

## The Gudgel Oak – Working with a Historic Tree

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Starhill Forest Arboretum, Petersburg, Illinois

all photos © Guy Sternberg

The story began long ago. I had admired for decades an old white oak (*Quercus alba* L.) growing along a rural road near our home. I have taken many Oak Society members from around the world to see the tree during local oak tours. A few friends and I decided to begin measuring and core-dating some of the most impressive trees in our county, so I suggested that we include this tree due to its size and to its prominent location along the road right of way.

When we examined the tree closely, we noticed a serious split in the main fork. The split probably had occurred long ago, but was placing the tree (and the traffic below) in jeopardy during wind and ice-loading events. We proceeded to core the oak and it was shown to date to 1759, making it one of the oldest trees in the area. This age was derived via extrapolation (a common practice in coring large trees) because the core was incomplete due to a large hollow in the center of the trunk.

We could have made a few notes and moved on. But I could not let this old veteran continue to try to stand on its own, with no help during future storms. We all know that, sooner or later, such trees come tumbling down, and I now was culpable – I had seen the split and I had become aware of the hollow trunk! I set out to raise funds to have the tree cabled and pruned. Things rapidly fell into place.

The first order of business was to give the tree a personality – *i.e.*, a name. It grew along Gudgel Road adjacent to land originally homesteaded by the Gudgel family. “Gudgel” is unique enough that people tend to remember the name when they hear it, so I named it the Gudgel Oak. This gave us a selling point: “Help save the Gudgel Oak!”

The State Journal-Register newspaper outdoor editor (a friend and outstanding naturalist) ran an article about the tree and the proposal to work on it. A local non-profit organization agreed to accept the contributions, granting donors the benefit of its tax-deductible status. A certified arborist stepped forward and agreed to do the work for the cost of paying his crew – his own time and equipment would be furnished at no charge. Donations began pouring in from the local community as well as from other cities and other states, due to the news spreading on the Internet. Many people contributed a few dollars, and a few gave hundreds. Some of them told me that they never had an opportunity before to help save an old tree, and they felt a sense of satisfaction in participating in our project.

As the work was being planned, an artist (and Oak Society member) from Chicago offered to create a plaque for the tree. Then a local stone mason volunteered to donate a large (1700-pound / 750-kilo) boulder and mount the plaque on it. A concrete contractor donated concrete for the base for the rock, and another contractor dug the footing for the base and placed the rock with his excavator. The local road supervisor gave permission for the work to be done on the road right of way, handled traffic control for us, and even built a small parking lot for viewing the tree.

Tree work included pruning (removing all major dead wood and reducing the weight on the limbs supported by the splitting stem), installing reinforcing cables high in the crown, cleaning out surrounding brush to remove competition and in-

crease visibility, and fertilizing. It was done in early spring, just as bud swell began, to facilitate identification and removal of dead wood. Everything was completed in one day, with a five-man crew and several pieces of heavy equipment. The work on the monument was done the following week.

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Menard County Tourism Council

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...the 17th...  
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...the 17th...

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Thurs., May 12, 2005

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**Sec. 1, Pg. 6**

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**Gudgel Oak News Coverage**

Extensive publicity helped to raise donations of money and services from several states.

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Looking up into the crown of the Gudgel Oak, a *Quercus alba* about 250 years of age. The branch stubs visible on the lower trunk remain from a broad crown confirming the savanna origin of this tree in central Illinois.

On Saturday, 7 May 2005, a dedication ceremony was held. Many of the donors participated, coming from as far away as Kansas City, and a follow-up article was published in several local newspapers. The community can take pride in their special oak tree, and know that every reasonable effort has been made to extend its life for future generations to appreciate.

This tree was worth saving, as a source of community pride and awareness and a living link to the pre-settlement history of the region. But more importantly, I hope others will see such opportunities in their own communities, and believe that they also can help save other historic or special trees and landscapes. Once gone, old and rare trees cannot be restored.



Arborists entering the tree crown to prune and cable



Installing reinforcing cables on one of the major side limbs, high in the crown.



The main fork of the trunk, showing the split that caused the project to be undertaken.



The Gudgel Oak (*Quercus alba*), core-dated to 1759, is one of several historic trees inventoried in Menard County, Illinois –it was a seedling during the French and Indian War of the 1750s.