



Ben Logan's Big Maple Tree

B-Wolfgang Hoffmann (1982)

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### *Crawford County*

Ben Logan, well-known author of *The Land Remembered*, a memoir of his boyhood on a Wisconsin farm in Southwestern Wisconsin, wrote compellingly about a big soft maple tree that stood on a ridge near the house. The whole family plus the hired man opposed Logan's father's plan to cut the tree down. A caring but logical man, he feared a storm would send a branch crashing through the roof. The following passage, quoted with permission from Viking Penguin, Inc., described the conflict:

*The tree was important to each of us in different ways, but most important to Mother. I think she saw it as a place where we lived, an extension of the house, and the house was her domain.*

*The maple tree was the first sign of the farm you could see as you came over the top of the hill leading up from Halls Branch Valley. When we'd been away on Sunday and there had been a windstorm, she would lean forward as the Model T groaned up the last steep pitch to the ridge. Then she'd lean back, smile, and say, "It's still there."*

*Most of all, the tree linked us to the migrating birds and the changing seasons. The new birds came to its leafless branches when its blossoms were a fringed silhouette of red and yellow, a week or more ahead of any other flowers.*

*The tree was more to her than we knew. Many times a day, looking up to where its high branches caught the breeze, she began to sing. There was something very warm and right about that, reminding us that Mother, too, had her own private world.*

*I'm not sure Father realized how important the tree was to Mother. If he had, I don't think he would have kept wanting to cut it down. It wasn't that Father didn't like the tree. He did, and he enjoyed the good times we had under it; but he didn't trust the tree.*

*"Look," he would say, pointing at the heavy limbs, "soft maple trees don't belong on the ridge in the first place. They can't take the wind storms."...*

*Finally it happened. There was a storm. A limb split loose from the trunk. There was a crash. The house shook. Again, the limb had missed the chimney, but for Father the fallen limb was proof that the tree should go.*

*After breakfast, out came the crosscut saw. He sharpened it carefully, decided which direction the tree should fall, and called Lyle and Junior. He held out the saw...*

*Mother stood on the porch, face set, arms folded. She said nothing...*

*Lyle and Junior knelt beside the tree to start the first cut... Father stood over them.*

*Mother was still on the porch. I couldn't understand her silence.*

*The saw cut deeper into the trunk. It had eaten in about five inches when Lyle and*

*Junior looked at each other and came to some agreement.*

*"Time for a rest," Junior said.*

*Father moved closer. "What's the matter?"*

Excerpted from *Every Root an Anchor: Wisconsin's Famous and Historic Trees* by R. Bruce Allison  
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*"We're tired," Junior said. His voice was polite but very firm.*

*Lyle looked around and met Mother's eyes. For just a minute his crooked grin was on his face. "As a matter of fact," he said, "we're damn tired. It just might be about fifty years before I'm rested up enough to try that again."*

*Mother smiled.*

*Father looked from Lyle to Junior to the tree. We waited knowing how much he counted on being obeyed. For the first time he looked at Mother. She tried to hide her smile. She didn't quite make it,*

*"Look," Father said. "That damned tree... I don't..."*

*"I know," she said.*

*Father took a deep breath, and slowly let it out again. He took the saw out of Lyle's hands. We still weren't sure. One man could handle a good crosscut saw if he had to.*

*Tooth by tooth, Father brushed the white sawdust from the saw. He walked to the milkhouse and hung it up in its usual place...*

*Only once after that do I remember any mention of the tree. The morning after a bad storm, Lyle looked into the yard and found no limbs on the ground. He forgot himself. "Hell, that tree's going to outlive us all."*

*"Maybe because it knows how we feel," Mother said, smiling.*

*Father looked at her for a long moment. He*

*smiled. "Could be that. Could be I scared it a little, too."*

*The tree is still there, four feet through now, the biggest soft maple I've ever seen on the ridge. The scar, low to the ground on the south side, is hardly noticeable.*

Logan's resonant prose stands by itself, expressing the deeply intuitive appreciation of trees that has characterized many of the people whose stories are in this book. An interesting postscript involves a nearby family's love of trees that went back even earlier.

After the publication of *The Land Remembers* in 1975, Logan got a letter from an old neighbor, Josephine Mullaney, who had been born in the one-room log house across the draw from the Logan farm in 1886. In a letter rich with the recollection of bygone years, she recalled her home: "A piece of me is most surely left on that ridge farm in Haney. Could be in a clearing in the white oak woods just south of the bridge, where the bird's foot violets bloomed."

She went on: "And I could well have been the one who planted the soft maple tree you loved. We all loved trees—the white pines were likely brought from our Uncle's, John Lynch, on Copper Creek or by Petersburg. It is unusual, I believe, for a soft maple to be so long-lived and to attain the size you indicate."

Not so unusual, perhaps, for a tree that is loved.

Source: Ben Logan