



Poet's Larch

B-Wolfgang Hoffmann (1982)

The Poet's Larch

Iowa County

Edna Meudt, one of Wisconsin's premiere poets during her lifetime, had a deep and intuitive appreciation for the trees on her Dodge County farm. When a 1973 Saturday tornado uprooted a large old European larch and blew it completely across the road, she didn't just consign the tree to a firewood fate. She was determined to save the century-old specimen, knowing that it ranked among Wisconsin's champion trees.

But more than that, she remembered that in March 1935, when her family had moved to the farm, she thought the three larches on the property were dead pines because they had cones, but no needles. She decided in early May to remove them. Then, she

writes, "That first week I noticed a kind of green mist on those trees. Two days later there was the airiest green cast and then the fine needles. How gorgeous they were to become a week or so later! The new cones are fuchsia, about the size of big pussywillows. Unbelievable! The next Sunday I took a sizeable bouquet to my father (Grandfather was a forester in the Sumava in Bohemia). He identified them."

After the 1973 tornado had wreaked its havoc and departed, she called her friend, Reid Gilbert, who at that time ran the Valley Studio near Spring Green, for help. On Sunday, the well-known actor and mime brought 26 apprentices to the Meudt farm to help clean up the debris of downed trees left by the wind. When Mrs. Meudt indicated she wanted to save the larch, some of the apprentices expressed amusement. She told them about the spring and summer evenings, before farm ponds and mosquitoes, spent

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in a hammock under the tree. She told them about the good talk and courting that had gone on beneath its limbs. One of the apprentices, Cleasius Goldman, who said he was half Crow Indian, warned that they must let the tree spirit know that help was coming or it would leave the tree. At his request, Mrs. Meudt supplied him with a bedsheet, which he ripped into strips and tied to the roots of the tree. Then they covered the roots with a blanket and watered it well.

On Monday the crane operator arrived with his rig to replant the 80-foot tree as “the strips tied to the tree’s roots waved crazily in a rising wind.” Sudden new tornado warnings made it necessary for him to return to town. He came again the next day, however, and lifted the tree back into its place, bracing it with steel cables and supports. Although county forester James Widder estimated the tree’s chances of survival at less than 40 percent, the larch did survive.

The tree spirit had not departed, for the larch put out new needles next year in its familiar, breathtaking spring display of beauty.

But its ordeal was not over. In July 1974, Mrs. Meudt was standing on her porch during a rainstorm when she saw a huge fireball drop from the sky, sit for an instant on the tip of the larch, then roll down the side and disappear into the ground, along the path of the steel support. It peeled off the bark all the way down, but the remaining “half a tree” continued to thrive.

Whether the tree’s second chance at life was the result of its vibrant spirit or that of its poet owner, is hard to say, but it still exists. As an illustration of what can be accomplished by people who care about trees, it has a fitting poetic mysticism.

Source: Edna Meudt, Dodgeville