

HANDLING THE DEMISE OF HISTORIC TREES: A PROBLEM OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

by Richard H. Munson

Abstract. Decisions regarding the removal of historic trees are discussed along with the importance of a public relations campaign to lessen the social impact of the removal. An historic American elm on the Smith College campus is used as a case study. A successful operation often depends upon extensive publicity before, during, and after the takedown to stress the reasons for taking action and to lay out a timetable for that action and the role of the professional arborist.

Making the final decision to take down a tree with great sentimental or historic value can be one of the most difficult decisions for any arborist or professional plantsman. Not only do we despair the demise of great and significant specimens, we must also answer to a general public that rarely understands the necessity for our actions. How well we handle our information campaign has a great deal to do with the overall success of the operation.

The Botanic Garden of Smith College, which encompasses the entire campus, is home to many large and significant specimens of native and exotic trees. Some of these trees are associated with the history of the college while others are significant in terms of their standing on the list of champion trees. Until recently the campus was home to the largest American elm (*Ulmus americana*) in New England (Fig. 1). Not only was the tree the largest, in terms of both height and dbh, of any species on campus, it also stood next to the President's House and was known as the President's Elm. The tree predated the college by over 100 years and was already a large specimen at the time of the college's founding in 1871. It was the most widely known tree on campus, popular with students and alumnae alike. Despite herculean efforts over the years to excise diseased limbs and to inject the trunk with protective fungicides, approximately twenty-five years after the first detection of Dutch elm disease (DED) in the tree, the disease organism was discovered in the main stem. With nearly fifty percent of the original crown

already removed during previous bouts of DED and with the disease now in the trunk there was little else that could be done other than remove the tree to below ground level. Although the course of action was clear, we still faced the difficult task of justifying the removal of the tree to the campus community and to the community at large.

In order to avoid the kinds of protests which frequently accompany unpopular decisions on campus and in the broader community, we felt a direct approach would be most effective. In Northampton it is not unheard of for local citizens to take direct action, even chaining themselves to trees, to prevent what they feel are unnecessary actions of this sort. Besides being troublesome, protesters, most importantly, create serious safety hazards and can increase the expense of the job. In addition, they often create highly unfavorable



Figure 1. Base of the tree showing its massive size and large buttressing roots. Thirteen Smith College biology students form a circle around base.

publicity for the college.

After informing the President of the college of our decision, the Botanic Garden began making preparations for both the takedown and the attendant publicity. Because the decision was made during the summer months while students were away from campus, we had the luxury of time to formulate a plan that would inform both the college and the local communities. Since the tree itself was in the middle of a large lawn that was accessible only by traversing a long gradual slope, we decided that the takedown could best be done in January during the winter semester break when the ground was frozen and less damage to the lawn would occur. At this time, not coincidentally, few students would be on campus and any potential protesters would, perhaps, be deterred by the cold weather. Our arborist, C. L. Frank and Co., could schedule the work well in advance, and we could also schedule a large mobile crane, owned by a local towing company, that was needed to extract the largest pieces of the trunk. There was, of course, the possibility of bad weather, but as it turned out the snow depth was not a serious matter.

The publicity regarding the impending removal was handled by the college's Office of College Relations. A general news release was distributed which explained what was going to happen, when it was to happen, and why it had to happen. Included was a brief chronology of the efforts that had been made over the years to save the tree and an explanation of the disease cycle of DED. Our Office of College Relations was also involved with local news organizations by providing news releases during the actual takedown and the aftermath of the removal.

The initial coverage in the local newspaper was small and relegated to the inner pages; it was, however, effective in informing the general public of the work to be done. The students and faculty of the college were told of the plans by the President of the College at the opening convocation of the academic year. When the audience learned that the President's Elm was to be removed a groan echoed in the auditorium. The President explained why the tree had to be removed, stating that plans

were underway to renovate the entire landscape of the area after the tree was removed. The Botanic Garden staff learned two things during the convocation: the first is that people do, indeed, care about the trees in their immediate environments, and the second is that, when told beforehand with good, honest explanations, student groups will generally react responsibly. Subsequent to the President's remarks, a reporter from the student newspaper interviewed the Director and foreman of the Botanic Garden and wrote an article which, in essence, reiterated what the President had said. Hence, by the middle of September the entire community had had at least three opportunities to learn of the tree's imminent demise.

The next stage of the publicity campaign began the day the arborist went to work. Local newspaper coverage was now front-page. Large photos showed workers lowering main branches from the upper crown as they toiled suspended by rope and saddle (Fig. 2). Other photos showed the large crane pulling massive sections of the main trunk from the lower lawn area to the awaiting flatbed trailer (Fig 3). Subsequent pictures showed Botanic Garden employees dismantling the dropped limbs. Accompanying the pictures was a human interest article reviewing the nearly 90 years of combined service of two Botanic Garden employees who were involved in the operation.

The penultimate act was perhaps the most unusual since it involved a candlelight, on-site, memorial service conducted by the college chaplain at the suggestion of the President. Although, at the time, the idea of a memorial service for a dead tree seemed overly sentimental to some, the result was favorably received. Newspaper coverage of the songs, poems, and prayers offered in a spirit of thanksgiving was tastefully written and was well-received by the readers. Indeed, the memorial service became widely known when a major wire service picked up the story.

Anticlimactically, the removal job was completed, with little fanfare, the following spring when the stump was ground out by our arborist.

In order to preserve some of the memories of



Figure 2. Limbs being lowered by employee of C. L. Frank and Company, professional arborist.

the American elm, a large slice of the largest side branch was submersed in polyethylene glycol (PEG) and subsequently sanded smooth. We plan to place small markers on appropriate annual growth rings that correspond to significant dates in the history of Smith College. We were unable to keep a slice of the main trunk since internal wood rot had destroyed much of the center of the tree. Because of the tree's sentimental value, we had also considered selling or otherwise distributing small segments of branches to alumnae and students. However, this idea was abandoned due to concerns with the possible spread of DED. In the end, the remains of the tree were buried in a private landfill.

Looking back, the whole process was remarkably free of problems within the college and local



Figure 3. Main trunk section before final drop. President's house is in background.

communities. Our success was due, in no small part, to the extensive publicity provided beforehand by the cooperative efforts of our own public relations staff and the local media. The keys to success appear to be forthright announcements of the necessity of the takedown, easily understood, but scientifically-based, explanations detailing why the course of action chosen is the only feasible one, a timetable for the work, and as much media coverage as possible showing professional arborists working safely and efficiently.

A final opportunity for good public relations was the planting and dedication of a small Liberty elm, near the site of the former President's Elm, by Cub Scouts from a local Webelos den.

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