

A Fresh Look At Nebraska

-Isms

By LuAnn Schindler

John Neihardt's novel "Black Elk Speaks," describes the significance of the Tree of Life sitting in the center of the sacred hoop. The multiple-branched tree represents life's metaphor, and religions and myths use the sturdy form as a motif for growth.

In Nebraska, the tree represents land preservation, a method of sustaining the earth, and a motif of progression.

Imagine the pioneers' surprise when venturing into the flat, treeless territory. J. Sterling Morton wasn't impressed with the lack of towering giants. He and his wife filled their Nebraska City property with trees, shrubs and flowers.

As a newspaperman, Morton advocated the importance of trees for windbreaks, fuel, building materials, and shade. At the Jan. 4, 1872, meeting of the State Board of Agriculture, Morton suggested the state promote "Arbor Day" on April 10. The statewide initiative included contests for individuals and counties that planted the most trees. Reports estimate over one million trees were planted on that spring day in 1872.

Impressed with the response, Governor Robert Furnas proclaimed that Nebraska celebrate Arbor Day beginning in 1874, but it didn't become a legal Nebraska holiday until 1885.

According to the Arbor Day Foundation, the first commemoration in Nebraska City involved nearly 1,000 students who planted trees and marched to the opera house, where another thousand citizens waited to hear Morton speak about the importance of tree planting.

By 1895, Nebraska touted the "Tree Planters' State" motto.

Nearly 140 years after Morton's activism, his vision continues. The USDA Forest Service and State Foresters team with the Arbor Day Foundation to promote Tree City USA. Over 135 million people live in a Tree City. In Nebraska, 107 communities participate in the program. Auburn leads the state, participating for 33 years.

The Nebraska Forest Service encourages residents to "ReTree Nebraska: One town, one tree, one shovel at a time." The group hopes to plant and maintain one million new trees by 2017.

It's a strong undertaking. Severe weather, drought, poor planting practices, and disease have affected the quality and number of trees across Nebraska. Tree inventories of 200 communities show over one-half of the tree population has disappeared since the late 1970s.

Another unique Nebraska tree project features heritage trees. These stately trees represent historic places, figures and legendary events. American chestnut, American linden, bur oak, cottonwood, crabapple, green ash, hackberry, jack pine, mulberry, oak, pin oak, red cedar, red maple and silver maple comprise the most statuesque trees in 29 Nebraska communities.

Nebraska also boasts the national champion Scotch pine, located in Beatrice, and the dwarf Chinkapin oak, near Salem.

I wonder what J. Sterling Morton would think of Nebraska's efforts to promote forestry in our still-flat, somewhat-shaded prairieland. Would he be pleased with our efforts at creating windbreaks and shade? Or would he stage another push for planting?

The Tree of Life continues the birth and rebirth of soil and its inhabitants. The Old Wolf Oak at Ponca State Park and the Unadilla Easter Egg tree are living proof.