

“Barren Plains Gave Birth to Arbor Day”
By John Mark Lambertson
Originally published in The Ottawa Herald March 25, 1988

Today is Arbor Day.

The practice of setting aside one day a year to plant trees for shade and beautification was first begun in Nebraska in 1872 by J. Sterling Morton. Three years later it was celebrated in Kansas for the first time. Since then, the Sunflower State has officially set aside the last Friday in March for this commendable task.

It is appropriate that Arbor Day should have begun here in the Great Plains. Nebraska and Kansas, after all, were once part of that great expanse of prairie referred to as “The Great American Desert”—a barren, treeless wasteland.

In Franklin County, several individuals have enriched the local landscape and history in their efforts to plant, cultivate and protect trees.

The first known tree-planting efforts here were made by the county’s earliest pioneer, the Rev. Jotham Meeker, who planted apples and peaches west of present-day Ottawa along the Marais des Cygnes River in the late 1830s. The missionary likewise was instrumental in getting the Ottawa Indians to establish orchards.

In his diary for 1847, Meeker also describes his efforts to mark certain small shrubs around the new log church to allow them to grow into shade trees. A split rail fence was erected around the churchyard to keep his livestock from damaging the young plants.

After part of present-day Franklin County was opened to settlement in 1854, the early settlers also planted for fruit, shade and beauty. When the townsite of Ottawa was surveyed in March 1864, the city fathers were impressed by a handsome grove of large trees on the north side of the river.

Several acres of the grove were therefore preserved, while the rest of the trees along the river were reduced to stumps for fuel and lumber. The leafy canopy of Forest Park has been enjoyed by generations of Ottawans ever since.

One of the foremost planters of trees in the southwest part of the county did so for an unusual reason. Monsieur Ernest Valetton de Boissiere of France planted more than 20 acres of mulberry trees in 1869-70 to provide food—the leaves—for his silkworms.

While the silk manufacturing experiment was finally abandoned in 1856, a few of those historic mulberry trees still survive today at the Silkville Ranch near Williamsburg.

Several others have made notable contributions to tree horticulture in the county, including John Pinney, recently deceased. He and others have operated Willis Nursery in Ottawa for generations, with the nursery having the distinction of being one of the oldest businesses in the area.

Probably no one has had a greater impact in beautifying Ottawa with trees, however, than Milan L. Ward. A longtime math and science professor and president of Ottawa University, Ward was responsible for the splendid green arbors of stately elms that for years sheltered the city’s streets.

After setting in the infant and treeless town in 1869, Ward established a custom of locking his classroom at 4 o’clock on pleasant afternoons so as to plant a few shade trees while daylight lasted. Taking a couple of college boys with him, he would plow a furrow and they would stake each end.

“The two boys would walk down the row, “ Ward later recalled, “one setting in the saplings and the other tamping down the earth with a spade, while I kept my eyes on the transit to keep them in line.”

The professor, for whom OU’s Ward Science Hall is named, followed this hobby for years. The result was a city whose streets were lined with 3,000 beautiful elms, creating lofty “tunnels” of cool foliage.

Ward’s patient labor delighted visitors and Ottawans alike for decades until most of the trees finally succumbed to the elm disease in the 1960s.

Before he died in 1923 at the age of 93, the distinguished old professor remarked, “Those hundreds of trees have been as great a satisfaction as anything I’ve done in Ottawa.