

FOREWORD

My family and I have just filled our woodshed with white oak. The good oak came from a 208-year-old witness tree on the ridge above our Upper Iowa River valley farm. What an amazing transformation of land and culture that tree lived through before it died a couple years ago.

Our oak began life at a time when passenger pigeons were so abundant that they darkened the sky during their autumn migrations. We're told that the pigeons would engorge themselves with acorns and then regurgitate them as they roosted at night. Was our oak the result of one of those migratory dispersals?

Our oak was forty-two years old when Nathan Boone, son of Daniel, surveyed the Upper Iowa River and laid out a territory called the Neutral Ground that became a temporary home for the Winnebago (Ho-Chunk) Indians. It wasn't long, however, before a Yankee born in New York in 1790, the same year as our oak, laid claim to the land – and our farm was born.

During the next fifty years our oak witnessed perhaps the most rapid transformation of any landscape in the history of the world. Iowa in the 1840s consisted of 28 million acres of tallgrass prairie interspersed with large and small wetlands and 7 million acres of forest. By 1900 almost all of the prairie was replaced by 200,000 farms. The wetlands were sucked dry by hundreds of thousands of miles of drain tile, and more than two-thirds of the forests were converted to firewood, railroad ties, fence posts, houses, and barns.

By the time our oak reached middle age, Iowa's last mountain lion, bison, black bear, elk, wolf, whooping crane, sandhill crane, and trumpeter swan had disappeared. In 1914 the last of the passenger pigeons, surrogate parents of oaks, died in a Cincinnati zoo.

As the twentieth century began, our oak looked down over the valley to see Iowa's first hydroelectric plant light up the night sky. That event also marked the last time northern pike swam freely from the Mississippi up past our farm. Iowa was growing richer in power, people, railroads, and farms but inversely poorer in things natural, wild, and free.

The winds of the next quarter-century must have made our oak shudder with sadness. Farm fields grew smaller as gullies divided them into ever-smaller pieces. Even deer, turkey, and beaver disappeared. Soil instead

of passenger pigeons darkened Iowa's sky and replaced the pike and other species in our rivers and streams.

During the last seventy years of our oak's life, Iowa began to grow up and settle down, and Iowans' understanding of their place in the land community began to mature. Forests, parks, and wildlife refuges were established. The soil conservation movement began. The river became cleaner as Iowans took more responsibility for their personal and community behavior. Deer, turkey, beaver, otters, eagles, sandhill cranes, and trumpeter swans returned.

Our oak lived through an amazing era in Iowa's history. It put down deeper roots, lifted its arms higher, and endured more Iowa weather than any of us or our families can claim. Although it no longer stands tall above our river valley, its progeny and the land community it belonged to live on. We merge with its story as we live out our lives.

Iowa – Portrait of the Land is also a story about this land we call Iowa and our place in it. It has been written to encourage you to think about what our oak witnessed and about how we've come to be what we are today. But even more importantly, it has been written to start you thinking about what kind of land our oak's offspring will witness. That will be up to you.

It is now your turn to help paint our portrait on the land. You will add color every day as you make personal and community decisions on how you live. We at the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, along with the many other conservation-minded organizations and individuals across our state, hope you will help paint a landscape in which our children and all of creation can thrive.

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