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Ask your...

It may not be surprising to learn that Three Oaks, Michigan, is named for three oak trees that once stood in the village. Although the trees were important enough to serve as the village's namesake, little was done to memorialize them after they met their demise. Careful research has pieced together the trees' past and revealed the citizens' determination to help the village stay true to its name.

The Three Oaks of Three Oaks

by Robert Tatina and Nancy Baird

After clearing the forest and building a cabin near a Michigan Central Railroad siding in the mid-1850s, Henry Chamberlain left three large oak trees standing near the tracks. The trees grew in a triangle close enough together so that their leafy crowns coalesced, making the three appear as one very large tree. As trains approached what was then called Chamberlain's Siding, passengers and crew would exclaim, "There are the three oaks" when the landmarks came into view. When Chamberlain's Siding was platted, Chamberlain chose to name the place after those statuesque oaks, hence the name "Three Oaks." Now, both the village and the township in southwestern Berrien County bear the same name, as does the road that runs north from Three Oaks to Sawyer.

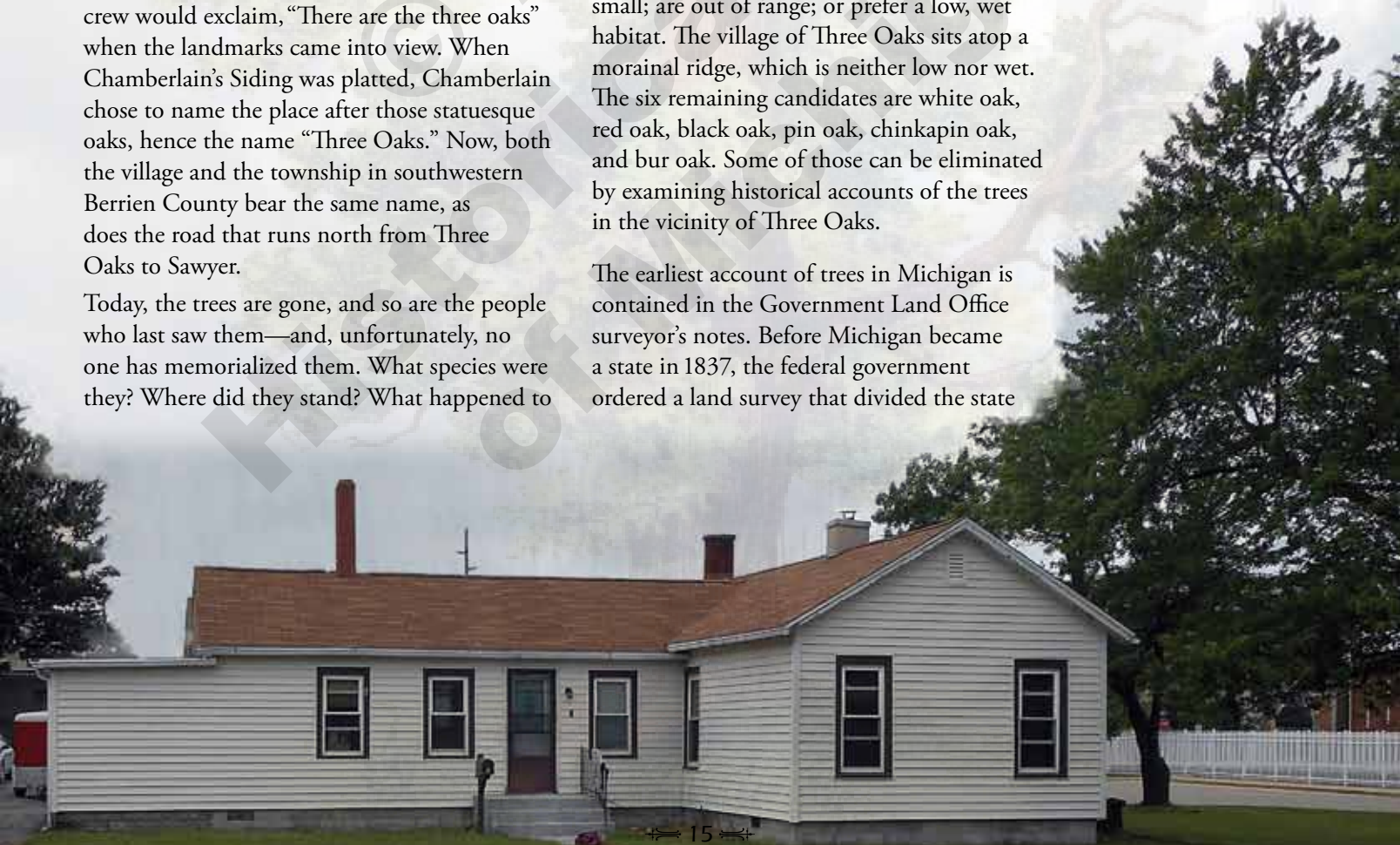
Today, the trees are gone, and so are the people who last saw them—and, unfortunately, no one has memorialized them. What species were they? Where did they stand? What happened to

them? What have the residents of Three Oaks done to keep their memory alive?

To determine the kind of oak, a good sleuth would consider all possibilities and then narrow the list to the most probable. There are about 400 species of oaks worldwide, but only 12 have been found in Michigan. Of those, 6 can be eliminated because they are small; are out of range; or prefer a low, wet habitat. The village of Three Oaks sits atop a morainal ridge, which is neither low nor wet. The six remaining candidates are white oak, red oak, black oak, pin oak, chinkapin oak, and bur oak. Some of those can be eliminated by examining historical accounts of the trees in the vicinity of Three Oaks.

The earliest account of trees in Michigan is contained in the Government Land Office surveyor's notes. Before Michigan became a state in 1837, the federal government ordered a land survey that divided the state

A house is now located where the three oak trees once stood. (All photos courtesy of Robert Tatina.)



into a series of 6-by-6-mile rectangles called townships. Every township contained 36 sections, each measuring 1 square mile. Surveyors were required to mark each section corner and to blaze two nearby trees, called witness trees, so that the corners could be relocated. Surveyors then entered the species names of the two witness trees, their diameters, and distances and directions from the corners into a notebook. In 1929, Township 7 South, Range 20 West, Township 8 South, and Range 20 West (Three Oaks Township) were surveyed. The two sets of notes helped to determine that 16 oaks were witness trees, 13 of which were white oaks, 2 red oaks, and 1 unnamed oak.



- A) Brown Hotel.
- B) Residence of E.K. Warren in 1872.
- C) Possible location of the original three oaks.
- D) Oak Street.

More recent tallies of oak trees from nearby Warren Woods—located 1.5 miles northwest of Three Oaks—listed white oak, red oak, and chinkapin oak. Another study of an area two miles northwest listed white oak, red oak, and pin oak. Based on commonness, it would seem most probable that the three oaks of Three Oaks were either white oak or red oak.

Pieces of wood from the three oak trees can be found in the Three Oaks Library and The region of Three Oaks Museum. Two pieces are part of a table housed in the library and are inscribed with the words “A piece of the original three oaks.” The pieces at the museum are probably roots. Neither of those two sets of specimens show the anatomical characteristics of oaks—such as prominent grain—because they were not taken from the trunk of the tree. They were also closely examined for features that would distinguish white oak from red oak, but no critical information was uncovered. Finally, a chemical test using an iron acetate



A piece of oak root claimed to be from one of the original three oak trees.

solution, which turns dark grey on white oak wood but not on red oak wood, revealed that the museum specimen was a white oak instead of a red oak.

Where did the white oaks stand as a sentinel to the village? Several accounts place the three oak trees near the west line of Section 2 just south of the railroad tracks and behind the Brown Hotel. According to Mary C. Warren, the oaks grew on the site of a house built by John A. Stevens and occupied in 1872 by her father E.K. Warren. All of those descriptions place the three white oak trees on a lot with the address 2 Oak Street, which is directly west and across the street from the depot parking lot.

The trees met their demise before 1898. The first one was struck by lightning, giving rise to the humorous moniker “Two Oaks and a Stump.” The two remaining trees were cut down after windstorms had severely damaged the upper branches. Consequently, the three trees were no longer the sentinels of Three Oaks. None of the early histories of the village contained their obituary, perhaps because there was no newspaper to report it.

What have the residents of Three Oaks done to perpetuate the memory of the three white oaks? Because of the historical importance to the community, the village council in 1898 authorized the street commissioner to find and plant “...three oak trees as large dimensions as can be transplanted, and arranged as near as possible to the original trees.” On October 27, 1899, Henry Chamberlain obtained the three trees and had them planted “north of the mound in Dewey Cannon Park.”

Unfortunately, those trees did not survive. As a result, a citizens’ committee composed of three prominent merchants—E.K. Warren, J.L. McKie, and Henry Chamberlain—was formed to arrange for a second replanting. The committee advertised for three white oak trees— (“and one red oak and one whitewood”)—in *The Acorn*, the Three Oaks weekly newspaper that was published during the early 1900s. The advertisement offered the first hint that the original three oaks may have been white oaks.

The new set of trees was planted on Arbor Day in 1901 in front of the cannon at Dewey Cannon Park. Those trees also did



Cover of *The Acorn* newspaper showing a white oak acorn.



Left: Iron acetate solution turns gray on a white oak wood but not on red oak wood, which proves that the museum specimen was a white oak. Below: Three red oak trees located at the corner of Ash and Elm Streets. Bottom: The banner of The Acorn weekly newspaper showing white oak leaves.

not survive, which led to a third replanting that was undertaken by the Three Oaks park commissioners on Arbor Day in 1905. Those three trees survived at least until 1980 and are pictured in *The Galien River Gazette*. Several years after the last set of trees were planted, E.K. Warren commissioned the planting of three more oak trees to the east and south of the railroad depot and “20 rods [= 110 yards] east of the location of the original three oak trees.” A tripartite tree was acquired. It was five feet in circumference with three “vigorous trunks,” the largest of which measured 30 inches in circumference and the other two 28 and 25 inches. The tree was 21 feet tall, had a root ball 7 feet in diameter, and weighed between 4 and 5 tons. It took a half of a day to load it onto a sled-like structure—which was known as a boat—that was pulled by three teams of horses. Carefully, the tree was planted on Arbor Day in 1906.

Is there any more evidence to bolster the claim that the original three oaks were white oaks? In “Place Names of Berrien County,” a 1924 *Michigan History* magazine article, G.R. Fox claims that the village of Three Oaks was named for three white oaks. In addition, the cover of *The Acorn* contains a line drawing of an acorn that looks like a white oak acorn, and its banner has leaves that match those of white oaks. All the circumstantial evidence suggests that the three oak trees of Three Oaks were white oaks.

One additional oak tree planting occurred in 1967 during the Three Oaks centennial celebration. Those trees still survive, and so on the northeast corner of Elm and Ash Streets are three large *red* oak trees appearing to emerge from one root and whose tops have coalesced, making them appear as one. If you weren’t distracted by traffic lights, signs, and buildings, you might exclaim as you drive toward the village, “There are the three oaks!” 🌳

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