

Blackhawk Country Club's Spirit Oak

Madison

Members and visitors alike loved the Spirit Oak on the grounds of the Blackhawk Country Club in Shorewood Hills, Madison, because of its stately beauty as well as the history it reminded them of. It did not live, as they hoped it would, to celebrate the Bicentennial. In September 1974 the tree fell because the roots were no longer able to support the massive trunk, 12 feet 2 inches in circumference, and heavy branches. By counting the rings in a cross section, dendrologists established its age at 227 years.

In its youth the Spirit Oak lived with Indians passing along the southwest shore of nearby Lake Mendota. They left a rich heritage, and the Spirit Oak's neighborhood is marked with trails and campsites used by the Sauk and Fox tribes. When the tree was about half a century old, Sauk warrior Black Hawk signed the treaty to give up his homelands around the Rock River and agreed to move to territory west of the Mississippi. He left in 1831 but returned the next year, dissatisfied with the new lands and determined to reclaim his Rock River homelands. As he said at an 1831 Council: "I wish to remain where the bones of my fathers are laid."

But anticipated support from other Indian tribes did not materialize, and he was forced to retreat, passing near the Spirit Oak along the west shore of Lake Mendota as he headed toward Wisconsin Heights. In the bloody battles that followed there and at Bad Axe on the Mississippi, most of his followers were either drowned or massacred by the whites or their Indian mercenaries.

Disaster that it was, the defeat of Black Hawk served to open the area to settlement. First to come were the surveyors, followed by the homesteaders, and the white people's ways rapidly began to supersede the Indian culture.

The railroad came in 1867 when the Spirit Oak was 120 years old, passing near the middle-aged tree. When it was a venerable 175, the Blackhawk Country Club was founded, and a new era of care and preservation made the tree's last decades a period of increased growth.

Although the Spirit Oak is no longer standing, two cross-sections were preserved to be saved among the treasures of the club. Honorary club president L. J. Markwardt also lovingly prepared an "autobiography" of the tree.