

Witness To America's History

Old Elm Has Tales To Tell

EDITOR'S NOTE — *This Kansas tree — 99 feet tall — has roots going deep into America's history. And it has branches of Louis Vieux's family reaching out to all parts of the nation's old frontier. And it has tales to tell. Gather around the old elm tree and listen.*

By **TAD BARTIMUS**

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LOUISVILLE, Kan. —

Long before there was a wheat field to surround it or a plaque to honor it, this country's biggest elm tree was a passive witness to the growing pains of America.

When it sprouted its first leaf, the Plains belonged only to the buffalo and other wild creatures of the field, and to the Indians. It was 17 years old when George Washington was born. U.S. Cavalry troopers tethered their horses under it as they passed to and fro between Fort Leavenworth and Fort Riley — gateway to the West. Anxious women, in calico bonnets gathered under it as their strong-backed men repaired wagon wheels disabled in the ruts of the Oregon Trail only a stone's throw away.

In the lawless early days of the frontier, violent men threw a rope over the mighty tree's lowest branch and claimed their own justice. Lovers have picnicked beneath it, a dozen generations of little boys have clambered up to its highest arm just to see if they could do it, and lightning, the wrath of the heavens, has wounded it three times in this century.

But Nature has spared it while capriciously striking down its peers with a disease that has left a pox of stumps throughout America.

So, because it survived and flourished, a hundred or so folks in straw farm hats and clean cotton dresses gathered on a hot day at the edge of a Kansas wheat field this summer to pay homage to the tree.

By act of the National Register of Big Trees of the American Forestry Association, the Louis Vieux Elm — proper name *Olmus Americana* — was design-

nated the largest known example of its species.

In the shade of its cool, leafy canopy, a prayer was said and politicians praised its longevity. The historian of the local historical society regaled the festive crowd with as much of the tree's history as she could find. And everyone marveled at the natural wonder.

The Louis Vieux elm is, by measurement of the Kansas Wildlife and Fisheries Department, 99 feet tall; 23 feet, two inches in circumference, and has an average crown spread of 133 feet. It is still growing. Last year it took 10 men to lock arms and reach around it. This summer it needed a little extra help from an 11th volunteer.

But the story of the giant elm can't be found in dry statistics.

Its story is in the people who lived in harmony with it over nearly three centuries.

Six descendants of Louis Vieux, a half-French, half-Pottawatomie fur trader who was born in 1810 and died in 1872, came back to the tree's dedication to sit in its shade and talk about their own roots. Most had never met before.

They didn't look alike or talk alike. They had different styles of life, different politics, different religions. But they all traced their blood lines back to the Vieuxs who settled more than 100 years ago in the spot where they found each other, under the big tree.

That one family's odyssey and wanderlust in a microcosm of the massive expansion and migration of Americana, a people who always seem to be going somewhere.

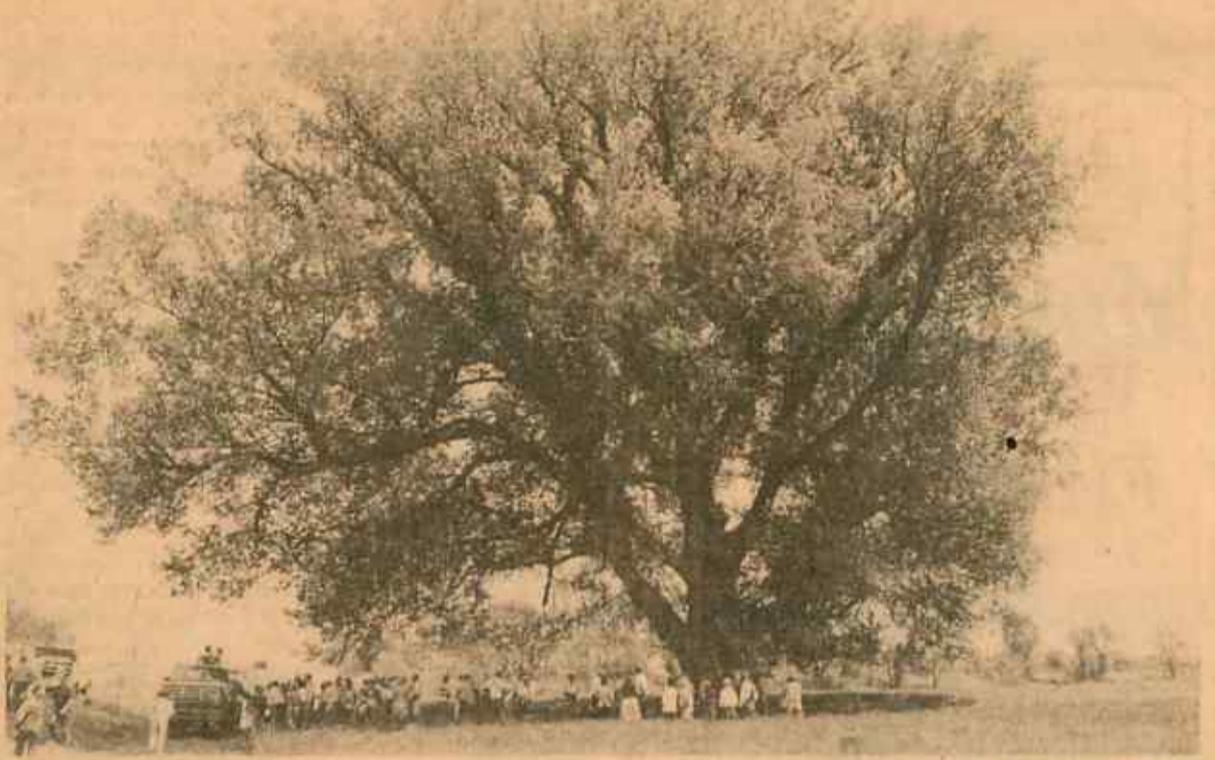
Elsie Blackhawk, whose face at 75 is as weathered as a fine apple left too long in the hot sun, came by herself, driving the car from Bartlesville, Okla., and back again in one day so she wouldn't have to entrust the care of her 20-year-old horse to a neighbor.

Mercedes McKillop flew in from Monroe, Wash., alone because her husband wasn't nearly as interested in the ancient family history as she was.

Angeline Kekahbah reveled in the long day of



VIEUX PATRIARCH — *Louis Vieux holds a dignified pose, in Washington in the 1860s, in this photograph in the collection of the Kansas State Historical Society. Vieux's name graces the nation's largest elm tree, the Louis Vieux Elm, and perhaps even the nearby town of Louisville, Kan. He was a half-French, half-Pottawatomie Indian fur trader who settled near the tree in 1857, and who by the time he died in 1872 was a big landowner and a major power in the Kansas territory. His family descendants attended the designation ceremony for the tree.*



AP NEWSFEATURES PHOTOS

STILL GROWING — The Louis Vieux Elm, shown in full leaf where it grows near Wamego, Kan., has been officially designated the largest known example of its species in this country. The people grouped under its massive boughs were attending its

designation ceremony early this summer. The elm, which dates from about 1715, measures a mighty 99 feet in height 23 feet, two inches in circumference, and has an average crown spread of 133 feet. And it is still growing.

sunshine and conversation, trying to pick up the threads of her past while everyone seemed to talk at once. She hated to leave for home in Pawhuska, Okla.

Helena Allemandi made a little holiday out of her easy journey from Ogden, Kan., and brought along some old pictures to pass around.

Herbert Whitlow brought along his pretty, grownup daughter Chris from Tecumseh, Kan., so she could meet some of the relatives and get a feel for her heritage.

"We'd just scattered to the four winds," says Elsie, widow of the hereditary chief of the Winnebago tribe. "I was amazed when we started trying to get together. I heard about this from a niece in Oregon who couldn't come.

"We are a proud people, and we knew about Louis Vieux and some of the family history. But being here with these other folks is very special for me." She says she is one-third Cherokee, one-third French, and one-third Pottawatomie.

Mercedes, who had the same grandmother as Helena and Elsie, described her branch of the family as "part of the classic exodus to California during the Dust Bowl days. When the good old Okies went west, we were part of it, settled in the Salinas Valley."

She eventually went on north to Washington State,

a brother went to Texas, and her children are going their own way, too.

Helena says her heritage is the same as Mercedes — but she and her relatives are very proud of their Indian blood. "I'm wearing my turquoise necklace and earrings in honor of this occasion," says Helena.

The descendants sat together under the tree and traced their ancestry back to three brothers: Whitlows

rider," says Barbara Burgess, the Wamego Historical Society's historian who organized the reunion and the tree dedication. "His brothers joined him and they all became very well off."

Louis occasionally represented the Pottawatomies at treaty talks in Washington, D.C., and in 1867 was a signer of a pact that allowed the Indians to either hold lands in common as a

dians . . . his business relations with the whites brought him into intimate association with them . . . all who knew him respected and loved him as a man of strict integrity."

It was reported that 800 people followed his funeral procession past the big tree and up the hill to the cemetery where 28 other Vieuxs — including his brother Paul and his two wives — were buried.

As the Vieux clan savored their personal past, a traveler on a big motorcycle braked to a stop to see what all the commotion was about.

Ed Mock, a Boulder, Colo., real estate broker, needed little encouragement to join the party. A third generation Kansan whose roots lead back to Germany and Ireland, the 52-year-old businessman found his own niche in the Rocky Mountains. But he said he was intrigued with the American past, and the rutted trails that took immigrants to every corner of the country. He was biking the Oregon Trail.

"Finding this gathering today was a wonderful surprise for me," he says, taking a break in his solitary pilgrimage. "We shouldn't forget where we came from as we hurry to wherever we're going. I plan to come back to this tree sometime. It's wonderful knowing that it will always be in the same place."

'Its story is in the people who lived in harmony with it over nearly three centuries.'

to Louis Vieux; Elsie, Mercedes and Helena to Paul Vieux; Angeline to Charles Vieux.

Those three men were born to a French fur trader and a Pottawatomie mother who ran a trading post in what later became Milwaukee, Wis.

The Vieuxs kept moving south as white homesteaders encroached on their land, and finally, in 1857, Louis settled near the big tree beside the meandering Vermillion River. He sold supplies, hay, grain and horses to the Army and travelers going by his homestead on the Oregon Trail.

"He was the first person to operate a toll bridge across the river, and by some estimates earned \$300 a day at the peak season by charging \$1 per horse and

reservation or establish individual claims of 80 acres or more.

That's when the family started to scatter. A few may have gone on up the Oregon Trail, perhaps others down the Santa Fe Trail. Some went to live on the new reservation in Oklahoma, some stayed behind and became naturalized citizens and recorded land patents. Louis got 315 acres, including the big tree, because of his high tribal position.

When he died in 1872, records indicate he was overseer of 44,000 acres of prime land, owned part of a successful watermill, had livestock, and was a major power in the Kansas territory.

His elaborately carved tombstone proclaims Vieux as: "Just and kind to In-