

RaiderLife

Rainwater Oak

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President Luckey picked up some acorns from the Vermont Rainwater Tree. He currently keeps in his office.

"I need to give them to [Physical Plant Operations] so that maybe they can plant them and see if they take off," Luckey said. "So wouldn't it be interesting if one of the children in Vermont ended up providing a child here in Columbia one day?"

There would then be three Rainwater trees on the LWC campus. The original, a child, and a grandchild.

The Rainwater Staff

The LWC cycling team is currently in possession of an item called the "Rainwater Staff." The project to make the staff was started by Dave Grigsby, LWC cycling coach from January 2008 to October 2013.

Grigsby was originally inspired by other colleges and the Tour De France to create something, such as a flag, that could be waved at events and honor LWC and its spirit.

"But a flag is only a piece of cloth, and it would be unrealistic to believe that one could be both waved at events and handed down from generation to generation intact. So I decided to have a flag staff made," Grigsby wrote in an article entitled, "Honoring Rainwater."

Grigsby sees Rainwater as one of LWC's first endurance athletes who left behind a marker that still points back to him.

"I always try to remind my students that Fred Rainwater was not some old guy that lived a hundred years ago," Grigsby said. "He was a student just like them and he was about their age when he decided, 'You know what? I'm going to leave a legacy behind. I'm going to plant an oak tree here, and hopefully it'll be here for generation to come.' And that's exactly what he did. So I always try to make it relatable to the students."

With such thoughts in mind in the summer of 2008, Grigsby decided that a limb from the Rainwater Oak Tree would be the perfect thing to make the staff with. But first, he needed to get permission. Using all of the time and perseverance he could muster, Grigsby went through LWC Athletics Director Willis Pooler, Vice President

Dean Adams, and former Vice President Roger Drake. Finally, Drake himself helped Grigsby pick out a good limb to use.

Grigsby's article says, "So on a fall afternoon [math instructor Rickie Williams] pulled his ancient Corvair pick-up to the tree, broke out his 25 foot extension ladder, and with running chainsaw in hand and the ladder perched precariously in the bed of his truck, climbed to the top rung."

It was at that moment that President Luckey walked out of the administration building and saw this sight. Grigsby was worried that Luckey would "fire" he and Williams, but Luckey was merely worried for their safety. After hearing an explanation of the situation, he helped hold Williams's quivering ladder.

After the limb was cut, Williams pruned it. Grigsby found a man in Jackson County who let him put it in his kiln. Former Upward Bound staff member Peter Owens smoothed and carved it, and someone else donated some linseed oil to preserve it.

"All the work that was done on the staff was just done free of charge by people that enjoyed the story," Grigsby said. "There's not a dime of money that went into it. There's just time and passion."

But Grigsby hopes that other LWC sports teams will begin using the Rainwater Staff at their events as well.

"I never wanted it to be the exclusive property of the cycling team," Grigsby said. "I kind of wanted the cycling team to be its caretakers, and of course use it at races and things like that, but I really wanted it to be a symbol for all of Lindsey Wilson."

Even though he feels this way, Grigsby still wants the cycling team's Ghost Riders to be honored on the staff by having their names carved into it. Andrew Parson, the current cycling coach, agrees with this and hopes to have it done sometime.

"We've got an honor that we always give to certain cyclists on the team called the Veus Ex Machina, the Ghost in the Machine, Award," Grigsby said. "And we've honored six cyclists with that in the last few years."

Once their names have been carved into the Rainwater Staff, the Ghost Riders will have left their own legacy for future generations of cyclists on a piece of the Rainwater Oak Tree.

Future Of The Tree

The original Rainwater oak tree is dying. Age and several severe lightning strikes have brought it to its last stage in life. Although it is trying to stand tall while it still has a sliver of life left, it is pale and 80 percent hollow.

"Basically, it's in the nursing home," Newton said. "We'll hold onto it as long as we can, as long as we consider it to be safe."

The center of the tree is dead, but the top will still get some foliage. As long as the tree's limbs, which have been cut for safety reasons, do not go too far up or out, it can withstand its own weight. But Newton said that "the tree's days are numbered."

Newton would like to preserve the Rainwater Oak Tree in some way after it's death, but there is not much wood to work with.

"If it weren't for the fact that it was so hollow in the inside," Newton said, "then it would have been nice to cut it, and maybe get a couple logs out of it, and then had them pressed down... to make some furniture, or wall plaques, or picture frames. And there may be a little of it left, but it'd be very little."

It seems that once the Rainwater Oak Tree is deemed a threat to the safety of people on campus and must come down, there will be no remnant of it left. However, there will still be its children to carry on its legacy.

The Rainwater Legend

As for Fred Rainwater himself, there are numerous stories about him. Some of the legends maintain varying amounts of credibility, whereas others are absolutely false.

The story about what exactly Rainwater said when he planted the oak tree is uncertain.

According to Duane Bonifer, director of public relations at LWC and a man very knowledgeable about the legend, it is believed Rainwater said something along these lines: "This school will grow into a mighty oak tree if it is nurtured and given love and care and attention."

It is uncertain how accurate this is. "Did he say those words?" Bonifer asked, rhetorically. "That's the stuff of legend. I mean, I always think about when about ten or twelve years before he [Rainwater] planted that [oak tree], William Goebel died in office and they said that his final words were, 'Be good and true and loyal to the common people,' or something like that. What he probably really said was, 'Doc, that was a damn poor oyster,' right before he died."

Bonifer's point was that these sorts of things are what make legends what they are. What was actually said cannot always be known and could be completely different from what is believed today.

"You also have to think, too, this was the first ten years that the school was in existence, it's first decade, and during that period, most schools are pregnant with optimism and hope and full of ambition," Bonifer said. "And a lot of times what happens is, people look back on that period, many years later, and they often reappropriate a moment, or an event, or a relic, or artifact to mean more than it meant at the time."

Bonifer believes the Rainwater oak tree has come to really represent the time in which it was planted. People were more hopeful, optimistic, and ambitious in regard to the Lindsey Wilson Training School than they were for others. It was a special time for the institution.

Another legend that is known to be a myth, as Bonifer well knows, is that Rainwater was a Native-American Cherokee.

In fact, he was not a Native American at all. An Adair County News article that looks back at the history of Rainwater, says there is absolutely no chance that Rainwater had

any Native American heritage. It refers to The Rainwater Collection, a website with a large amount of information and research on the genealogy of the name. According to the website, the origins of the name are much more likely to be English or Flemish-Dutch than Native American.

Fred Rainwater himself was from Pulaski County, Kentucky. Moseley called him a country boy.

"When the track meet in Lexington came about," Moseley said, having heard this particular story from a friend of Rainwater's, "he [Rainwater] went up there and ran barefooted in overalls, because he was a good old country boy, and won all of the races that he ran in at the University of Kentucky."

Such stories of Rainwater's athletic prowess are numerous and likely true, at least to some degree. Even Moseley finds no reason to doubt them.

"He was an honest man," Moseley said. "What would be the reason for [the stories] not to be true?"

The Adair County News article, which refers to and quotes numerous older editions that speak about Rainwater, lists many of his physical feats, particularly those "from 1907 through 1910."

During his years at Lindsey Wilson Training School, Rainwater competed in and won mostly foot races, but also pole vaulting competitions and sack races.

The Adair County News reported, "He [Rainwater] is a perfect athlete and is the fastest runner in the school."

The article also discussed Rainwater's involvement in the celebration of Abraham Lincoln's birthday at his birthplace in Hodgenville, Ky, on February 12, 1909. President Theodore Roosevelt was part of the ceremony, which also involved, "the Lincoln family's former log cabin."

Possibly wanting to see President Roosevelt, Rainwater attended the event.

The Adair County News says that several people, including Mr. Rainwater, had "represented the Lindsey-Wilson at the Hodgenville celebration." The article went on to say that Fred Rainwater "started [to Hodgenville] on Thursday and made the trip there and back afoot."

Rainwater alternatively walked and ran to Hodgenville the day before the event. However, since he was poor, there were no rooms for him to stay. Likely, without permission, at least one of the places he eventually found to accommodate him was the Lincoln family cabin. This apparently made Rainwater the last person to have ever slept in the cabin.

Whether or not they are true, there are also other stories about Rainwater's athletic feats.

According to Moseley, Rainwater once walked the borders of Pulaski County in a day.

"I heard that he would take two or three days and run to these track meets and these running meets. He would walk or run there. And sometimes it would take more than a day or two to get there."

Remembering the Legends

Rainwater, as Moseley will agree, was a good, interesting, and skilled individual.

"I just knew that he was a very friendly person and that I was welcomed into his home," Moseley said.

Moseley recalled a time when he visited an older Fred Rainwater at his home. Moseley said he was looking at one of Rainwater's pistols and accidentally fired it into a pillow. Not only was Rainwater not upset, but he remained completely unshaken by the sudden shot as well.

Such stories are enjoyed by those who hear or read them. They help preserve the memory of Fred Rainwater and his oak tree. Perhaps, many generations from now, the legacy will still live on.

