

KING OF THE HILL

(Narrative: Sue Schuit)

TODAY

“Icy wind of night be gone this is not your domain, In the sky a bird was heard to cry, Misty morning whisperings and gentle stirring sounds, Belie the deathly silence that lay all around” – Pink Floyd, Grantchester Meadows, Ummagumma.

A blink-your-eyes-and-it’s-gone moment; a not uncommon occurrence in Wisconsin Novembers. This gray, quiet day began with a gentle but steady rain, no longer warm, just on the brink of not-quite-chilling cold, indecisive and wavering prior to reaching earth; shall I be wet or would I prefer white?

The drops are over for now and the sun has decided to make a brief, swift appearance low on the horizon. His rays light up a small band of red in the west and arch clear and high to the east, aimed directly at my highest crown for a brief, lingering moment, setting my leaves alight and silhouetting my wet-blackened branches clear and distinct against the somber canvas. Blink, and he is gone.

For the few who care to share my domain at this season there is a quiet, subdued beauty. Sounds and smells have changed in this season of gray; this small window of time behind colorful autumn and before white, pale winter. Countless, wet leaves release a pungent, earthy-rich smell and the spicy scent of Queen Anne’s, Asters and wild herbs can still linger occasionally in the air. Ground creatures rustle in the cast off season’s debris, scurrying, hurrying to stock the larder and prepare their winter grounds; flocks of finches, juncos and chickadees scold and fuss in the shelter of bushes, branches and leaves, bursting out in small, chattering waves to frenziedly complete their tasks on this fleeting window of day. Geese fly overhead and in the still air the whir of wings are clearly heard. Their honks carry far and the whistle of a distant train is somehow as lonely, thought-evoking and poignant as the geese – the perfect backdrop for the mood of the season.

I, I am always here. My beauty, while constant, has changed with the season as well. I am a White Oak and I have been the King of the Hill for many Novembers; I will be the King for many more. Oaks are not known for having brilliant fall colors but I do have deeper, richer tones. When the maples have dropped their leaves, it is we with our deep purple foliage, the noble Oaks which carry the last of the now-faded fall foliage, offering the gray winter landscape a touch of bronze or brown.

Home, home again.

I like to be here when I can.

When I come home cold and tired

It's good to warm my bones beside the fire.

Far away across the field

The tolling of the iron bell

Calls the faithful to their knees

To hear the softly spoken magic spells – Pink Floyd, Breathe, Dark Side of the Moon

To borrow the expression, "I am comfortably loved". My home, my grounds are known as Hoods Hollow, in Caledonia. My domain is a destination of choice; a well-cared-for haven for all. The homes are large, comfortable, creatively and uniquely designed, and exquisitely landscaped. They are carefully considered, and well placed amongst a pastoral, beautiful setting. Large and beautiful rural lots, winding roads, a meandering brook and residential nature-lovers; Hoods Hollow could be called one of the very first conservation subdivisions. And I am this land's proud, sentinel tree.

I am the champion tree, the official greeter and the obvious landmark of my realm. I am the King of the Hill, strong and proud, the regal sentinel crowning the knoll. I can't be missed at this position of prominence, just past the bridge and straight ahead; the entranceway to my realm.

YESTERDAY

***All that is now, all that is gone, all that's to come and everything under the sun is in tune,
But the sun is eclipsed by the moon. – Pink Floyd, Dark Side of the Moon***

The beginning of my yesterdays occurred, by your reckoning, in approximately 1827. At that time my land looked much as it had for many thousands of years. Native Indians were the only human inhabitants and they made no impact on the dense, old-growth forests and rich, vibrant prairies, indeed they were part of the landscape, the character and the life of the times. Their time was our time; a slow, idyllic movement keeping beat with the tempo of the seasons; the rising and setting of the sun, the waxing and waning of the moon.

Would the Indians of my past or the early settlers recognize their land today? Would they be able to point out familiar landmarks? Perhaps they would recognize their King of the Hill, their sentinel, landmark tree? I may be one of the few living relics of their history.

"Around the year 1832, the first white man, Jacques Vieau (also known as Jambeau), the French Fur Trader, arrived. Jacques chose for his cabin and fur trading post, a spot along a branch of the Root River, southeast of the current village of Franksville. These were perhaps, the first permanent structures in what is now, Racine County. The transition from Indian occupation to the white man's was made when Jacques took as his bride, a maiden of the Potawatomi tribe." - ***Franksville, The First 100 Years, 1975.***

Time stepped up the pace.

***There is trouble in the forest, and the creatures all have fled, as the maples scream oppression! And
the oaks just shake their heads...***

***Now there's no more oak oppression, for they passed a noble law - and the trees are all kept equal by,
Hatchet, ax and saw. – Rush, The Trees***

"A feeder stream for the Root River, Hood's Creek runs from nearly the exact middle of the town's southern border north between Highway 38 and Johnson Park. The pocket community of Hood's Creek is bounded by the Chicago and North Western rail line to the west, 4 Mile Rd to the north, Highway 31 on the east and the town line on the south. While this area never had its own post office or general store, it did have two schools during the 19th century. One of the schools was located at the corner of

the Milwaukee Rd. and 4 Mile Rd. while the other was on Highway 38 just east of the intersection with Hwy K, near the location of the present day Johnson Bank. The former was known as Wilson School during its time as a schoolhouse, while the later was called either the Hood's Creek School or simply Hood School.

As with most of the southern half of Caledonia, this region was initially settled by Yankees from "back East." Unlike the areas to the west of Hood's Creek, most of this pocket community was heavily wooded and most of the properties were relatively small – 40 acres or smaller. The few larger claims belonged to Thomas Hood (the creek and area was named for Thomas Hood), Alexander Stuart, Royal Morse, J.A. Horlick, H.F. Cox, John Morris and William Gittings.

The region remained primarily a Yankee and New-York-based one throughout the 19th century, with the New York born Gifford's and Wilson's joining the Morse's and Gittings' south and north of the Root River. Those two families would each own over 200 acres in the region by the end of the 19th century."
- *Journey to a Village, Caledonia, 1835-2008*

***Please allow me to introduce myself
I'm a man of wealth and taste – The Rolling Stones, Sympathy for the Devil***

In 1857, William Gifford, his wife, Catherine Morris, and their three children came to Wisconsin. The original Gifford farm (which has now become the subdivision Hoods Hollow and part of Aldebaran) was purchased by Dr. Philip Morris in 1843.

According to his sons, Gifford was not overly ambitious and was something of a gentleman farmer. While still very young, the sons took over the more laborious farm duties. They described their father as going about his managerial capacity dressed in a starched white shirt and "wearing" his inevitable cane.

In 1888, Gifford purchased the land adjoining his to the south from Cyrus Nichols (parts of this 160 acres have become the Hoods Creek subdivision).

The Reverend Cyrus Nichols was the first Presbyterian minister in Racine. He was said to have been a brilliant man and very well-educated but had lost sanity and for many years his family had kept him confined in a twelve by fifteen foot shed (our generation called it "the crazy house" and it was used for storing the grain binder). The shed had been built specifically to house the mad man. There were three windows very close to the ceiling. An outside door led to an enclosed space where the wood-burning stove was placed. The only unlocked access to Mr. Nichols was through a two by two-foot opening with a wide ledge and a sliding door through which the food was passed (narrators interjection: YIKES! Poor Man!).

A son of William Gifford (William Gifford, Jr) was a progressive and innovative farmer. The first in the community to build a silo, first to have cattle tested for tuberculosis, first to build a farm house with inside plumbing and even as a young boy he delivered the first load of milk to be processed by The Horlick Malted Milk Company.

In 1912, the two sons of William Gifford began a one-wagon milk delivery service called Gifford's Sanitary Milk Co and supplied the milk from their herd. In 1920 the name changed to Progressive Dairy.

W. Allen Gifford managed the company from its inception until his death at seventy two in 1963.

In 1916, Joseph Gifford (2nd son of William) and his wife, Kate Jensen, built their colonial home in the grove at the intersection of Hwy 38 and K. He continued to manage his own dairy farm as well as the Gifford land and other rented properties until the Gifford estate was sold in 1962. After selling the frontage of his own farm for the Bailey's Bend development, he continued, in spite of crippling arthritis, to plant and cultivate his remaining fifty acres. He suffered a stroke in August 1976 and did not live to see his last crop of wheat and soybeans harvested. Joe Gifford was very proud of the fact that he was actively farming at the age of eighty-three and boasted that he would still be doing it at age ninety.”
- *Excerpts written by Esther E. Gifford from the 1978 The Grassroots History of Racine County.*

And so it goes a short history of my time, a brief story of my domain, a small saga of me. The names are still with us, they are remembered today just as today's names will be remembered tomorrow. Events still unfold but life marches on to the same beat of the drum, the same march of the band, the same timeless, repeated song which is sung for the never-ending dance of time.

Plus ca change, plus ca meme chose. The more that things change, the more they stay the same.

TOMORROW

Tomorrow, the day after today
Tomorrow, the next chapter,
Not free from the past
Unlike yesterday's future which is not forecast.

Tomorrow, it's upcoming
The end of the story for some,
And for others the beginning
Will have just begun.

The decisions, the actions,
The life tales we write
The hopes and plans that are made
For a future that's bright.

The remains of our days
Aren't known before tomorrow's revealed;
Bad, sad or glad,
Even fame is concealed.

We all know the song
What will be, will be,
We all know the future's not ours to see.

What's over's not over
It's the stuff of today,
It's not past, it's not finished,

Nor is it done,

For nothing's ever really new
Under the sun,
In my humble opinion
Really quite an apt phrase
For this not-quite last line.

This piece is over
I've run out of time.
– Sue Schuit

Trees We Love, 2017
Hoy Audubon Society
White Oak (Quercus Alba)
Approx. age: 190 years
42" Diameter at breast height
55' Height, 60' Spread
Proud Stewards: The Brown Family, 6837 Brook Rd.