



Tree of the Month • March 2017

by: *Gilbert A Smith, ISA Master Arborist*

Interview with Indian Trail Marker Tree

I'm speaking with one of the oldest and wisest residents of Lake County Illinois. She lives in Deerfield beside the play ground on Carlisle Avenue and has stood in that place for more than 200 years. The trail marker tree was a sapling in the late 1700's when she was selected to be a guide for the Potawatomi Indians.

Gil: I've been coming here to visit you for more than 30 years and you never seem to change. Why are you still here when most of the other trees in the area are less than half your age?

Trail Guide: I was selected when I was a young sapling to be bent and tied down with raw hide until my trunk stayed bent. This was to make me different so I could be picked out from the other trees. It was an honor that the Potawatomi Tribe chose me to direct their paths. They knew that my spirit was strong and that I would be a guide for many human generations.

Gil: When did you say farewell to the Potawatomi?

Trail Guide: In 1833 the Native people signed a treaty that gave up their land to the European settlers. They were forced to leave, and with them, went my purpose. People never again looked to me to guide them safely on their path.

Gil: What was it like when you were young? I can tell from the trees surrounding us that Deerfield was an Oak Savanna. What is a Sugar Maple, like you, doing here?

Trail Guide: Good question. Remember this, **"Trees grow where they grow."** In this modern sub-urban forest, people plant trees without reference to where each species comes from and, therefore, where they thrive. Deerfield is part of a flat, low area surrounding Lake Michigan in a broad band which includes Chicago. Before it was drained for farms, most of the land is what you would call swamp. Savanna is a better term. Flocks of birds darkened the skies. The life giving waters attracted wildlife; beavers, fox, wolves, bear, wildcats, eagles, fish and amphibians. It could be loud, but not discordant, like the highway noises now.



Indian Trail Marker Tree, a Sugar Maple (Acer saccharum), as old as our nation, protected by a cyclone fence, Deerfield, IL. Photo by Lesley Bruce Smith.



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The Oaks grow on slightly higher ground above the wetlands. They have thick bark to withstand the fires set by the Indians that used to roam in from the western prairies. I'm on higher ground too, along a trail the Potawatomi used to walk avoiding the swamps. My thin bark couldn't withstand those prairie fires, but I'm in a natural fire break down wind or east of the Des Plaines River that allowed me to survive the fires. **Trees grow where they grow.** Look west of the Des Plaines River and you will see the Oak trees. Look east and you will see many of my species remaining, a living story of the fires set hundreds of years ago by the Native Peoples.

Gil: Do you have some guidance for us in this modern age?

Trail Guide: I have weathered many storms, witnessed many wars and the coming and going of many races of people and animals. If you come stand by me and listen, I will talk to you about steadfastness during change, about the tree talk in the wind, about rest in the shine of the moon. If you wish to listen, come along because my trunk is rotting and my time to return to mother earth is near. This is your country now, your earth, your mother, not to be bought and sold lightly, **but to be protected.**