



## Maternity LEAVES

Known for shading pioneer infants, McMinnville's giant white oak — 'The Birthing Tree' — has become the town's icon

Story and photos by Mark E. Johnson

"The Birthing Tree" is so named because local lore tells of hundreds of babies being born beneath its limbs during America's westward expansion of the mid-19th century. The enormous white oak, estimated by some to be 4 centuries old, is located in McMinnville along U.S. Highway 70, once one of the main wagon train routes west.

A wagon train composed of 12 dusty, oxen-drawn vehicles rattled into the eastern entrance of the small settlement of McMinnville on a steamy July day in 1856. In the third wagon, the driver, a young North Carolinian, spotted a local farmer who was plowing a weedy field behind a team of jennies. With a whistle, the driver stopped the train and beckoned the farmer with an urgent wave.

"Sir, my wife is in labor inside this wagon," he yelled breathlessly as the farmer approached, wiping sweat from his brow. "Is there a doctor nearby?"

"Nope, no doctor," replied the farmer, who then pointed further up the trail. "See that big tree yonder? Take your wife there and put her in the shade. I'll send for a midwife and meet you there within the half hour."



McMinnville ●

By late afternoon, mother and newborn child were resting comfortably under the protective leaves of the enormous white oak. The following day, the young couple, with their newest family member swaddled carefully,

climbed aboard their wagon and continued their trek toward a new life beyond Tennessee's western borders.

Although this particular account was never documented as fact, such stories have made a living legend of the giant oak — known simply as "The Birthing Tree" — that stands along U.S. Highway 70 across from Riverpark Hospital in McMinnville. Since America's westward expansion of the mid-19th century, these tales have been passed down through the generations of ancestors being born beneath the tree, which was located near the junction of three well-traveled roads, several general stores, and an underground spring. Some speculate that several Cherokee mothers gave birth there during the tribe's Trail of Tears march of the 1830s, and it's even said that local Indians considered a birth under the oak a sign of a good life to come.

"We have no way to verify most of these stories and claims," says longtime Warren County Historian James Dillon. "But there were obviously enough births under this tree to give it its name. Regardless, there is no doubt that it is a very old, remarkable tree."

James credits his late friend, Warren County Agricultural Extension agent, historian, and conservationist Hobart Massey, for initiating research on the tree in the 1930s. James says Hobart used to tell a story of giving an agricultural presentation to a Madisonville, Ky., civic group in the mid-'40s when he was approached by a woman who asked if he was aware of the Birthing Tree.

"Hobart said, 'I sure am,'" says James. "The lady said, 'My grandmother, Elizabeth Wilson, was born under that tree Nov. 12, 1845, on the way from North Carolina to Kentucky.' She had known about the tree her entire life and came to visit it as an elderly woman."

During his research, Massey discovered that the Birthing Tree was one of two local specimens that were important to pioneers traveling through Warren County. Another giant oak, named "The Waiting Tree," was located east of town along what is now U.S. Highway 8 at the fork of two main

western routes. It was so named because wagon trains would often stop at the tree to wait for vehicles that had fallen behind on the journey. A lightning strike destroyed The Waiting Tree in the 1980s, says James.

"I hold my breath every time an electrical storm blows through here," he adds. "It would be a disaster to see The Birthing Tree destroyed after all these years."

Though the actual age of the tree can't be accurately determined without experts examining a cored sample from the trunk, James says some arborists put the oak at better than 400 years old. To place the age in historical perspective, America was still 167 years from declaring



Longtime Warren County Historian James Dillon says that visitors to the area will often stop to inquire about the tree, located near the former site of several 19th-century general stores and taverns.



its independence when the acorn may have germinated in 1609. George Washington's great-great-grandfather, Lawrence, was only 7 years old, explorer Henry Hudson had just discovered New York Bay, and Galileo was demonstrating his first telescope to Venetian lawmakers. By the mid-1800s, the tree would've already been massive.

"It's amazing when you really think about it," says James. "The Birthing Tree is a living piece of history."

A very large piece, at that. At last measure, says James, the specimen was nearly 10 stories tall and 22 feet in circumference. Giant, knob-by roots bulge out of the soil near the trunk. Several lateral branches snake along the ground like enormous wooden tentacles some 85 feet in length, giving the tree a mind-boggling spread of approximately 175 feet. Although other, larger trees have been documented in the county, the Birthing Tree has outlived all of them.

Bryson James, a longtime consultant to Warren County's vaunted horticultural industry, says that after all the years of wagon wheels, lawnmowers, Weedeaters, encroaching development, and over-anxious, tree-climbing youngsters and teenagers, the oak still "enjoys good health."

"It's amazing, really, for something that old," says Bryson, who has helped care for the tree for more than 20 years. "We're still seeing four to six inches of new growth a year, which is perfect. As long as we keep it properly pruned and on a fertility program, the tree should keep plugging away without any problems."

In 2005, four local developers gave the city of McMinnville the 150-by-100-foot plot the tree calls home. Since then, the city has cared for the tree, which, in many ways, has become the unofficial mascot of the town. The oak is listed as one of the city's "attractions" on its Web site, is featured promi-

nently in promotional literature, and is carved into a granite sculpture — located on the courthouse lawn — commemorating the 200th anniversary of Warren County.

"That tree is very important to me and many other people in Warren County," says Bryson. "It is a living reminder of our heritage and the development of our town but is also a landmark that progress has not destroyed. I hope it will be enjoyed for many generations to come."

Dr. Norman Rone, mayor of McMinnville, says the tree is a fitting symbol for the county and city known as the "Nursery Capital of the World."

"We really consider it to be our trademark," he says. "Since we are a leader in the nursery industry, it only makes sense that our trademark be a tree. More than that, The Birthing Tree is kind of a monument to our history and heritage. I think we will always feel protective of it."



This engraving on a sculpture commemorating Warren County's 200-year anniversary is evidence of how The Birthing Tree has become a cherished symbol of the area.



James shows the scale of the huge 22-foot circumference of the tree, estimated at more than 100 feet tall with a 175-foot spread.

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