

# Tale of the Ancient Oak

By

Edward F. Dickinson

## Prelude

Some centuries ago, a wood  
Rose in primeval solitude  
Save where a dusky form passed by  
His foe to meet, or game to spy:  
Wide through the forest and around  
Was Savage home and Primal Ground.  
Empires might rise across the sea -  
Or kingdoms fall - no history  
Held substance for the Western wood  
Where White Man never yet had stood.  
Waiting Columbus' grand event,  
Virgin was Western Continent!  
So waiting was our Northern Land  
Till Mayflower touched on Plymouth sand.  
What happened thence, it well might be  
Told in the story of a tree;  
An Oak still living in our town

Through centuries has it looked down

On forest life and wilderness -

On Red Man's skins, and English dress.

As now to tell its story, bent,

List to our Oldest Resident!

'Twas in the days now long bespoke

An acorn dropped from parent oak;

Nor was it long upon the ground

Ere darting squirrel it had found

Who dug for it earth pocket, rude

To deep his store of winter food;

And, had his purpose fully run,

This tale had ended, ere begun;

But, as the evening sun was low

He fell before an Indian bow.

So stayed the acorn in its mould -

To grow an Oak, whose story, told

Will of the townland's tale hold key

Through many a changing century.

### The Tree's Tale

When springtime burst my garments out,

I cracked the ground - a growing sprout -

To share with all rare things of earth

The wondrous mystery of birth.  
I felt the touch of summer breeze -  
I saw around great boles of trees:  
Through leafage came warm rays of sun -  
While showers to aid my growth begun:  
Though much I feared some strolling foot  
Might find - and crush - my feeble root.  
But fortune helped my early growth,  
And infant days went on to youth.  
Enlarging yearly in the wood,  
With earthy mould my native food;  
Each springtime gave me leafy suit -  
A taller trunk and deeper root.  
I was the forest's child, although  
With every year to mount and grow;  
And - through the oaks - there went a call  
'Twas writ, "I should outlive them all" - -  
That Winter's cold and Summer's sun  
For me in centuries should run.  
At length, as fifty years had won  
My top was nearer to the sun -  
My acorns dropped in autumn breeze  
To grow as "children of the trees."

I was a friend to deer and bird -  
And many a Savage cry I've heard  
As victims of his cruel bow  
In forest shades have fallen low;  
While deer, and bear, and dusky face  
Have sought my shelter from the chase.  
  
The Indian youth oft found a mark  
For arrows, in my sturdy bark!  
A hundred years! Vain thoughts arise!  
  
My head is nearest to the skies  
Of all my kindred of the wood -  
And girth I have in amplitude.  
  
With looks about, my vision sees  
New smoke come curling through the trees!  
And what is this that meets my sight?  
A face, unpainted, clear and white!  
Before his axe, trees meet their doom -  
Whose trunks, nearby, have made his home.  
  
Strange people, these, from o'er the sea  
(This tale the Red Man Tells to me) -  
Speak they of sails - of ships they charter -  
To us who know but Concord's water!  
New dress - new ways - and fair of skin -

This stranger comes, new home to win:

Before his axe, the forest yields,

To give him acreage in fields.

That he may grow a store of wheat,

(A kind of food his people eat) -

And give his animals (new found)

Called horses-cows-their pasture ground

Each year fast goes our woodland peace;

As homes are built, and farms increase-

While wigwams fade- and Indian braves

Fight for their hunting grounds, and graves.

Another sum of years has won -

My neighbor forest trees have gone;

And I - of years, in longer span -

See now another world, and plan.

Before me runs a rural road,

Where goes the ox team with its load;

From scores of hearth fires curls the smoke

Where once the woodland echoes woke.

About the hillside that I crown

Is the beginning of a town -

With roads - rude houses - and consent

To Charter for Town Government:

Proud date town fold may keep alive - -  
Birth year of Sixteen fifty-five!  
  
Upon the green, a church appears,  
Built by God-fearing pioneers;  
And only they may cast a vote  
For public ends, who show by note  
That they (with mind on Heavenly cares)  
Are fit to act in Town Affairs.  
  
For years a hundred more, I thrive!  
'Tis Seventeen Hundred Fifty five.  
  
The town is now a Century old  
Whose early story I have told.  
  
The White Man's firesides now replace  
The wigwam - and a fading race.  
  
No longer does the council fire  
Throw on my limbs its ruddy flare!  
  
The wolf has vanished, with the wood  
That long my near associate stood!  
  
The Concord is by bridges spanned;  
Paths change to roads, on every hand.  
  
Where once right shadows found their shrine  
The glows of blazing hearth fires shine:  
The low of cattle is around -

The axe, a most familiar sound.

The plough, a virgin soil has rent

For conquest of a continent!

I never thought such change could be

As this that all around I see -

That - forest born - I should look down

Upon a staid New England town -

And see the pale face rule and bless

My birthplace in the wilderness - -

Whose name (now changed from Indian mien)

To Billerica - from Shawshin -

(In honor of an English town)

Has even now unique renown

In that name no other mates

Within the whole United States!

Another score of years has rolled,

And strong I stand 'tho growing old!

More is my height, and more my girth -

An oak of age - an oak of worth!

I've further store of history

And honors, fine, have come to me!

But what this stir - this loud alarm -

That moves each Middlesex heart and farm?

Armed figures pass me - and again!

It is the rallying Minute Men!

So war begins - each patriot son

Responds to call of Lexington!

Victorious peace! Now soon there calls

The hum of wheels by waterfalls:

Where grinding millstones used to be

Is seen the busy factory;

With homes of workers close beside

Where shafts are turned by Concord's tide.

When storms are due, it plainly tells

By sound of the North Village bells.

The Talbot and the Faulkner name,

With enterprise and civic aim

Have built a prosperous center, here,

Famed as a model, far and near!

Of all my days outstands there one,

When-'neath my limbs stood Washington!

As stop from Essex tour was made,

He rested here, in welcome shade!

To hold this story - as expressed -

I bear a Tablet on my breast

Which the B.H. Society

Has placed - for Washington, and me!

Now, threat of danger came to me

And to my thread of history!

A group of axe men were bespoke

To send to death "The village Oak."

To move a church from site below,

They said, "This tree will have to go."

Then, threatened by this fateful mien,

Squire Foster came upon the scene -

And - by his forceful language aided -

From their fell purpose, he dissuaded;

But words profane - from wrathful lip -

Lost him his choice for deaconship!

Another church on moving list -

(This time The Universalist)

Passed by - as later annals tell -

To rest near Lock on old Canal.

When churches walk up hill and down -

This surely is no static town!

One of our proudest years - we say -

Was that which saw across the way

The School - well named for Dr. Howe -

Who often passed beneath my bough.

A boon to me from roadside place is  
To daily note bright, youthful faces  
As mornings 'neath my shade they pass  
Intent on games, and rank and class.  
Of old, I've seen them come to well  
To fill, for school, the waterpail;  
And common cup to lips they'd raise  
In those pre-sanitary days.

The passing of the centuries  
Has brought me friends in other trees -  
As servers of the Town have made  
Plantings - for beauty and for shade  
Of ash, and elm, in ample store -  
With maple, linden, sycamore;  
But none such tribute can invoke  
As comes to me - The forest Oak!  
Fair fame, indeed, has B. in these -  
Our "Township Beautiful" in trees!  
If plantings new are made, anon  
They'll bless and shade when we are gone!

Now, eighteen fifty-five, adieu -  
For further tale I have in view!  
Farewell to romance of the past -

Welcome to new days, coming fast!

As nineteen thirty marks our rhyme.

It brings us to the present time.

And now a larger town, we see!

Three quarters of a century

Had favored buildings, amply planned -

Improvements new on every hand.

Where forest heard the call to arms,

Now, far outspread, are fertile farms.

Daily is call of factory bells -

The hammer of construction tells.

School-houses, new, make civic show -

And, soon as built, they overflow.

Staid churches, framed for social needs,

Are modernized in work and creeds.

Fair village homes, our hill-top crown

To indicate a thriving town;

Whose dwellings modern plans can show

With water, gas, and radio.

Where candles flared, electric light

Gives brilliancy to darkest night;

And distant friends as near, we own

So well connected by the 'phone!

Electric current - like a spook -  
Will heat, or cool, or sweep, or cook!  
You "touch the button" - that is all -  
To find ten servants at your call!  
Such changes modern days invoke!  
Strange telling for a primal oak!  
In 1880 could be seen  
The library upon the Green;  
Beyond - to serve the people's call -  
Is the new, spacious, brick Town Hall -  
The village civic plan, completing -  
Home of New England's famed Town Meeting!  
Good citizens, in brave array,  
Come here their civic dues to pay,  
In coat (or dress) Election Day.  
As acorn from the parent tree  
A new and larger oak may be,  
So, by same simile and rule,  
From old, has come the new Howe School.  
Off all the changes years may bring,  
Most marked are ways of traveling!  
In old, I've seen the bark canoe  
Paddled the Concord's waters through;

The pillioned horse - this seems a dream!

The mid-Colonial cattle team!

And next, the packet boats impel

Slow travel on the new canal.

The stage coach, with its horse relay,

Through dust and mud of old-time way,

Could make its fifty miles a day!

Now, used in Governor Talbot's days

Came easy, homely, one-horse chaise

With Main Street trains in Eighty-five

Soon, then electric cars arrive!

These traffic ways seemed strange, to me -

But stranger yet, were soon to be.

Congestion came upon my road -

The Buick, Chevrolet, and Ford -

New names! New power! This new machine

In colors blue, and black, and green, -

In multitudes went speeding by!

'Naught now remaining - but, to Fly!

From thought to deed - with wings outspread,

A strange bird circles near my head;

A humming sound comes from the sky

Where air-sailed ships may float and fly -

And there - my aging eyes before  
In cloudland, sails the Shenandoah!  
I've seen the men of "Sixty-One"  
Go South to answer Sumter's gun;  
And for the great war's sad mischance -  
Our boys go forth - to die in France.  
I've viewed the winding slow cortege -  
The homes (black draped for Lincoln's page).  
Armistice bells! - I've heard them ring -  
And notes of Christmas caroling.  
The car shop chimney's mark with smoke  
Where settler's home felt savage stroke;  
Where Old Town Hall -, chain stores enrank;  
In the Bruce Block, is modern bank.  
The Meeting House, thatch-roofed has now for heir  
Staid House of Worship, fronting on the square.  
The settlers' homes - built ere the Georgian dates -  
The Manning Manse now well commemorates!  
Now, motored Fire Department flies  
At call - to scene where danger lies;  
Swift, its response - by 'phone advised -  
O'er modern roads, macadamized.  
In years of conflagration's fame,

I've visioned smoke from Boston's flame -

The Chelsea's blaze - that naught could tame!

The ice storm wrecked my fellow's limb!

But little did I yield to him.

The wind has leveled - lightning struck -

The elements have run amuck;

While still erect, my sturdy head -

With all my generation, dead!

Protect me with an iron cuirass,

From cars that all too speedy pass, -

And I'll be hale, in trunk and bough,

To speak again - long years from now!

What tale new century may give,

I'll voice - in words to burn and live;

Tho' - for the story told again -

Another hand may hold the pen.

Fair may the New Day be, indeed!

Blessed with old faith, and service creed.

Another time! New century dress!

May they show progress, and success!

Man's days - or short, or long, may be -

But longer stands the oaken tree,

To hold scroll of history!

Now, with its story so bespoke,  
To silence came the Speaking Oak.

Edward Fowler Dickinson, 1934

[Back To Local History](#)