

Great White Oak

by Madeleine McDowell

David Orsini and I share a particular passion — for a tree. It's a White Oak (*Quercus alba*) in the west end of Toronto, in a backyard on the southwest corner of Jane and Weatherell Streets. I describe the tree as over 260 years old. David, a landscape architect, says it's 300 years old. Neither of us argues the point. It is a beautiful and impressive tree.

Toronto has other White Oaks of this age, but what makes this one so special is its location on the Toronto

Carrying Place. A portage trail along the Humber River used by aboriginal peoples to traverse the distance between Lake Ontario and Lake Simcoe, the Carrying Place was a link in the major North American trade route that stretched from the Gulf of Mexico to the north shore of Lake Superior. The Weatherell Street White Oak is a living witness to people and events that are a part of the history of Canada.

The oak was a sapling when the French built their second trading fort,

Fort Toronto, in 1749 at the foot of the portage on which the tree stands. It was part of the forest canopy by 1764 when Alexander Henry passed by with a group of Mississaugas on their way to Fort Niagara. It was a maturing tree when fur trader Benjamin Frobisher traveled through the area recommending in a 1784 report that the Northwest Company use the Carrying Place as the preferred route to the West.

The feet of the war party dispatched by General Brock in 1812 to capture Fort Mackinac trod over the roots of this tree. In 1828, the massive oak witnessed the passage of Peter Jones, the Chief of the Mississaugas, and his people on their way to a meeting with Inspector General Jacques Baby further north on his estate.

This magnificent oak was into its third century when little David Orsini passed by each day on his way to St. Pius X School. Entranced by this tree, David began collecting its acorns and propagating them. The last time the tree produced acorns was in 1998, so its offspring are now seven years old and looking for a new home in the neighbourhood. The continuation of a local gene pool with a pedigree of three centuries is both remarkable and essential to the integrity of the area's natural history.

In the spring of 1997 this White Oak was one of 150 oak trees along the Toronto Carrying Place, all over 125 years old, that were proclaimed by Metropolitan Toronto as an ancient oak grove and named in honour of Tuhbananequay, daughter of Wabanosay, Chief of the Mississaugas at the time of the Toronto Purchase. (Tuhbananequay was Peter Jones' mother.) Naming of the grove (which included black oaks, *Quercus velutina*, some red oaks, *Quercus rubra*, and hybrids of the two) was done with the permission of the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation who conducted the dedication ceremony. They planted a bur oak (*Quercus macrocarpa*) as a symbol of regeneration. Since then a number of oak trees of different species have been planted in front yards, while



Photograph Courtesy: David Orsini.

David Orsini's White Oak Nursery

there has been a loss of about 10% of the ancient oaks of Tuhbananequay due to drought, pest infestation and urban stress. This is of grave concern since the preservation and perpetuation of its live trees are essential to maintaining the status of the Humber as a Canadian Heritage River.

For this reason, I have attempted to have the Great White Oak designated under the Ontario Heritage Act. The City of Toronto has so far refused to consider designation since the tree is not fully owned by them (it straddles the property line between city road allowance and private property). Still, if advised to do so by the Toronto Preservation Board upon the recommendation of the local preservation panel, City Council may be persuaded to pass the designation.

Although designation does not guarantee preservation, it does give the tree a measure of exposure it would not otherwise receive. It would be a good first step.

The tree, whose trunk shows to be at least 1.2 metres (four feet) in diameter at breast height, appears very healthy. The new owner of the property on which it lives is fascinated by its story and determined to aid in its preservation. In the meantime, David Orsini tends the saplings that he will out plant locally to carry on the lineage of the Great White Oak.

Heritage Tree Designation

Torontonians are urged to contact their local councillor in writing, by phone, fax or e-mail to push for the designation of the White Oak at 37 Weatherdill Street. With the Private Tree Bylaw now in place in the amalgamated city of Toronto, the city's privately owned trees (including backyard trees) are better protected. But this protection is dependent in large part upon the participation of concerned citizens who report any attempts to have trees 30 centimetres (one foot) in diameter at 1.4 metres (4-1/2 feet) above the ground removed.

Under the Ontario Heritage Act, designation is done by the municipality upon the advice of the local architectural

conservation advisory committee. The tree (or grove of trees) should be of outstanding significance to the local or provincial heritage. This may be determined by its historical associations (as in the case of the White Oak) or based upon its presence in the local historical gene pool. An example of this is the tiny cedars (*Thuja occidentalis*) that grow on the Niagara Escarpment which are over 900 years old.

Dead or dying trees will not be designated. The Weston, Ontario cucumber magnolia (*Magnolia acuminata*) that's over 130 years old (one of a pair until recently) is not a candidate for designation. Although it's a rare Carolinian species, the tree is not healthy. Weatherdill Street's White Oak is healthy, ancient, genetically valuable and of great historical significance. Having it designated as a heritage tree will heighten public awareness of conservation and history.



The Great White Oak at Jane and Weatherdill Streets in Toronto.

Photograph Courtesy David Orsini.