

Typical Elms of Yesterday

*The Dutch elm disease fungus, along with its dispersal agent, the European elm-bark beetle, arrived in North America in 1930, hidden under the bark of a shipment of European elm burl-logs that had been imported into the United States for the manufacture of veneer. The disease killed American elms so quickly and spread so rapidly that people were at first afraid that the American elm was headed for extinction. Fortunately, this dire prediction has not materialized. The fact is that the species still thrives and reproduces as a wild tree in wet woods and along stream banks throughout eastern North America. As a landscape plant, however, the American elm is close to extinction. Grand old specimens that were once an integral part of the New England landscape are mostly gone now. What was once the graceful giant of every town common, 4-5 feet in diameter, has become a not-so-common tree, not much more than 2 feet wide. Tragically, the Dutch elm disease kills a tree just as it is coming into the prime of its life. Indeed, a fanciful statement from Henry Ward Beecher, from a book entitled *Norwood*, published in New York in 1867 by Fords, Howard, and Hulbert, prophetically describes the situation in which many towns now find themselves as a result of Dutch elm disease: "New Haven without elms would be like Jupiter without a beard, or a lion shaved of his mane."*

Typical Elms and Other Trees of Massachusetts, *by L. L. Dame and Henry Brooks, with an introduction by Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, was printed in 1890 and still serves as a fitting tribute to the greatness of the American elm. The principal purpose of this beautiful book was to document not only the histories of the great elms, but also their sizes and shapes. After considerable soul-searching, the authors of the book decided to include in each photograph "two white wands, each five feet in length, put together in the form of a T," so that the dimensions of the trees could be accurately compared to one another. The device was the idea of Dr. Holmes, who was as insistent upon a fixed scale of measurement in 1890 as he had been in 1858, when he first presented the idea for the book in his column in Atlantic Monthly, "The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table":*

— *I wish somebody would get up the following work: —*

SYLVA NOVANGLICA

Photographs of New England Elms and Other Trees, taken upon the Same Scale of Magnitude. With Letter-Press Descriptions, by a Distinguished Literary Gentleman.

Boston: _____ & Co., 185_____



The Rugg Elm at Framingham, Massachusetts. This unusual tree, showing what is known as the oak-tree shape, is 70 feet tall with a crown spread of 145 feet. Photo by E. A. Richardson.

Typical Elms is notable not only as the fulfillment of Holmes' inspiration, but also for the quality of the photographs and the deep affection that the authors held for the trees they described. The data they present are unique and irreplaceable, given that the elms of today will never match those of yesterday. It is particularly interesting to note that even before the arrival of the Dutch elm disease, the American elm was not considered an exceptionally long-lived tree. According to Dame, the tree's great size was achieved more by virtue of its rapid growth than by its longevity.

Here, then, is an excerpt from Typical Elms, portraying the American elm, at the height of its glory.

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