

Donald Redman: Ripon's Tree Man

Before it lost its elms, Ripon, in Fond du Lac County, called itself the City of Trees. Fortunately, it was also the city of Donald Redman, a biology teacher and a man dedicated to tree planting. Over the years, he and his students planted a staggering total of more than 150,000 trees, bought with money they raised themselves through projects such as collecting aluminum cans and waste paper for recycling.

In 1968, Mr. Redman had his middle school students make a study of Ripon's trees, noting the percentage of elms: 32. The point of the study was to get city officials thinking in terms of replacement.

Mr. Redman's own private replacement program never faltered. For four or five weeks every fall semester, students in Mr. Redman's biology classes would walk around their neighborhood identifying trees. They located more than 50 different species. They also planted more than 300 trees on school property, their own and others. One of their first projects was planting maple trees in a nearby park.

What got Mr. Redman started on his tree planting crusade was needless destruction. One day, in a "road widening" project, the City of Ripon cut down 68 fine and healthy trees in the space of three blocks. These included two sugar maples in perfect condition that stood in front of Mr. Redman's home. So angry, so appalled, so incensed was he that he vowed it would never happen again. He ran for a seat on the City Council at the next opportunity, vowing to raise people's tree awareness. He won, and served for 12 years, during which time the city did adopt a tree-planting program.

On his own four acres within the city, Mr. Redman planted more than 3,500 trees over the years, mostly white and red pine, but also black walnut, apple, silver maple, mockernut hickory and basswood. He was particularly fond of conifers because he grew up near Green Lake in the sand country and as a small boy remembered being scared when the sand blew so hard it was impossible to see. At that time, in the 1930s, the planting of evergreens as shelter belts or windbreaks was a new technique that fascinated him.

Sources: Georgeann Penson, Ripon
Donald Redman, Ripon