

Requiem for a Cork Tree

Peter Del Tredici

Around two o'clock on the afternoon of Thursday, 28 September 1995, one of the best loved trees at the Arnold Arboretum died—the old Amur cork tree, *Phellodendron amurense*, which grew along Meadow Road.

It died as it lived, giving of itself freely to an adoring public: a group of twenty-two schoolchildren from the Winsor School in Boston were perched in the tree, posing for a photograph, when the weight of the group caused the tree to crack audibly and collapse. The children hastily climbed down, with no one suffering injury.

Without a doubt it was the most photographed tree in the Arboretum, and the most loved. In fact, it was loved to death. The tree had been in a slow state of decline, particularly over the last ten years, as a steady parade of trampling feet compacted the soil around its base, smothering its roots, and as children and adults of all ages climbed among its low, spreading limbs. Those pressures simply compounded the health problems that are normal for a tree that is over one-hundred-and-twenty years old. Over the years, the Arboretum staff had tried various techniques to keep the public out of the tree but found none that could overcome its sheer magnetism—the irresistible urge it inspired to go up and touch the soft bark that had been rubbed to a smooth polish by countless generations of Boston children. So the decision was made to let the cork tree die as gracefully as possible. It became the only tree in the Arboretum that people were “allowed” to climb.

When the end finally came, the tree was clearly on its last legs. Every year for the last ten



Phellodendron amurense, AA #143-A, age 121 On 29 September 1995, the day after the “accident,” the massive climbing limb is on the ground

years, Arboretum pruners had had to remove dead branches from the tree, making it ever thinner and weaker. The low, spreading limb, where all the children perched, had descended from four feet above the ground in 1983 to only two feet in 1995. This past summer’s drought, bringing forty straight days without rain, was just one more problem for the tree to cope with.

The cork tree had an altogether remarkable history. It arrived in Boston as a seed from the Imperial Botanic Garden in Saint Petersburg, Russia, on September 14, 1874, just two years after the Arboretum was founded. It was assigned the accession number 143-A, indicating it was the one-hundred-and-forty-third tree to be acquired by the Arboretum and very likely one of the first trees planted on the grounds.

E. H. WILSON



In the prime of life in April 1924, at age fifty, the cork tree's broad, spreading crown is fully formed. Obviously, children have not yet started to climb among the branches.

WORCESTER TELEGRAPH



In July 1946, at age seventy-two, a tradition of photographing the tree with children is beginning to emerge and the cork tree's lower limb is adding girth.

When death finally came, at the hands of its friends, it had passed its one-hundred-and-twenty-first birthday only two weeks before.

One of the interesting things about cork trees is that they are dioecious, meaning there are separate male and female individuals. Our beloved specimen was a male. Despite its common name and the corky feel of its bark, *Phellodendron amurense* is not the source of commercial cork used for wine bottles and bulletin boards. (That product comes from a species of oak that grows in the Mediterranean region, *Quercus suber*.) The specific name, *amurense*, refers to the tree's origin in the Amur River Valley of Manchuria, a region with very severe winters. Many other plants from this region are growing well at the Arboretum and seem particularly well adapted to the rigorous climate of New England.



By 1988, one of the cork tree's lower limbs has been removed and children are clearly comfortable climbing along its spreading limbs.

U.S. POSTAL SERVICE STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION (Required by 39 U.S.C. 3685)

1A, Title of publication *Arnoldia* 1B, Publication number 00042633. 2, Date of filing 27 Sept 1995 3, Frequency of issue Quarterly 3A, Number of issues published annually 4 3B, Annual subscription price \$20 00 domestic, \$25 00 foreign 4, Complete mailing address of known office of publication Arnold Arboretum, 125 Arborway, Jamaica Plain, Suffolk County, MA 02130-3519 5, Complete mailing address of the headquarters of general business offices of the publisher Arnold Arboretum, 125 Arborway, Jamaica Plain, Suffolk County, MA 02130-3519 6, Full names of the publisher Arnold Arboretum, 125 Arborway, Jamaica Plain, Suffolk County, MA 02130-3519 6, Full names and complete mailing address of publisher, editor, and managing editor Arnold Arboretum, 125 Arborway, Jamaica Plain, Suffolk County, MA 02130-3519, publisher, Karen Madsen, Arnold Arboretum, 125 Arborway, Jamaica Plain, MA 02130-3519, editor 7, Owner. The Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University, 125 Arborway, Jamaica Plain, MA 02130-3519 8, Known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities none 9, The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes have not changed during the preceding 12 months 10, Extent and nature of circulation A, Total number of copies Average number of copies of each issue during preceding 12 months 4,531 Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date 4,500 B, Paid and/or requested circulation 1, Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, and counter sales Average number of copies of each issue during preceding 12 months none Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date none 2, Mail subscription Average number of copies of each issue during preceding 12 months 3,264 Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date 3,341 C, Total paid and/or requested circulation Average number of copies of each issue during preceding 12 months 3,264 Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 3,341 D, Free distribution by mail, carrier, or other means (samples, complimentary, and other free copies) Average number of copies of each issue during preceding 12 months 105 Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date 180 E, Total distribution Average number of copies of each issue during preceding 12 months 3,584 Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date 3,566 F, Copies not distributed 1, Office use, leftovers, spoiled Average number of copies of each issue during preceding 12 months 947 Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date 934 2, Return from news agents Average number of copies of each issue during preceding 12 months none Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date none G, Total Average number of copies of each issue during preceding 12 months 4,531 Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date 4,500 11, I certify that the statements made by me are correct and complete Karen Madsen, Editor