
Beyond the Red Cedar

(May 14, 2009 at 03:00 AM) - Contributed by Terry Sprague

BEYOND THE RED CEDAR Thursday, May 14, 2009

Many of us take for granted the stands of shagbark hickory, black walnut and black maple that grow in Prince Edward County. However, if you drive a short distance north, or even west, you will rarely encounter these trees, as they are Carolinian species, some of them even rare in the Toronto area, but more common again in south-western Ontario.

So, how did these trees get here? The accepted theory is that these typically southern trees, blocked by the presence of Lakes Ontario and Erie, eventually became established by finding their way across land bridges at either ends of the two lakes. Shagbark hickory, for example is absent in the north, but occurs abundantly south of the border, and you can almost trace its Ontario route along the shore of Lake Erie, and again as it pioneered new territory along eastern Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River into Quebec.

There are probably at least 60 of the some 300 or more species of trees in Canada that occur in Prince Edward County. The problem in assigning a more accurate number is the difficulty in sorting out the cultivars, and separating them from the native trees, and then deciding if they are trees, or if they are shrubs. By definition, a tree is single-stemmed perennial woody plant growing to a height of more than 10 feet. However, everybody's favourite in the County, the prickly ash, can grow to more than 10 feet, but by definition, is a shrub. Technically, staghorn sumac is a tree, but its smaller cousins are shrubs. Among the trees in Prince Edward County we commonly recognize as such, are some truly unique specimens. Most of us are familiar with the lone sycamore tree on Babylon Road. According to local history, a South Bay mariner brought home two sycamores from the United States and planted them along the roadside fence. One died only a few years ago, and the remaining individual continues to be the only sycamore tree in all of Prince Edward County, although specimens can be found sprinkled here and there between Belleville and Toronto, becoming more common in the London area.

Sometimes it is size and age that makes our trees distinctive. A Chinese gingko on Picton's East Main Street, at 160 years of age and almost 30 metres (100 feet!) in height is believed to be the oldest and largest gingko in North America. These ornamental trees, popularly chosen for their unusual fan-shaped leaves and resistance to insect pests and diseases, have been planted elsewhere in the County, and there are several at Glenwood Cemetery. One is a female tree, seldom sold by nurseries, due to the rancid butter smell of the fruit once it ripens and falls.

James Hyatt whose name crops up frequently in the annals at Sandbanks, planted a black walnut in 1869, near where County Road 12 approaches Athol Bay. Given the length of time it takes this species to acquire any appreciable size, the tree has evolved into a remarkable specimen, and continues to bear copious quantities of nuts. Shagbark hickories that we are accustomed to seeing in with oaks and ironwoods on shallow soil seldom acquire any size; however, one shagbark hickory along the Black River is an amazing 25 metres (75 feet) in height with a diameter the size of a large rain barrel. In fact, the Black River woodland is one of the most significant upland woodlands in the County, and let's not forget the Big Swamp with its extensive silver maples.

Towering red oaks, black cherries, elms, bur oaks, Carolina poplars, silver maples, white pines and sugar maples have weathered many years of ice storms, high winds, droughts, and escaping lightning strikes. Many of these trees were planted by our forefathers at a time when the word conservation and a concerted effort at tree planting had not yet become fashionable. Long after the shovel had turned the earth to cover the roots of these one time seedlings, these trees continue to awe and inspire the poet and naturalist in us a hundred years later. Chances are, they will still be around for our grandchildren.

So the next time someone says that Prince Edward County has little beyond the red cedar, be sure to direct their attention to a few of our giants as depicted on the Poster of Our Heritage Trees, made available by the Prince Edward Stewardship Council over a year ago.

This is the sixth in a series of columns by Terry Sprague on the natural heritage of Prince Edward County, sponsored by the Prince Edward Stewardship Council.

For more information, check out their website at <http://www.ontariostewardship.org> .