

# TEXAS HERITAGE

★ PUBLICATION OF THE TEXAS HISTORICAL FOUNDATION | EST. 1954 | \$5 | INSUP | Volume 33 | 2011

## *Rooted in Texas*

Indian Marker Trees

The Wildflower Effect

Native Plants and Their Uses

Plus: Lone Star History Sleuths Uncover the Past

# TEXAS HERITAGE

A PUBLICATION OF THE TEXAS HISTORICAL FOUNDATION | EST. 1954 | \$5 ISSUE | Volume 3 2017

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Long before there were grocery stores and other retail outlets, the great outdoors served as a natural shopping center. Wild-growing plants and trees provided the necessities of life for generations of Texans, from the state's earliest inhabitants to modern-day residents.

By Pamela Murtha

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American Indians once used trees like highway signposts, bending and securing young saplings to mark important landmarks and resources. The Texas Historic Tree Coalition is working to identify, document, and officially recognize these culturally modified trees, before they disappear from the landscape—and the state's historical record.

By Steve Houser

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From 1927 through 1929, the Texas Wildflower Competitive Exhibitions catapulted regional art to unprecedented heights, thanks to an oilman's pledge to repay a debt of gratitude to the state's bountiful blooms.

By William Reaves

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## ON THE COVER

Trees and natural-growing plants and wildflowers abound throughout Texas. Photograph by Gene Krane.

Texas HERITAGE magazine is published quarterly by the Texas Historical Foundation, P.O. Box 50314, Austin, Texas 78763; 512-453-2154; admin@texashistoricalfoundation.org. Opinions expressed by contributing writers do not necessarily reflect those of the Texas Historical Foundation. THF is a private, nonprofit organization supported by membership dues, contributions, and grants. Unsolicited articles not exceeding 2,000 words will be considered by a review committee for publication. Articles pertaining to Texas heritage, culture, and preservation activities are given priority. Submissions become the property of the Texas Historical Foundation unless accompanied by a self-addressed envelope for return of materials.



This California Crossing Indian Marker Tree, located on the grounds of the National Guard Armory in Dallas, likely signaled a low-water crossing point along the Trinity River. All photographs are courtesy of the author, originals in color.



# Showing the Way



## Indian Marker Trees

*By Steve Houser*



Left: Steve Houser points to a scarred area in the trunk of the California Crossing Indian Marker Tree.

**H**istorically, American Indians have lived in complete harmony with their surroundings. Native people relied on nature for all their needs—food, shelter, and even travel. Many years ago, moving from place to place required good navigational skills, directions along the way, and a method of marking common trails. American Indians used trees not only to indicate a favored route, but also to signal the presence of important landmarks

and resources, some of which were critical for survival.

These natural signposts are now commonly known as Indian Marker Trees. They are also called trail trees, thong trees, and culturally modified trees. Regardless of their names, the trees had the same purpose: to guide others to water sources, safe river crossings, a campsite, or important natural features. To those who could interpret their meaning, these guides were life-saving road signs.

An Indian Marker Tree is one that was purposely bent over and secured in that position when it was small, eventually taking on an unusual appearance as it matured. Some tribes used binding ties made with a thong of animal hide, which is where the term “thong tree” originated. The Comanche, who claimed areas of North, Central, and West Texas as tribal territory, secured a sapling with rope made of yucca and weighted with rocks. According to Comanche Nation Tribal Historic Preservation Officer Jimmy W. Arterberry, plant fiber was more widely used because animal hide was a valuable resource.

#### IDENTIFYING INDIAN MARKER TREES

Why do so few people today know about these cultural marker trees? The most likely reason is that American Indians did not openly share information about their way of life with outsiders. Instead, they handed down customs and practices as part of their oral tradition. In time, as elders passed away, the stories of these special trees and the roles they played within a tribe’s culture were lost.

The lack of public awareness and an appreciation for significant trees, including those that guided American Indians, prompted the establishment in 1995 of the Tex-

*A genuine marker tree is a rare find—only six have been documented in the North Texas area and officially recognized...A pecan with a long arching bow in the trunk, located in an East Dallas park, was the first to be recognized in 1996.*

as Historic Tree Coalition (TXHTC), originally the Dallas Historic Tree Coalition. Within the organization, there is a group that studies and researches Indian Marker Trees.

Through the years, TXHTC has received information on more than 550 potential Indian Marker Trees from landowners, foresters, historians, and hikers. To date, however, only 75 investigations of those candidates have been completed, with research on another 82 underway. The verification process begins with a simple question, "Is the tree old enough?"

Determining an age range for a tree requires information on the size of the specimen, the species, and site conditions, including the type of soil. Researchers also request specific measurements as well as photographs with a person standing nearby, for perspective. Once the potential age is determined to be approximately 150 years or older, and the bent shape of the tree shows promise, a site visit is made to record more detailed information.

Trained volunteers visually inspect the Indian Marker candidate and discuss the history of the area with the property owner. More research is undertaken, including a review of a topographical map of the site, to identify features that might have been important to the Comanche people. For example, the existence of a nearby high point (an ideal site for sending a smoke signal or placing a lookout to signal approaching travelers) might offer an explanation for the presence of the marker tree under investigation. Elevated areas and other significant terrain features, such as location near a low-water river crossing or natural springs, are topographical clues that could suggest a reason for establishment of a marker tree. Reviewers also assess whether a tree is situated near known trails. Additionally, area archeological archives and early pioneer cemetery records are studied for traces of Comanche presence. Original land grants and ownership documents are examined as well, and local historians are called upon to provide input.

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## LIVING WITNESSES TO THE PAST

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A genuine marker tree is a rare find—only six have been documented in the North Texas area and officially recognized by the Comanche Na-



## RECOGNIZING SIGNIFICANT TEXAS TREES

A **historic tree** is a specimen (or a group) that is at least 50 years old and tells the story of a momentous event (or events) within a specific place in time. Size, age, or a tree's noteworthy story can all contribute to its importance. One of the main goals of the TXHTC is to locate and honor a historic tree in every Texas county.

A **heritage tree** has deep significance to a community, such as a new sapling (or grove) planted in honor of an individual or a group of people important to the area.

An application for recognition can be submitted for these trees on [www.txhtc.org](http://www.txhtc.org).

## PRESERVING THE PAST FOR THE FUTURE



Excavation at San Felipe Spring,  
Val Verde County, 1998



Excavating Confederate Veterans,  
Texas State Cemetery, Travis County, 1995

## CONSERVING OUR ARCHEOLOGICAL HERITAGE

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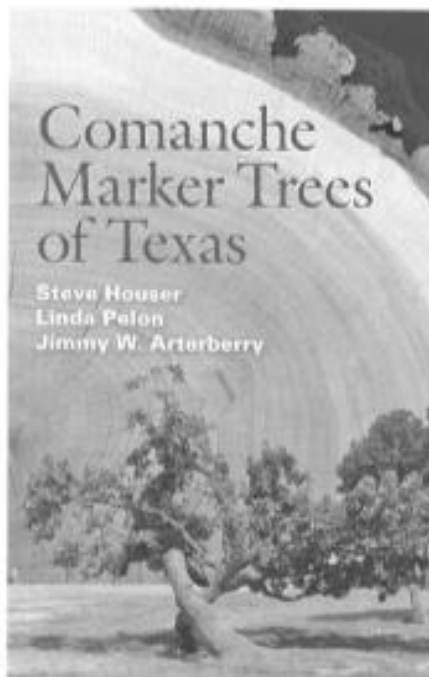
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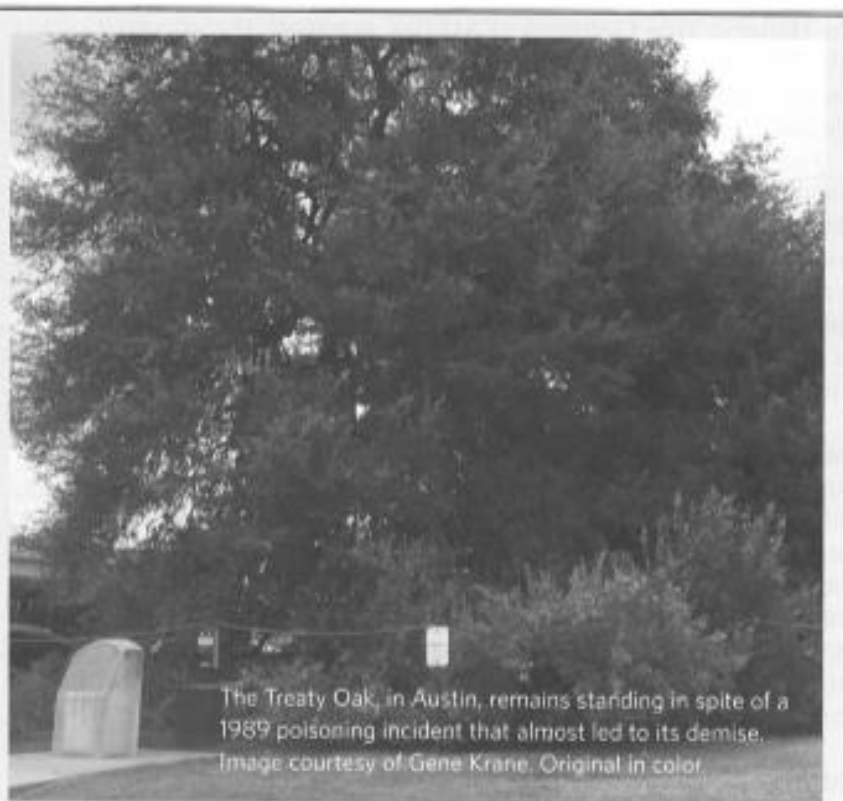
tion. Research can take years to complete and submit to Indian officials. A pecan with a long arching bow in the trunk, located in an East Dallas park, was the first to be recognized in 1996.

Indian Marker Trees are living witnesses to the history of a past civilization, but their life expectancy is limited. This underscores the urgency to study and document as much information as possible about known, and yet-to-be-found, intact specimens. One of the best ways to do that is by creating awareness and providing education about the existence of these American Indian treasures. ★

*Steve Houser, of Dallas, is a certified arborist involved in public education regarding tree and other resource-related issues.*



Above: *Comanche Marker Trees of Texas*, published by Texas A&M University Press in 2016, offers a close look at the unique cultural significance of these natural observers of history and provides detailed guidelines on how to recognize, research, and report potential marker tree candidates.



The Treaty Oak, in Austin, remains standing in spite of a 1989 poisoning incident that almost led to its demise. Image courtesy of Gene Krane. Original in color.

## INDIAN MARKER TREES...More Broadly Defined

The bent tree, which is also called a turning, pointing, or leaning tree, is the characteristic form of an Indian Marker Tree. However, the term is generic by definition and can refer to trees modified or used by American Indians for other cultural purposes. For example, the Treaty Oak in Austin, pictured above, is the surviving member of a stand of trees under which the Comanche and Tonkawa held council.

According to folklore, this centuries-old oak was the site for a brokered agreement between Stephen F. Austin and native tribes, which assured the safety of Anglo colonists who settled the area.

There also were medicine trees created by the Ute tribe, whose people removed bark and the tissue underneath for healing purposes.

## TEXAS HISTORIC TREE COALITION

Originally founded as the Dallas Historic Tree Coalition, the group's research boundaries expanded due to the growing need to identify and study significant trees in other parts of the state; this prompted an organizational name change. For more than 20 years, the Texas Historic Tree Coalition ([www.txhtc.org](http://www.txhtc.org)) has been driven to find, document, and celebrate these living legacies for future generations to enjoy.

In addition to Indian Marker Trees, the TXHTC recognizes historic and heritage trees. The group works to identify the most noteworthy research available from historians, arborists, archeologists, anthropologists, environmentalists, and other experts.