

RaiderLife

Falling Rainwater

Legendary oak tree removed over summer

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Lindsey Wilson College's (LWC) historic and legendary Rainwater Oak Tree, which stood in front of the L.R. McDonald Administration Building, was removed over the summer.

The Rainwater Oak Tree was said to have been planted in 1907 by Lindsey Wilson Training School student and long distance runner Fred Rainwater, who is described in legend as a Cherokee. It was "his legacy to future generations of students," as the tree's plaque reads. Also, over the years, staff members of LWC came to see the tree as a representation of special attributes about the school.

The cutting down of the Rainwater Oak, which might have been as tall as 100 feet and as wide as over six feet in diameter, was a sad event for Mike Newton, director of Physical Plant Operations at LWC. The tree, however, had become a safety hazard for students passing by it and for the historic Administration Building it stood in front of.

Despite previous recommendations to cut the Rainwater Oak down, Newton said he let it stand a while longer because he knew people would find cutting it down painful.

"I'll take responsibility," Newton said. "I took it, really, a step beyond good judgement in letting it stand as long as I did."

Due to the tree's old age and numerous severe lightning strikes it sustained over the years, portions of it had become hollow and dead. These hollow portions would fill up with water and have to be drained several times a year,

releasing "hundreds of gallons of water," Newton said.

Newton believes all of that water in the tree turned it into a sort of lightning rod. Sustaining several more lightning strikes over the past summer may be what finally pushed the tree over the edge of becoming a safety hazard.

"It was not in our plan to take it down this year until the last two little thunderstorms came through," Newton said. "It was blowing chunks out of it every time."

Newton would like to use what remains of the Rainwater Oak as lumber for furniture and picture frames that may be needed around campus to help the legacy live on.

"We have discovered, and this was a surprise, that so much of the tree was good," Newton said. "There was a lot of really rare lumber in that tree. High quality lumber."

The lumber is currently being sawed and kiln-dried by companies that donated their services, Newton said.

Newton also said that there are currently no ideas about what to do with the plaque, which is currently in storage, that stood in front of the Rainwater Oak. The tree's "child" and its plaque, however, still stand between the Administration Building and the John B. Begley Chapel.

Newton said that he would like to someday take an acorn from that child and plant another one where the original Rainwater Oak Tree used to stand, after its roots decay into the ground. He believes this would be a good way to let the Rainwater legacy live on and to continue "the family tradition."



Before and after

The Rainwater Oak Tree (above) as it appeared in 2014. It was removed (left) in the summer of 2015, the week before classes started. The tree, planted in 1907 by Lindsey Wilson student Fred Rainwater, stood as a campus landmark for over 100 years. Rainwater's actions produced many wild stories. However, many of the stories cannot be substantiated, according to accounts over his life through the years. Photos by James D. McIntosh Jr.

CAMPUS LORE

As tree grew, so did campus

The legend of Fred Rainwater, a student and long distance runner at Lindsey Wilson Training School, may be one of the most heartfelt legends for the people of Lindsey Wilson College (LWC). The tree named after Rainwater has become symbolic in some way for many of the college's staff members, and they enjoy telling his stories.

That is why the recent cutting down of the Rainwater Oak Tree, which stood in front of the L.R. McDonald Administration Building, was a difficult experience for them.

According to the legend, Rainwater was a Cherokee runner of great skill. He would run to and from the cities he would compete in and dominate the competition, sometimes getting himself into interesting situations.

In 1907, about three years after Lindsey Wilson Training School opened, Rainwater took an acorn and planted it "as his legacy to future generations of students," as the tree's plaque now reads. It is even said that Rainwater compared his oak tree to the school. According to the legend, Rainwater said that if the school were nurtured, it would grow like a mighty oak tree.

RaiderView reported in the March 2014 issue that Duane Bonifer, the director of public relations at LWC and a man very knowledgeable of the Rainwater legend, said that Rainwater may or may not have really said those

things. It could be a story that was formed later to recapture the optimism of that time period when Lindsey Wilson was just getting started and had a hopeful future.

A lesser known fact is that Rainwater planted another oak tree on Founder's Day in 1967, as a local newspaper clipping from 2004 says. It no longer remains, however, because the building it stood next to, the former Student Union Building, burned in a fire that spread to the tree in 1983.

Such stories about Rainwater are not difficult to believe, but there are others that are more farfetched, some more so than others.

There are stories about Rainwater walking around the entire border of Pulaski County, Ky., in a day or running to and from his track meets in other cities in a day or two. Stories of this sort, however, are believed and shared by Doug Moseley, a former professor and vice president of LWC who knew Rainwater personally.

In one story in particular, Rainwater ran all the way to Hodgenville, Ky., in 1909 for the Lincoln celebration that President Theodore Roosevelt was a part of. This was after he had gotten "a little exercise by running two miles" the day before, according to an Adair County News article from 2007 that references and quotes older issues.

After Rainwater ran all the way to Hodgenville, he needed some rest before the celebration

started.

"Moseley said that Rainwater slipped into the memorial early on the morning of February 12, 1909, and took a nap in the Lincoln family's former log cabin, thus being the last person to sleep in the cabin," the 2004 clipping says.

After the celebration, Rainwater also ran back.

Whether or not these stories have much truth to them, one thing is true. Rainwater was a great athlete.

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

By referring to older issues, the article provides a long record of Rainwater's achievements "from 1907 through 1910." Rainwater took many first place awards in racing and pole vaulting competitions, winning awards that varied from hats to rifles and everything in between. He even participated in sack races.

Although the amount of truth

in some of the athletic stories is hard to know for certain, there is one legend about Rainwater that is definitely not true. He was not a Cherokee.

There appears to be a common misconception about the family name in general that possibly started when some Rainwaters lived in the Carolinas in the 1800s.

According to The Rainwater Collection, a genealogical website dedicated to researching and archiving the Rainwater name, the origins of the name are European. In fact, there are versions of it found in England from as early as the 1600s.

The website also addresses a myth about full-blooded Cherokee Rainwaters and debunks it. Although a few Native Americans have used the name, it is not a Native American name.

"In fact, I have found only 10 Native Americans surnamed Rainwater - three Cherokee in the 1880 census and seven Lakota

Sioux in the 1900 census," the website says.

According to the Adair County News article, Fred Rainwater himself, whose full name was William Frederick Rainwater, was born in Pulaski County in 1887 and had many siblings. A photograph of the family can be found on The Rainwater Collection.

Therefore, it does not make sense that Rainwater was a Cherokee.

Furthermore, RaiderView reported in March 2014 that Moseley called Rainwater "a good old country boy."

The legend of Fred Rainwater may be one of the most in-depth and beloved legends at LWC. Based partly in reality and partly in fiction, there are many Rainwater stories and relics with sentiment attached to them. How many of these stores are completely or even partly real cannot be known, but in the words of Bonifer, "That's the stuff of legend."