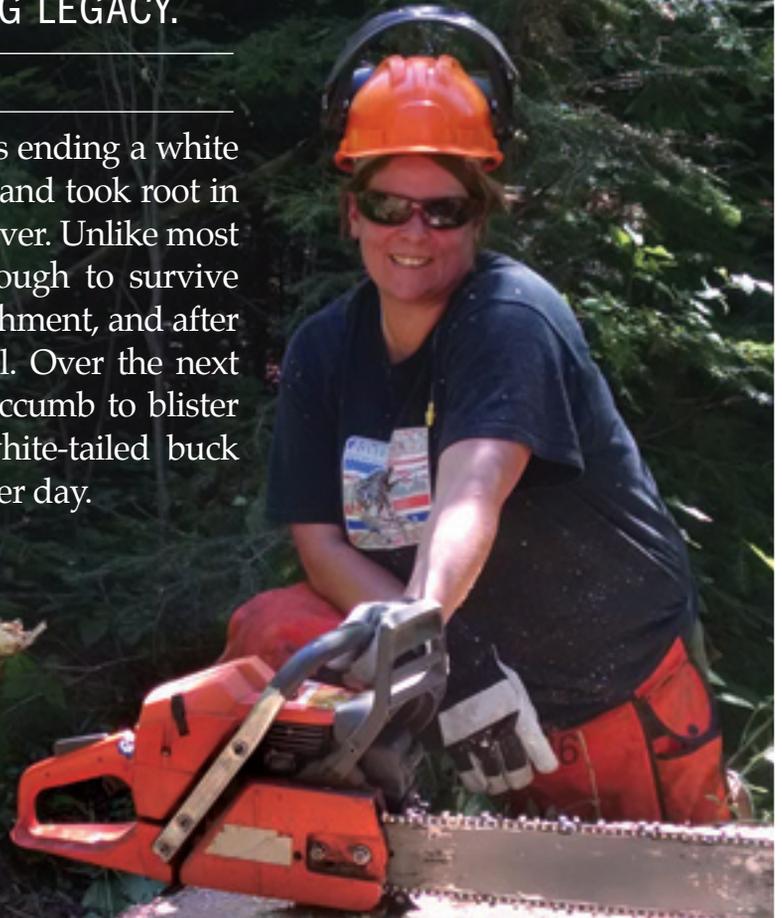


A white pine eulogy

HISTORY AND HARD WORK CREATE A BEAUTIFUL AND WELCOMING LEGACY.

Ron Weber

About the time the Civil War was ending a white pine seed landed in mineral soil and took root in the Oxbo area of the Flambeau River. Unlike most of its brethren, it was lucky enough to survive those fierce early years of establishment, and after a decade, stood nearly 5 feet tall. Over the next several decades it saw others succumb to blister rust, tip weevils and even a white-tailed buck venting his aggression one October day.



Forestry technician Jennifer Peterson skillfully cut the large white pine.

As the United States prepared to enter “the war to end all wars” the pine, now a slim 50 years old, was filling the void left vacant after the logging era of the late 1800s. As time passed, it continued to send its leader skyward, and like many older beings, started to add girth to its trunk. By the end of the next World War, the 80-year-old pine had secured its place in the canopy with the other survivors of its generation.

As the tree celebrated its 100th birthday, the United States wrestled with a variety of social issues, another war and the realization that a better life at the cost of the future of our environment may be too high a price to pay. The pine stood steadfast as a fierce wind blew through on July 4, 1977, changing the face of the forest in a swath across northern Wisconsin. For nearly 150 years the pine had survived winds, droughts, disease and insects. But like for all things, there is a season.

The end for the big pine came in August 2014 when an ATV trail project was being planned. Though no one wanted to see the tree cut, it was deemed necessary for the project completion. Forestry technician Jennifer Peterson notched the tree, and with the skillful use of wedges, was able to safely fell the tree. Forestry technician Roy Gilge was on standby with the excavator bucket to help push the tree over but it was not needed.

Three 12-foot logs were brought

to Red Oak Lumber in Spooner to be sawed and dried into the 3-inch thick slabs which would be used to construct the countertop for the service counter, a coffee table and benches for the shower facility of the new Flambeau River State Forest headquarters. The slabs were then sent to the Flambeau Correctional Camp for an initial sanding.

In January 2015, Peterson was tasked with designing and building the countertop, table and benches. Though an experienced and accomplished woodworker, the countertop project was a little daunting at first. The tree, which in life was shaped by natural forces and circumstance, would now be shaped by human hands into a curved 20-foot-long countertop.

With care and precision, measuring twice and cutting once, Peterson fashioned the pieces into the correct lengths complete with mitered ends as needed. Due to the thickness of the wood, an initial cut was done with a circular saw and the last half inch was cut with a hand saw. Each piece was sanded smooth and the edges rounded. The pieces were then fit together, with additional sanding required to get the mitered joints tightly fit. Since the slabs were quite large, Peterson was often helped as needed by various staff members in lifting, holding and measuring the pieces.

When all the pieces were ready to be put together, Peterson, with the help of

Flambeau staff member Curtiss Lindner, drilled and chiseled each mitered end for the anchors to draw the joints tight. Once all the pieces were joined, next came the challenging task of lifting the countertop in one piece and placing it in its new home. Six staff members arranged themselves around the countertop and like pall bearers at a funeral, carefully lifted and set the pine countertop onto its final resting place.

Peterson was aided by Flambeau staff member Diane Stowell to finish the project using Envirotex, a pour-on epoxy material which is equal to 50 coats of varnish. This work was done after hours when no people were in the building to avoid disturbance and dust. With meticulous care, the finish was applied and bubbles removed. The end result is a lasting thing of beauty, a real testament to nature, human know-how and as Leopold wrote, “the unity of the hodgepodge of events called history.”

Most eulogies are written or spoken. The eulogy for this 150-year-old white pine will instead be seen by countless people over the next 100 years as they visit the Flambeau River State Forest headquarters. Maybe they will even take the time to count the rings evident on the end of the countertop and be reminded that throughout history, when humans work thoughtfully with nature, they can accomplish beautiful things. 

Ron Weber writes from Weyerhaeuser, Wis.



The finished countertop is a lasting legacy of the Oxbo pine.