



# postscript. Dr. Boyd's Elm Tree

In some parts of the country, inhabitants may take their trees for granted. Not so Oklahomans. Here trees are a treasured commodity, nurtured and pampered, watered, sprayed and trimmed with devotion akin to obsession. Cut down a tree, and you had better have a good reason or risk the condemnation of your fellow townsmen.

The University of Oklahoma is cutting down a tree this spring—not just any tree, but the once-stately, 100-year-old American elm that stood in front of Evans Hall before there was an Evans Hall, indeed before there was much of a university. This sacrilege has been scheduled after Commencement, probably one day at the crack of dawn, with few witnesses but accompanied by more than a few tears—even, one imagines, from the landscape crew charged with carrying out the deed.

The decision to fell the elm was not taken lightly. For years landscapers have labored diligently to prolong the life of the tree, now hollow and held together by cables, and finally deemed a potential safety hazard to pedestrians on the heavily trafficked walkway. Several of the tree's cavities are filled with concrete, a once-common tree-saving practice, and one is home to a giant beehive. Attempts to propagate seedlings from cuttings have been largely unsuccessful.

The landscape department plans to leave a three-foot stump, cut at an angle to accommodate a bronze plaque attesting to the historic nature of the departed tree, named officially in 1936 "The Pe-et Elm." The senior honor society, which has held initiation ceremonies under its branches since 1910, hopes to use wood from the tree to fashion commemorative items for its members and alumni.

Legend holds that the University of Oklahoma's first president, David Ross Boyd, planted the elm himself, in what can



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OU botanists took core samples to determine that, in spring 2006, the Pe-et Elm was approximately 100 years old, likely the last vestige of David Ross Boyd's tree-planting efforts.

only be termed a tree-planting frenzy. In his new book, *The University of Oklahoma: A History*, David Levy quotes *The Norman Transcript's* unlikely claim that Boyd planted 10,000 trees in his first 16 months as president—roughly 20 trees a day, leaving precious little time for things presidential. Regardless, he planted a lot, and there is no reason to suppose that the Evans Hall tree was not one of them.

There are so many stories about Boyd and the trees, and variations of each, and there is probably a germ of truth in most: Boyd bought the seedlings with his own money (in Perry or Winfield, Kansas, or Wisconsin) and paid for the water to keep them alive, which he applied himself; he set up two nurseries and sold the young trees "cheap," or alternately he gave them away, asking payment only if the recipient let them die; he devised habitats to attract woodpeckers that would eat the insects that were attacking his trees. The details do not really matter; the fact is that Boyd's passion and tireless efforts created a beautification mindset within the

campus and the town that continues to this day.

Other OU presidents have gotten into the act in varying degrees. William S. Banowsky launched a privately funded tree-planting program in the early 1980s with mixed results. David L. Boren and his wife, Molly Shi Boren, took a more aggressive approach as part of their campus beautification efforts, with more than 5,000 trees planted since 1995. They also turned Arbor Day into a major springtime event on the campus.

Each year, the observances, the majority of which are held in David Burr Park just south of Huston Huffman Center, honor individuals who have contributed greatly to campus beautification past and present. This year the ceremonies took place under the branches of the Pe-et Elm—Dr. Boyd's tree—for an honoree with an unbroken record of service a century long. —CJB