

Marker Trees

We are all searching for signs in our lives. Which way do I go on this highway? Where should I live? Where should I work? We take internet quizzes to tell us what career we should have and what kind of dog we would be or in what country we were meant to live. Signs to tell us if we're making the right choices. Signs from God, lucky pennies, four leaf clovers. I have been known to collect particularly sage fortune cookie messages or bottle caps with wise words on their undersides. You never know when those fortune cookie lucky numbers might just be the winning lottery digits! You'd better follow the sign, right?

Trees have been used as signs for centuries. Native Americans used to use trees to tell in which direction they should travel. These trees were called "Marker Trees". Favorite tree selection for these trees were oaks, maples and elms. These species were selected for their flexibility in youth but hardwood in maturity. Marker trees were bent in the direction of a frequently visited destination such as a water source, campsite or a safe river crossing. A traveler through the woods might happen into a meadow area and find himself unsure of the correct path. A marker tree bent in the direction of the destination would lead the way. Often easily discernable but sometimes covert, these trees let Native Americans know they were headed the right way. Conversely, a distinctive marker tree from one tribe might act as a "no trespassing" sign to the member of another tribe who might stumble upon a tree from another tribe.



Methods for bending these marker trees varied by tribe as did the appearance of the marker trees. A marker tree created by the Iroquois would have been different than one created by a Cherokee or Navajo. Nevertheless the trees would have been shaped in such a way as to make it clear that the trees were shaped by man; not to be confused with Mother Nature's handiwork. Regardless of the method used, the basic principal was to bend a sapling tree over and held into this bent position for several years until this man made habit becomes the tree's own.

Starhill Forest Arboretum in Illinois specializes in the hybridization of new oak species as well as the preservation of senior oaks. They are breeding a variety of white oak which they have named *Quercus alba* 'Pathfinder'. This variety of white oak is a selection made for its ability to be shaped into a desired shape and was named as a tribute to the Native American marker trees from generations ago. It is not known when the earliest marker trees were created, however the largest marker trees have been measured as having 50" trunk diameters. Using historical tree diameter data, we can infer that this might date these trees back as far as 400 years! A very long time indeed for any landmark; let alone a living one!

So, what if you could create your own markers? To stop looking for clues in your fortune cookies, stop listening to your GPS... forever "re-calculating". Maybe today you look out your window and see your marker.

"It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see"

Henry David Thoreau