Trees of Hampshire College

Hampshire campus: the middle of nowhere to some, the center of civilization to others. To those from a city, the many trees separating the main campus from not-very-busy roads makes this place seem like the middle of nowhere. The most often repeated line I have heard is, “It is too quiet.” To those of us from places more rural than this campus, the interspersed and oft broken street lamps are much too bright and the occasional gaggles of people wandering from building to building add up to a loud and obnoxious place to live.

The trees at Hampshire serve several purposes. For some people they are frightening monuments in the dark that hide potential dangers. To others they provide comfort and privacy. To everyone they can teach a lesson, give a hint to the kind of land we all live on. The trees can tell us how this land was used. The tree’s histories are told only in snippets on small plaques placed on few trees around the main campus. Too little is given in these small bronze-colored placards.

This piece is an attempt to remedy this. I hope to create a document that tells some of the story of this land, along with the practical elements of the trees that grace our campus. While I have quite a love of field guides they do not give the tale of specific trees, nor, though they are practical, are they lively reading. This is an attempt in a creative solution to this.

Introduction

I have had a fascination with trees since I was a small child. I love to roam the dense growth of the white pine forest directly behind my house and explore. Wandering behind the house to the south/southeast, through the dense sticky trunks and branches of young white pine, you are suddenly expelled into an

older forest of oak, beech and birch. An old white pine grove grows to the east. It was always intriguing why that patch of white pine directly behind my house is so much younger than the surrounding woods. At college I learned why this was, that white pine was an early successional tree[1], an observation that suggested to me that this area had been recently cleared and not so long ago had started growing back in. Over the 14 years I have lived in this house I have watched these trees grow from the size of Christmas trees to 20+ feet tall, there lower branches dying off as their crowns reach for the sky.

I have always been in love with not only the trees but the environment that surrounds them. The idea that, with an observant eye I would be able to see the codependence of animals, plants, mushrooms, lichens, rocks and soil as well the flashy trees. In this piece I plan to focus on trees and the processes directly surrounding them. I am writing vignettes so that the reader can both see these trees in an environment as well as learning about their individuality. My hope this will be an informative creative writing pieces through which I will share my love of this environment.

I will focus my efforts to the woods and trees around Hampshire campus and area directly adjoining it. This being said, the trees and environments are common to many areas around New England.

[1] Early successional trees: the first trees that sprout in an area that has been recently cleared whether by natural disaster, fire, or human disturbance.

Pin Oak *Quercus palustris*

Wet, swampy, acidic, dark moist soil

Late evening colors come in layers on the horizon. Waves of hues peak through the gaps between buildings, between trees. The pin oak directly in the path of the sky, like many of its brethren, has not lost all of its leaves. This oak's top branches, unlike others, has no wet snow clinging. As the sun sinks further, I hear squeaks and twittering coming faintly behind the rattle of the bus passing on the road; one moment's loss of focus, and I can no longer hear their voices. I squint against the cold, at the top of the pin oak, a clump of leaves comes into focus. The drey of the grey squirrel looks nothing more than a pile of lost leaves at the top of the tree. Large tails as long as the squirrels at least, dance in and out of sight behind the branches. As if in jest, small birds dance on the thinnest of the top branches, laughing at the pudgy winter squirrels. This past fall ('14) was a mast year for the oaks. A carpet of acorns still surrounds the base of the pin oaks that pepper this campus.

Pin Oaks (Quercus palustris) prefer wet acidic soils and live throughout southern New England and as far south as Georgia. They are medium-sized trees that are often planted by people because they are fast growers and have pleasing shape. Their leaves are deeply lobed and come to pointed tips, marking them as member of the red oak family (unlike white oaks who tend to have more rounded edges). Pin oaks flower in the spring and their fruiting bodies are represented by acorns. These acorns are small and have lighter color lines running from the cap of the acorn to tip and take two growing seasons to mature on the tree. Once they fall to the ground the acorns become food for squirrels and deer. They are bitter to the taste because of tannic acid contained within the acorn to protect it from predation.

Red Pine *Pinus resinas*

Dry, rocky, poor soil

Late fall fields of corn are cut to stubble, and are interspersed with winding rivulets of water. To the west I can see the trees that line the other side of the field. To the east, the sudden rise and fall of small hill that runs snake-like to the north and south. This dune of sandy soil is a remainder of the shore of Lake Hitchcock that once filled the Pioneer Valley[2] and extends towards the Long Island Sound. Along the dune to the east a stand of tall trees stand sentinel, their lowest branches twenty feet in the air. Beneath their canopy I find very little undergrowth, only a thick bed of long reddish needles that have fallen but not decayed. A fire once burned here, escaped from a fire pit or so I understand. The thick bark protected the older trunks but some saplings were not so lucky. I see this tree often, lining roadsides in long straight. Nowhere in a place without humans will you find such straight lines.

The red pine stands 60-80' high with straight trunk. The bark of the red pine is thick and made of small flakes and often has a reddish tinge. The needles are a dark green and can grow up to 6" long and grow in pairings of 2. Red pine produces cones around 2" long that take 2 seasons to mature and fall. These trees are often found in pure stands but often this is a human occurrence. In the early 20th century a fungus killed many of the white pines. Red pines were planted in place since they were resistant to this fungus. These trees are still planted quite often, and are useful for posts used for things such as telephone poles.

Eastern Hemlock *Tsuga canadensis*

Cool, moist soil

Hidden in small patches, lurking in the understory the dark green needles splay like ferns around a narrow flexible trunk. Though I have seen healthy trees these patches look sickly, several branches have

[2] Lake Hitchcock drained approximately 12,000 years ago. The Connecticut River is what is left of this lake since then.

patches of brown dead wood and needles; some branches are completely dead. When I take a close look at the undersides of the branches and needles I see the culprit of the dying off. At the base of the needles are small clumps of white; on the needles themselves I sometimes find small patches of brown. At Hampshire, as well in other places around MA, I see the hemlock wooly adelgid (white) and the scale insect (brown) eating the life out of these trees. A bit farther north, as close as southern NH, the Hemlocks have not been affected. It is surmised the longer periods of cooler temperatures keep the pests away but in a very short time this might change. As our climate warms the hemlock wooly adelgid and scale insect may be able to travel farther north.

> *The Eastern Hemlock can reach the height of 70' but can remain for years as small trees living in the undergrowth, waiting for a space in the canopy to grow into. The needles are short, ranging from 1/3"-2/3" and sprout from either side of the branches; the branches grow horizontally to the ground creating the fern-like spray of branches. The cones are small, they grow to be about 3/4"and mature in one season but they generally fall from the tree in the spring.*

Sugar Maple *Acer saccharum*

Moist, rocky soil

In the early mornings of March I walk into the woods by the tennis courts. The bone aching chill mark the morning as winter still but there is a scent in the air that is reminiscent of spring and the snow in the fields is looking translucent and thin. Through an early morning fog the trees look grey and lifeless without their leaves. Seemingly random, buckets hang from various trees in this patch. If I look closely at the bark I notice it is only those trees with light grey bark and deep grooves that have the buckets. I wander from tree to tree, emptying these pails into a plastic tub that I carry back to a tank on a truck. Collected from taps in the tree the sap is almost clear, thicker than water with a fresh sweet smell.

The Sugar Maple grows up to 70' with a wide spreading crown. The leaves the sugar maple are 3-5" long and grow in opposite pairs along the branches. The leaves themselves are lobed; each dip forms a "U" shape (easy to see the difference from Red Maples whose lobed leaves form a "V"). Young sugar maples have smooth light grey bark that becomes darker and more pitted as the tree becomes older. The flowers of these trees are green-yellow and hang among the leaves. The fruiting bodies are paired in 2's and have propeller-like appearance; they ripen and fall in the autumn.

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