

The Big Oak
by
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It was an ordinary day when I literally ran right past him. I took a few more crunchy strides through the leaves and then suddenly stopped. There was an emanating aura that caused me to pause and backtrack to where he was standing. "What an inspirational fellow you are," I murmured.

As I got to know him, I recognized that his legacy provided us with an interesting piece of our American heritage because he is truly a native American. I can only imagine the remarkable stories he has to tell. "Who were the first people he encountered?" I wondered.

One of the most generous of creatures, he has indiscriminately provided shelter for many over the years. A few birds and a grey squirrel seem to have a particular fondness of him currently. He is majestic, strong and proud yet so gentle and unselfish.

Today, he still brings a smile to many of us. Most people can't resist stopping, paying their respects and gazing at his magnificence. He still looks pretty impressive for an old guy. I'm not sure what his name is but since Richland Township owns him, I just call him Big Rich.

Sometimes its incredible to discover what nature treasures there are in your own backyard - literally. Remarkably, he was born just around the time the pilgrims entered our country. In case you haven't guessed, I am talking about the 370 year old white oak tree that lives on the back edge of Richland Township Community Park. Unknown to me until recently, Big Rich is just a short jog from my doorstep. It is believed that he is the 2nd oldest tree in Allegheny County.

Count me as one of those disinterested folks who didn't think much of the little "tree" arrows along the trails. "What's another tree," I asked myself as I trudged along. "I love nature but I'm an animal guy. Give me a dog, a horse, a rhino. How could a tree be exciting?" I wondered.

But when I saw this tree for the first time, I immediately knew what the fuss was about. "Wow, is that cool or what," I gasped to myself as I circled around Rich for the first time.

"A tree that looks at God all day, and lifts her leafy arms to pray." Remember that verse? You may have had to memorize that Joyce Kilmer poem in grade school. It's funny what you remember. I always thought that poem was a little corny but it began to resurface on my cranium as I marveled at Rich. When you meet a tree such as this, you quickly discover how Joyce found such inspiration.

Every morning for many years, the script has presumably been the same. The sun slowly rising through the branches greeting this elder statesman is awesome. His companions, the sky and earth come together to form a colossal canopy that surrounds another day. You forget whatever you were thinking about and you can't help but daydream happy thoughts.

One neat thing about Big Rich is he still resides in woods that probably don't look much different than four centuries ago. The Richland Township Community Park trails are wonderful, one of the best kept secrets in the North Hills.

In 1998 (the placard reads), Ryan Herzing put together a project commemorating the tree. He cleared a little path and constructed a split rail fence just off the trail surrounding the tree as his effort for Troop 150. Ryan, hats off to you for this wonderful effort. You've given many of us something extra to be proud of in this area. Today my wife and I appreciate this project every time we zip through the park on our running excursions.

I have no doubt there are other treasures waiting that I zip past in my hurry to get to those urgent matters that fill my days. But noticing the important things is a lot more fun than rushing to those urgent matters. Visiting Big Rich is now on my list of important items that I must accomplish each weekend. "I think I shall never see a poem lovely as a tree."



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