Trees

By Jeane Knapp

grew up on a nursery in southern Ohio where we raised trees, shrubs and evergreens. The first tree I ever fell from was a small sumac, one of a group of three that grew beside the nursery drive. It was probably 1935, when I was 5. I scraped my knees and went crying into the house.

This did not discourage me from climbing trees, however, and despite numerous subsequent | between the sales yard and our house. Birches are

falls, I was fortunate not to break any of my limbs and glad to have such an abundance of trees to test my courage and agility.

The trees I remember best and loved the most were not the ones we planted in the fields, but the unique and individual trees that grew around the house and grounds.

Three huge American elms stood in front of our house on the highway right-of-way, forming a canopy over U.S. Route 25. It was called the Dixie Highway and stretched from Michigan to Florida. The shade of these elms was a favorite spot for the many hoboes who hitchhiked along the road during the Depression.

My brother, Bill, remembers that there was a white X on a telephone pole in front of the house, marking ours as a home with handout possibilities. When tramps knocked at our back door, Mother gave them plates of food.

One of the elms—the smallest of the three blew down in a fierce thunderstorm and fell across the highway, blocking traffic. Family lore has it that the mayor of nearby Tipp City was in a great hurry to get to Troy, the next city north, and persuaded my brother Bob to let him drive in the nursery drive, across the lawn behind the house, and out the residence drive. I understand that the family narrowly averted a stream of traffic following the mayor across the lawn, and Bob was chided for his ill-advised political favor.

Along the south fencerow in the nursery fields grew three Logan elms, trees my father grafted in the 1920s from the famous Logan elm in Circleville, Ohio, where the Indian chief Logan signed a peace treaty with Anthony Wayne. He placed other Logan elms in various locations around Ohio, including one at the state capitol in Columbus.

When my oldest brother and his wife built a home adjoining the nursery property, the Logan elms were moved there. The trees shaded their home for more than four decades.

A white birch grew along the nursery drive



Huge American elms framed the family home.

not native to southern Ohio, as they do not like the heavy clay soil, and the tree was considered a rare and delicate specimen. I was not allowed to climb the birch tree.

Despite being protected from me, the birch died, whereupon my optimistic family replaced it with another. This continued throughout several unsuccessful reincarnations.

French and Persian lilac bushes grew beside the birch, and farther along the drive, where the walk led from the sales yard to the house, there were three Bolleana poplars. These trees were impossible to climb and needed frequent trimming. Bluebells bloomed beneath them.

Two pyramidal oaks stood sentinel on either side of the residence driveway that led to the garage and barn on the north side of the house. These were ornamental trees, also unsuitable for climbing. Next along the north side of the drive were an American elm, a maple, two poplars, and closest to the barn, an enormous willow.

The elm had scratchy bark, and the lower branches of the maple and poplars were hard to reach. The willow was my favorite. Its smooth bark was kind to bare legs; its limbs were fat and sturdy for sitting; and the leafy, dangly branches formed a perfect hiding place where I could monitor the nursery activity with the help of toy binoculars.

The family's favorite spot to sit on hot summer evenings was under the Chinese elm close to the

back porch. Often Mother would say to one of my brothers, "Run down to the corner and get some ice cream," or "Run down to the corner and get some beer."

Often I tagged along, of course. We would cut through the neighbor's backyard to the small restaurant they operated at the corner of U.S. 25 and State Route 71. We would bring back a bucket of beer or a quart of handpacked ice cream (strawberry, if my wishes were heeded).

On one occasion, when it was far too hot to stay inside, my brothers rigged up a series of extension cords to bring the radio out under the Chinese elm so they could listen to the Joe Louis-Max Schmeling prizefight. I

marveled at the idea of listening to a radio outdoors, and I recall that after all the elaborate preparations, the fight was over in just a few minutes, as Louis won by a knockout in the first round.

The most interesting trees in the backyard were eight Moline elms, planted in a wide circle and grafted together at the top to make an arbor, a popular landscaping feature at the time. A hammock hung between two of the trees, and if I had been a *very* good girl, my brothers would let me swing them back and forth in it. While they were working in the fields, I used the hammock as a boat for my dolls and kittens. It was a cool and lovely place to play, except for the green inchworms that were also fond of the trees and dropped with disgusting frequency from the top of the arbor into the hammock.

Another of my favorite places to play was beneath the big mulberry tree across the nursery drive from the arbor. My swing was there, tied to one of the high branches, and my sandbox nestled in its shade. When I was about 8 years old, the mulberry was felled in another terrible thunderstorm; I believe it was struck by lightning.

I was sorry to lose its shelter, but I had a marvelous time playing Tarzan in the strange new forest of horizontal branches. When it was finally chopped up for firewood, I consoled myself by swinging from several large grapevines that grew along the fencerow trees in the pasture.

> Two apple trees stood near the sales yard; one provided the best Winesaps I ever ate. The branches were too high for me to reach, but I polished my throwing skills by using fallen apples to knock down a targeted fruit. The other apple tree, a Cortland, shaded the sunken barrel used as a mud hole to coat the roots of plants that were dug bare-rooted. The plants were then heeled into beds of sawdust in the sales yard. Its apples were mediocre, but it was a fine climbing tree, and its shade provided a favorite spot for the nursery crew to take a break.

> My father planted a small orchard behind the chicken house, and in the springtime, a profusion of blos-

soms exploded from apple, peach, plum and pear trees. He planted a row of cherry trees along the lane to the pasture, and when they were big enough to bear fruit, I would climb the fence beside the trees and pick a pailful for Mother to make into a pie.

Ohio is a verdant state, and I remember fondly the profusion of trees that sheltered and nurtured me as a child. When I grew up, married and moved to Texas, a semi-desert, I sorely missed the cool, green beauty of trees. I'm happy now to be living in Wisconsin, a state with abundant deciduous trees, although they are understandably reluctant to leaf out until the threat of cold weather is past.

When we moved here, my husband and I planted some new trees in our yard, including a red oak, a sycamore, two ginkgos and a corkscrew willow. The oldest tree we have was planted more than 80 years ago when our house was built: a 50-foot double birch. It is native to this area and is one of the oldest birches in town.

I carefully refrain from climbing it. ❖



Me beside the blue spruce in the front yard.