

The Big Oak must have been an outstanding forest tree when the land now the Arboretum was cleared, about 1840, for it was singled out by the first owner to be left standing in the open.

My first memory of the tree dates from about 1910, when I was getting old enough to pay attention to trees. It seems to me now in memory that its trunk was as large then as it is now, but early life memories usually magnify with time. There were already two lightning scars, which wriggled like gigantic snakes down the east and south faces of the trunk, and the traces of which still remain.

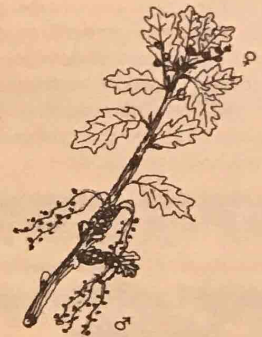
It was probably one of the features of the farm which induced my father to buy the property, for he loved far views, and he immediately named the place Oak Nose Farm, and always took visitors to see the views up and down the Schoharie Valley, which one gets from the knoll upon which the oak stands. The knoll itself is part of a glacial moraine that was dumped across the valley during the last glacial retreat.

We have never, here at the Arboretum, taken borings of the tree to ascertain its age. From comparing the size of the trunk and branch spread with that of certain famous oaks in southern New England and on Long Island, whose age is roughly known from certain historic events which happened near or under them, we guess the Big Oak to be from 350 - 500 years old.

It was a flourishing tree until the year 1940. Then a natural disaster overtook it. That year there was an ice storm. It rained steadily and heavily day and night for three days, the rain freezing as it fell. By the end of the storm, every blade of dead grass in the fields was coated with solid ice to the thickness of a man's thumb, and all the branchlets of trees were equally coated.

I have never lived through a major earthquake, nor a tornado, nor a hurricane. The last night of the ice storm was the greatest natural disaster I have ever experienced. Few persons on these hills slept that night. From late afternoon of the third day, when the large limbs of trees began to give way, and all through the night into the next morning, there was a constant bombardment from the crashing of limbs as they broke loose from the trees and fell.

On the fourth morning the storm had ended and the sun came out. I walked over toward the Big Oak to see the damage. On the way up to its knoll one looks over a section of the woodlot that had always been the sap bush, with large maple trees that had furnished sap for maple syrup for a hundred years. There was not a single large maple left standing, only the stripped tops of trunks and the mass of fallen



*Quercus, Oak Flower Detail.*

branches glistening in the sun. The Big Oak lost all of its branches on the north-east side, about half of its crown.

If I had had at the time either the money or the experience to repair the damage after the storm, the tree could probably have recovered completely, for it was then a vigorously growing tree. I had neither, and did nothing. So in a few years the open wounds left along the trunk by the pulled out bases of the falling limbs, began to rot inward. Once water was able to reach beyond the growing layer of wood, the rotting inward and down accelerated, and has continued ever since. Raccoons began to nest inside the hollow trunk.

In the meantime, the tree has continued to grow vigorously, but during the last four years large lower branches have broken off without even a high wind or a heavy snow to cause the break, merely the weight of the branches overpowering the now shallow moorings which they have in the trunk.

Whether anything could be done now, that is worth doing, is doubtful. The very lower section of the trunk still seems solid, but the upper section is completely hollow, and one can look up from lower holes to light in the upper ones.

Even as it stands, the tree may live another hundred years, for the White Oak is a vigorous species, but the climax of its life definitely came at the end of three days of freezing rain in the winter of 1940, and from then on its way has been downward.