

LOOKING FOR HICKORIES

Rediscovering the Virtues of an American Icon

In my hometown of Three Rivers, Michigan, the school superintendent used to publish a newsletter called the *Hickory Stick*. It carried articles about field trips and science fairs, and the words *Hickory Stick* were written in letters that resembled Lincoln Logs.

During the mid-1980s, the newsletter's name was changed to the *Educator*. While the newer name sounds blandly institutional, it was an understandable concession to modern thinking. In American tradition, the hickory stick has long been associated with harsh discipline. Teachers once kept a hickory switch handy to whack the hands and backsides of errant pupils.

The hickory, of course, asked for none of this. Since we've put school-approved corporal punishment "behind" us, there's no need to further malign the tree's character. Our native hickory, from its versatile wood to its fiery gold autumn foliage, deserves a renewed sense of respect and affection. As for the rare flavor of hickory nuts—well, more on that momentarily.

In Michigan, there wouldn't even be hickories if the state line were located a few hundred miles north. Hickories grow across much of the United States and Mexico but reach the northern limits of their range in southern Michigan. The Lower Peninsula is home to four species: pignut, shagbark, shellbark, and bitternut.

Wherever it's found, the hickory is rugged through and through. Most prefer sandy or gravelly soil, the same dry terrain favored by black oak and black cherry. Even the hickory's oval leaves are tough

and leathery. When crumbled, they emit a spicy, peppery smell—no subtle fragrance here.

The bark is gray and smooth on saplings but forms loose strips and rough, interlacing ridges on mature trees. The shagbark hickory, as its name suggests, looks especially rustic and unkempt. Its bark curls away from the trunk in long strips that “look like they were left in the rain too long” in the words of Michigan naturalist John Eastman.

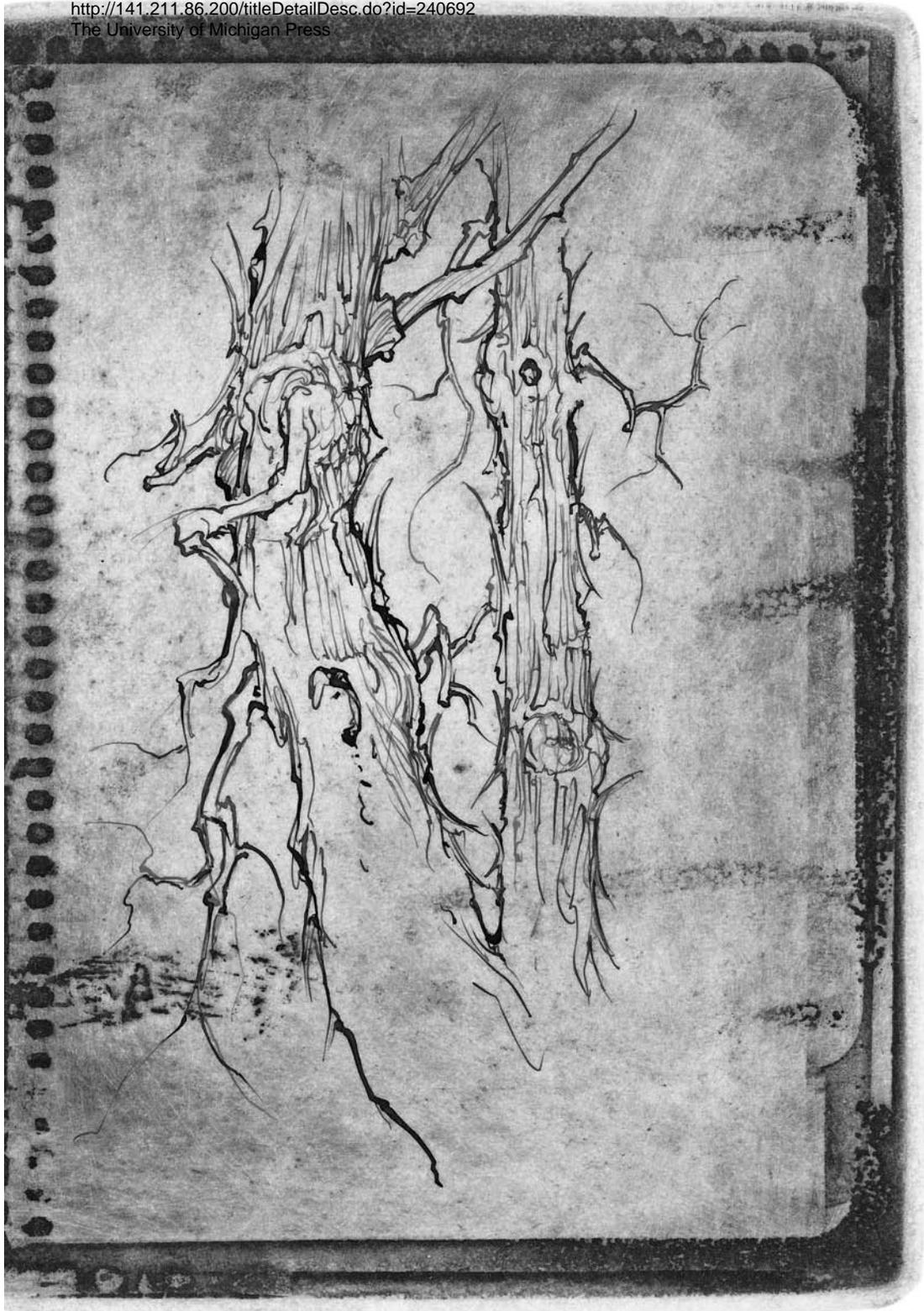
Given its robust form and function, it’s no wonder the hickory was once an American icon. And no one has described its mythic status better than the botanist and wordsmith Donald Culross Peattie.

To everyone with a feeling for things American, and for American history, the shagbark [hickory] seems like a symbol of the pioneer age, with its hard sinewy limbs and rude, shaggy coat, like the pioneer himself in fringed deerskin hunting shirt. And the roaring heat of its fire, the tang of its nuts—that wild manna that every autumn it once cast lavishly before the feet—stand for the days of forest abundance.

As for the hickory’s sinewy mettle, I once encountered it while I was clearing brush and stumbled backward into a two-inch-diameter sapling. The little tree shuddered with an audible hum. When I whacked it again, this time with my open palm, its trunk vibrated like an oversized tuning fork. It’s this resiliency that makes hickory such a popular choice for shovel, ax, and sledgehammer handles.

On a fall day a few years ago, my brother and I cut down a dead hickory in our woods along the Portage River in St. Joseph County. It was a golden November afternoon, unseasonably warm, and before long our boots were powdered with fragrant sawdust. This same aroma brings a sweet, tang to hickory-smoked meats and barbecue sauce. (Wood chips from the bitternut hickory—whose nuts are nearly inedible—are said to impart the best flavor.)

As I pushed a loaded wheelbarrow down the path to our pickup truck, I saw a few stray chunks of hickory firewood from last year’s cutting. They had already turned soft and soggy. Contrary as it may seem, the wood from this famously rugged tree rots quickly once in contact with soil, so we left these pieces for the ants and termites to



enjoy. You wouldn't want to use hickory for a fence or mailbox post. Osage orange would be the thing for that.

The tree we cut was about ten inches in diameter, and with a five-pound maul we easily split the lengths into halves and quarters for use in a fireplace. And for that hickory is hard to beat. Because the wood is so dense, a cord of dry hickory gives off as much heat as a ton of coal or two hundred gallons of number 2 fuel oil.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the only place for hickory lumber is in a tool shed or woodpile. Increasingly, as other hardwoods become more expensive, hickory is being used for furniture and kitchen cabinets. It has a close grain, a creamy beige hue, and a smattering of small, wavy knots that woodworkers call "bird peck." After seeing hickory consigned to ax handle status for so many years, it's nice to see the wood finely milled and polished, the way oak or cherry cabinets usually are.

Now, with regard to the nuts, we could still learn much from those spirited pioneer schoolkids who were reared, so to speak, in the days when virgin groves of hickories once stood near most midwestern farms and villages. What boys and girls once collected by the bushel for their autumn "nut crack" parties has now become a culinary rarity.

By coincidence, about a week after my brother and I cut up the hickory for firewood, I received a gourmet food catalog in the mail. Along with designer jams, preserves, and dried fruit, the catalog offered wild hickory nuts—\$6.95 for a four-ounce package. The price seemed outlandish, so I decided to harvest my own from beneath a fifty-foot tree that grows near our driveway.

That night, after three and a half hours of cracking and picking, I managed to glean a *single cup* of hickory nut meats. At that pace, I'd have to sell my nuts at about seventeen dollars per four-ounce package just to earn the minimum wage. Nonetheless, it was a peaceful way to pass an evening. I cracked and picked with an old plastic bowl on my lap while the film *Forrest Gump* played on television.

About 20 percent of the nuts had small holes the size of a pinhead. Inside these, there was usually a squirmy, white intruder. To paraphrase Forrest Gump, "Life is like a bowl of hickory nuts. You never know when you'll run into a big, fat worm."

The next night we were warmed inside and out by the hickory's bounty. We ate hickory nut cookies fresh from the oven (made from a recipe in the gourmet food catalog, thank-you) while an armload of hickory logs flared in the fireplace. The only thing better, it seems, would be a slice of fresh hickory nut pie. And that's ample enticement to pick another batch of nuts next year.

For all its charms, the hickory is in dire need of a marketing campaign. When I told friends and coworkers about the tasty cookies (alas, there were none left to share), they were surprised to hear that hickory nuts were so readily available. The gourmet food catalog—perhaps hoping to justify its high prices—described hickories as “living antiques that are very difficult to find.”

The truth is hickories are quite common across the Midwest. As with many native species, the tree goes unnoticed and unloved by an urbanized population. Each year tons of hickory nuts fall to the ground unheeded, like so many uncounted blessings. Or at least unheeded by humans. The nuts are an important food for turkeys, wood ducks, chipmunks, squirrels, and whatever those little white worms are.

Does a hickory grow in your yard? If so, consider yourself lucky. It's no doubt a living monument to the vanished woods that once occupied your property. The hickory's long taproot makes it difficult to transplant, so it's unlikely that a landscaper placed it there. Of course, if you're a patient person you can buy hickory saplings from a specialty nursery. You'll just need to wait twenty years for your tree to produce any nuts.

But think ahead to a fall evening when the grandkids stop by for their first plate of hickory nut cookies. Unaware of the hickory's tough love persona, maybe they'll someday find room for a tree in their yard—or at least in their heart.