

The carving tree

A tree in Samuel S. Lewis State Park holds the stories of past visitors on its branches

By SUSAN HALLER
Daily Record/Sunday News

From its perch in Samuel S. Lewis State Park, a European beech tree has a panoramic view of Eastern York County, part of Lancaster County and the Susquehanna River in between.

Down the river is the Safe Harbor Dam, where hundreds, maybe thousands of years ago, people created a geological history book, carving pictures on rocks of humans, birds and animals.

From these rocks, long-gone voices whisper.

We were here.

The beech tree has voices too, encased in its chalky, gray bark.

Instead of humans, birds and animals, the tree bears initials, dates and hearts.

It is a living history book reaching 60 feet into the sky.

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Park the car and head up the short, asphalt walkway to the George E. Stine Arboretum, marked by a deteriorating plaque on a large, concrete wheel. The trees in this garden are at least 50 years old, most likely older.

In the midst of several droll specimens — the Siberian elm, American sycamore and Norway maple — the beech tree stands out like a clown among bankers.

Branches explode from its base, unleashed toward the sun like children

let out for recess. From far away it looks as if the tree channels Einstein's frazzled coif.

It's magnetic.

Step closer, and a mystery comes to light.

The tree is covered with the carvings of past visitors. So many it looks like a tattooed man in the circus side-show.

"DORIANE 2006," circled.

"BRADLEY 2000"

Equations on its base and low-lying branches read:

"K + J"

"JR + DS"

"WKM + ELM"

Some are clear, straight and black; they could've been written with a felt-tip pen.

Others are evidence of the tree's life. Thick scabs of bark form over many letters, making them illegible. It's difficult to tell who "DAVE" loved on "9-9-89" — "EY" are the only decipherable characters.

Walk around the tree 10 times, and you'd still find something new.

And this is only if you don't climb the tree.

Which you must do.

It practically picks you up and hoists you on its broad shoulder, urging you up its sturdy branches. And whether you're 5 feet up or 10 feet or higher, it hugs you, providing one more boost when you thought you couldn't climb any farther.

The messages are mysterious up there:

"DROOG"

"FOULTZ"

"IKDR '04"

"BSK8ER"

At least one is angry:

"I HATE IKAYLA," circled.

Or desperate.

"HELP ME," reads a small gash on one branch.

Most are sweet though, even if the sharp, scrawled letters seem more befitting of a slasher flick than amorous declarations:

"ERIKA ♥ RON"

"BEANIE - N - CHRISTINE," with a heart.

"KRIS - N - WILL 96"

And the freshly carved, "BRYAN LOVES NIKKI."

And on and on. The highest is a daring 40 feet up the trunk.

A tree specialist would tell you that carving a tree like this leaves it susceptible to disease.

A park ranger would tell you that if you were found carving the tree, you could be fined.

As for those who made their mark on this tree, they might echo what the tree itself whispers in initials, dates and hearts: Remember us.

We were angry on this day.

We loved on this day.

We were alive this day.

We were here.

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ABOUT THE ARBORETUM

In the mid-1950s, then-secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Forest and Waters Samuel S. Lewis persuaded a farmer named George E. Stine to sell his arboretum to the state. Many of those trees are labeled at the top of Samuel S. Lewis State Park's popular hill overlooking the Susquehanna River.

Source: Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

CARVING TREES

The top-most layers of tree bark are alive. These are where the growth of the tree occurs. And where water and minerals tunnel upward, and sugars and other nutrients move downward. When carved, the tree does not heal the same way a person's skin might, it simply seals off the damaged area — which shuts down the ability for nutrients to move through that part of the tree. Carving also makes the tree more susceptible to insect infestations and wood-decaying organisms.

Source: <http://wvgardengate.homestead.com/>

CONTACT US

If you have carved in the European Beech in Samuel S. Lewis State Park, e-mail shaller@ydr.com to share your message and when you wrote on it. If it was a note of love or friendship, tell us if you are still in touch with the person or people whose initials or names you carved. Please include your name, age and the municipality in which you live.

ON THE WEB

Visit ydr.com/living to see an interactive presentation about the tree.