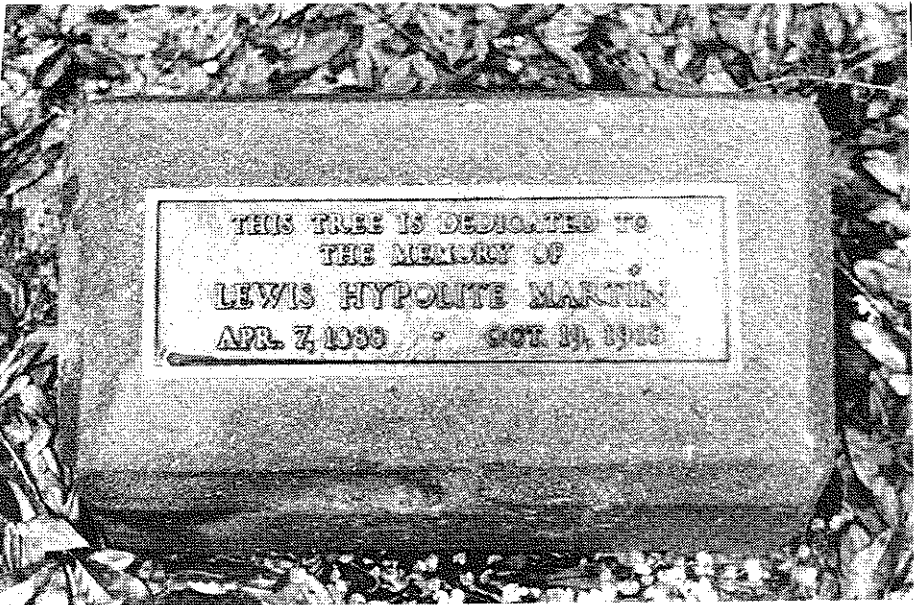


APPENDIX A

Memorial Oak Grove Revisited: 1926-1982



A marker in Memorial Oak Grove commemorating a former Louisiana State University student who gave his life in the service of his country in World War I

Landmarks often lose their distinctiveness and, after awhile, become part of the general scenery. Quite literally, that has been the fate of Memorial Oak Grove. Its stately trees are so woven into the lush florae and foliage of the LSU campus that they stand out neither in form nor arrangement. It is difficult to see those trees for the forest--unless one knows how they differ from all other trees and pauses to meditate upon that difference. Not many people do, anymore.

Literature on the history of the Grove is meager and contradictory. What is available proceeds from the dedication in 1926 through the 1960's in a journalistic fashion and recycles material first published fifty-odd years ago. The paucity of detailed records and memoirs is a serious handicap to the investigator, but there is sufficient information to support a synthesis that does not stray too far beyond the borders of non-fiction. There are certain basic questions one might raise on this topic: From what sources did the notion of creating a special Grove emanate? How did the project unfold? Are there any inaccuracies or confusions that should be addressed before we take many more steps into the future, dragging the Grove behind us? Along the way I will inject several ideas that are somewhat speculative but lend a flourish to the story. I would not want to reduce this brief essay to the level of "The Curious Case of the

Shifting Quercus virginiana"* but it does have its arcane aspects.

* * *

I suspect LSU's Oak Grove manifested from a fusion of two tributaries in American thought: the impulse to recognize heroic acts, and the adoption of trees as symbols of life and re-birth.

With reference to the former, one need only recall how many statues, cannons, arches, tablets, gateways, and assorted stoneworks dotted the national landscape to understand how important the commemoration of heroism was to us between 1865 and 1930. If it is true, as Charles Thwing wrote in 1920, that "The founding of a memorial in recognition of great deeds is almost instinctive to man," then we responded to that instinct regularly after the Civil War. And, since we often defined "great deeds" in military terms, many memorials were related directly to the wars of 1861-65, 1898, and 1917-18. For nearly sixty years powerful tides of idealism and (sometimes mawkish) nostalgia tugged at the public psyche and found material expression in memorials to soldiers and sailors who died in the latest righteous conflict. From Professor Thwing's remarks we learn about the emotional content of that period and, also, about the characteristics of the perfect memorial:

* Live oak.

It should touch the imagination, move the sense of the poetic, and incarnate in the visible and the tangible the highest aspirations of the human spirit... Every noble feeling should be stirred by its vision or recollection. It should be a permanent festival of the dead. It should with ever increasing force appeal to the eternal and the universal in the human soul.

That was expecting quite a bit of the average memorial, and very few met those lofty standards. But the intentions of the planners and builders cannot be faulted. They were not concerned so much with contributing to the advancement of art as they were with making a permanent statement--forging a public prayer, if you will. And that is what they did in hamlets, towns, cities, and on college campuses across the length and breadth of the country they loved so much. By 1918, then, the practice of memorialization was a veritable tradition. It is fair to say that it meant much more to Americans of that innocent era than it does to their contemporary descendants, many of whom view the erection of memorials with cynicism. There is no satisfactory way to communicate to the citizen of the 1980's how deeply, genuinely, and lastingly his or her ancestors responded to the loss of just one soldier or sailor who went off to war and failed to return. The mass annihilations of the past forty years have been so desensitizing that a single death is little more than a by-product of violence so vast and systematic that we cannot personalize it. Two

things, at least, are certain: heroism of the military sort is no longer lavished with the praise and respect of yore, and every proposal for a memorial will be accompanied by an exhaustive, bitter debate.

Six decades ago, Thwing shows us, it was still a "spiritual" issue. American college and university officials were compelled to face the question of appropriate memorials as early as the winter of 1917-18. Casualty reports could not be ignored. Alma Mater readied herself to honor her foster sons' sacrifices when the full extent of their martyrdom became known. Many of the libraries, fountains, stadiums, auditoriums, and dormitories she erected in their names in the 1920's are still in use today. Do we ever wonder why? It is more than superb craftsmanship, and clearly more than tender care over the decades. Those edifices lasted because, mirabile dictu, those who designed them truly believed the structures were being built "for the ages," that they would stand forever as testimonies to the "highest aspirations of the human spirit," that the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse would never again ride through the planet's bloodstained skies, and that the students and alumni who fell in The Great War had paid off the Devil's bill in full, for each one of us. All the more reason why their memorials should be imposing, classical of line, centrally located, and impervious to decay. If there were to be no more global wars, should not the last, great memorials be as glorious as the memory of the men who died so we might secure peace on earth?

Given her history as a military institution, LSU was more determined than most universities to properly memorialize her fallen servicemen. No one doubted for a moment that it was the logical, moral thing to do. That conviction lay behind the formation of the Alumni Memorial committee in June 1919, but a plan of action awaited the establishment of the David J. Ewing Post 58 of the American Legion on campus in April 1920. The memorial project was intended to produce three tangible results: a structure, or part of a structure (the Memorial Tower, eventually), bronze tableture inscribed with names of Louisiana's 1,474 war dead, and a war museum. It took thirteen years to attain those objectives. Extant records do not refer to a grove as one of the components of the original plan, nor does the subject arise in the private or public letters of individuals closely associated with the project. One is tempted to conclude that the idea developed rather spontaneously in 1925 when the configuration of LSU's new campus was unmistakable.* But why, in view of the other

*Mr. George F. Matthes believes this may be the case. The basic idea may have been first advanced in 1924 by Mr. Upshur P. Breazeale of Natchitoches, however, who sent to President Boyd a number of "little oaks" and suggested they be planted somewhere on the new campus to honor "all Louisiana boys" who died in the war. On March 2, 1926, Breazeale wrote Boyd to ask him what happened to the oaks he sent. "Did they die, too?" he wondered.

honors planned for the State's war dead, a fourth gesture in the form of a memorial grove? There are a number of likely reasons, the first of which takes us back once more to the pre-war generation.

The idea of deploying trees in rows or clusters to commemorate war deaths was fairly novel in the 1920's, but well before then the tree began to assume an esoteric significance that exceeded what one might call "common nature reverence." In Nebraska in 1874 residents took up the habit of selecting one day per year to plant trees. Minnesota and Michigan followed suit two years later. By 1889 thirty-two of the forty-two states had adopted the practice. As a rule such events were accompanied by singing, prayer, poetry readings, other incantations. Ceremonies became increasingly elaborate as the idea spread and often hovered close to being religious in tone and flavor. In the 1890's several interesting things happened to what began as a simple, charming, rural exercise devoid of any political or literary pretensions. This uncomplicated celebration of the tree was swept up in the Progressive Movement, in which "conservation" was a secondary but alluring theme. Reformers devoted to protecting the nation's resources from total ingestion by the industrial Behemoth focused on the tree as the symbol of everything they were seeking fervently to preserve.

Infused with ideological sap, the tree-planting ritual picked up momentum. Protective societies were organized around the principle that conservationism began at home and in the school. Heavy pressure to be tree-conscious was brought to bear upon pupils via the "educating influence" of the classroom teacher. Arbor Day, by 1909 being observed in every state every April, was elevated to the status of a major holiday. Special programs were conducted in schools throughout the nation. The movement's foremost advocate, President Theodore Roosevelt, wrote an open letter (April 15, 1907) to American school children, telling them that truly good citizens cultivate a lifelong respect for trees and strive "to preserve our forests." By 1910 a tree was no longer just a tree, it was a politicized object well on its way toward beatification. To qualify for further exultation the tree had only to be embraced by poets.

Poets who wrote about trees prior to the Progressive Era (Bryant, Emerson, Thoreau, and countless anonymous scribes) were resurrected, blended with nouveau nature poets (Edith Thomas, Josephine Peabody, Madison Cawein, Ella Wilcox, and others), published in rhapsodic anthologies dedicated to the sylvan muses, and offered up to an insatiable public. Here and there one could even find "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing" by Walt Whitman, who died (1892) as the new group of "versifiers" were rising to prominence. Arbormania reached its lyrical summit just before the United States went to

war. Tree-worship was pushed to new heights by a poet who did not know one tree from another, Alfred Joyce Kilmer (1886-1918). In February, 1913 he jotted down the first two lines of a work that would overshadow all his other literary achievements: "I think that I shall never see/ A poem lovely as a tree." Published in Poetry magazine later that year, "Trees" was a sensation by 1914 and a popular classic by 1920. No other piece on the same subject has received such universal exposure.

Kilmer enlisted in the Army in 1917 and was sent to France with the Rainbow Division. On July 30, 1918 Sergeant Kilmer was killed in action on the Western Front. His body was interred in the Oise-Aisne military cemetery, but his memory was borne forward by the American people on the wings of his supreme sacrifice and his best-known poem, "Trees". At this junction an extraordinary metamorphosis occurred which I will try not to overdramatize. Within a few months of his death, and for twenty years to come, Kilmer became, to many Americans and most veterans, the personification of what The Great War was supposed to signify. He soon was two symbols in one: the heroic soldier-poet who gave his all in the late war, and the author of a "poem of worship" to the Lord's masterpiece, the tree. Kilmer's poem, Russel Nye informs us, "somehow in the public mind became a part of the metaphoric meaning of the poet at war." Military bravery and poetic idealism merged in the posthumous Kilmer and provided us with the positive symbol we needed to justify

the cost of war. By 1919 the two Kilmers overlapped so perfectly that it was impossible to think of him any longer as either a soldier or a poet.

For two decades following the Armistice Kilmer's poem (which was set to music in 1922) was sung by children and adults alike at tree-planting ceremonies, many of which were conducted on November 11 each year. The American Legion adopted Kilmer as one of its special patriotic properties. Scores of Legion posts were named for him. "Trees" was featured on the cover of the March 10, 1922, edition of the American Legion Weekly. There is no doubt that LSU's Legionnaires knew about Kilmer and were appreciative of his unique role as a symbol of their generation. An entire bronze plaque in the rotunda of the Memorial Tower is filled with an excerpt from his war poem "Rouge Bouquet" (1918).*

Clearly, the idea of creating a grove as a means of honoring the war dead was afforded new significance and

*On another tablet in the rotunda there is a portion of John McCrae's poem, "In Flanders Field," inscribed. McCrae (1872-1918) was a Canadian physician who died of pneumonia while commanding the British military hospital at Boulogne, France. "In Flanders Field" was the most famous poem of the war, rivaled only by Alan Seeger's "Rendevous." To most Americans of that era Rupert Brooke, McCrae, Seeger, and Kilmer were the major war poets (of the heroic school) and their works were widely quoted during and after the war.

fresh impetus by the First World War. Trees were not only a continuing hallmark of the conservationist movement after 1918, they were also inspirational tokens of remembrance from a war-saturated generation to its departed sons. Joyce Kilmer's influence may not have been a causal one, but it was critical in that it impacted the public imagination on an unprecedented scale. "Poems are made by fools like me/ But only God can make a tree," Kilmer told us. All the ingredients of the new Zeitgeist were present: war nostalgia, heroism, the Deity, humility, the tree as life and (with each planting) regeneration--the eternal mosaic that appealed so much to Kilmer's contemporaries. With each passing year the grove concept grew more popular. It held considerable attraction for authorities at American colleges. As early as the spring of 1919 the University of New Hampshire planted a cluster of trees in memory of its eighteen fallen students.

* * *

In part the foregoing responds to the question: From what sources did the notion of an Oak Grove emanate? It gives rise to another, however: Why was a grove not included in the original memorial project? Why does it smack of an afterthought rather than a predisposition? Certainly the LSU Legionnaires were aware of the grove movement in 1920.

The most plausible explanation is that the Legion post did not feel the need to devise a fourth memorial until it became obvious that no feature of the new LSU campus was going to be reserved exclusively for the University's war dead. The Tower, the tablets, and the museum were destined to remind us of Louisiana's collective sacrifice to the gods of war. Even Upshur Breazeale's gesture in 1924, which President Boyd may have mentioned to LSU's Legionnaires, was intended to honor "all Louisiana boys" rather than LSU's boys alone. Should not a fitting tribute to the University's deceased be prepared? What legacy could be left that spoke only of LSU's personal losses? What sort of endowment would blend with the physical configurations of the South Baton Rouge campus? A memorial grove, perhaps? And what species of tree would be suited to the underlying purpose? The durable, majestic oak. As Washington Irving wrote many years before, "He who plants an oak looks forward to future ages, and plants for posterity."

Early in 1926 the stage was set for action. The problems to be dealt with were: the location of the grove, the procurement of infant oaks, the identification of the LSU men to be honored, and the scheduling of a ceremony. Permission to establish a grove in a natural depression southeast of the Memorial Tower was granted by LSU officials. It was a visible, accessible site that would someday enhance the appearance of the grounds. The

oak saplings were donated by a well-known area horticulturist Edward A. McIlhenny (1872-1949), who was already under contract to LSU to attend to the beautification of the evolving campus. With assistance from the Forestry faculty and other interested parties a blueprint for the design of the grove and the exact placement of trees was drawn up and entrusted to Major Perry Cole, founder and past commander of Ewing Post 58. The plan called for the installation of bronze plaques at the base of each tree but this was left undone until December 18, 1941.

The number of oaks was to be determined by the number of LSU men who did not survive the war, plus an additional tree for the Unknown Soldier (who was laid to rest in Arlington Cemetery in 1921). Major Cole's list of the deceased contained thirty names. There would be thirty-one trees in all. A brass nameplate was to be affixed to each tree. On Friday, March 12, 1926 at 3:30 P.M. the formal dedication was held. President Boyd, local Legionnaires, ROTC representatives, and other dignitaries watched solemnly as the Memorial Oak Grove was christened. Certainly no one present was conscious of the incredible coincidence in which they were participating that afternoon. On that very date eight years earlier, March 12, 1918, Joyce Kilmer read aloud over the earthen tomb of twenty-three of his buddies a poem he completed the previous night, "Rouge Bouquet." Five lines from that poem were chosen by LSU's Legionnaires for commitment to bronze and placement on the south wall of the Tower rotunda in 1932.

Preparing an accurate roster of LSU's war dead evidently created no problem for Major Cole, whose 1926 list remains the touchstone for the researcher. There are several interesting twists to this aspect of the Oak Grove story that deserve to be reviewed. One nagging question over the years has been: How many trees and plaques are there in the Grove--twenty-nine, thirty, thirty-one, or thirty-two? Astonishing as it may seem each number has been reported as the definitive count in sundry sources between 1926 and 1961. Perhaps it is time to resolve this issue.

The initial attempt to identify LSU's war dead was made by the Reveille in its "Memorial Edition" of June 6, 1919. There were twenty-five obituaries and twenty-four photographs. It was too soon after the Armistice to expect that list to be final, of course. In the January 9, 1920 Reveille a revision showed twenty-nine names. One man who was on the 1919 roster was missing; one who eventually made it to the Grove was on neither list; and a third man, Wear F. Milling, who wafted in and out of Oak Grove tabulations for forty years, made his debut.

Perry Cole side-stepped the Reveille compilations in 1926 and went directly to the "former student" cards in the Registrar's Office. He brought out thirty names and based the assignment of trees on those findings. It appears that he did not come away with the name of Wear Milling, whose card is now (and probably was then, from the look of it) very much among the cards in the master

file. Milling was qualified for memorialization by virtue of his death while serving as an officer in the aviation corps. The Grove dedication report published in the March 13, 1926 Reveille cited thirty names, Milling's among them, but one has to be cautious about accepting that article as fact. One man who made previous Reveille listings was omitted and Alan L. Melton's name was given as "Allen D. Norton." Shortly after the Grove ceremony the March, 1926 issue of the LSU Alumni News published the honorees' names. Thirty-one were listed, including Milling. If this were taken at face value there should have been thirty-two trees, allowing for the extra oak for the Unknown Soldier.

A month thereafter the "dedication" edition of the Baton Rouge State-Times (April 30, 1926) printed a piece on the Grove, presenting twenty-nine names. It excluded John Joseph and Charles Singletary and referred to William Morgan incorrectly as "William Martin." Wear Milling was continued. Whether or not what happened next is in some way crucial to understanding the discrepancies in names of honorees and numbers of trees over the years I cannot say, but it must be acknowledged. On Saturday, September 11, 1926 one of the young oaks was cut down by the blades of a mule-driven mowing machine. We know from the text of a letter from Dean W.R. Dodson to President Boyd that the casualty was the tree reserved for the Unknown Soldier. What we do not know is whether it was replaced--or if there was an exchange of nameplates on the remaining trees but no new planting of a substitute.

Fifteen years later the Reveille for December 19, 1941, taking cognizance of an event of the previous day, noted that thirty-two plaques were embedded at the feet of the oaks but did not refer by name to the thirty-one LSU men so honored. On May 25, 1945 the Reveille spoke of twenty-nine men, leaving William Morgan and John Joseph off its list. Eight years pursuant to that report the Reveille of February 17, 1953 returned to the Grove theme, gave twenty-nine names, and eliminated, this time, Daniel Ory and Stuart Simonton (whom the March 13, 1926 Reveille also omitted). Finally, on March 12, 1961, the Grove's thirty-fifth anniversary, the Baton Rouge Morning Advocate published an honor roll ostensibly drawn from Perry Cole's 1926 findings. There were thirty names--but Wear Milling of Franklin, Louisiana, was absent from the paper's rendition. He is not represented in the Grove, either. Was he ever there? If so, what befell his tree and plaque? How could his name appear consistently for over forty years in every written report on the Grove and yet seem to have been excluded from the official 1926 list upon which the installations were predicated? It is puzzling. In any event, we shall recognize Lt. Milling here and ask that his spirit rest in peace.

The question of numbers arose in the Morning Advocate article as well. A "recent count," by whom the paper did not say, revealed that, Cole's blueprint notwithstanding, there were only thirty trees, not thirty-one. Was there a tree missing? A flaw in the

original calculation? Did the anonymous counter miscount? Few people were sufficiently aware of the numerical variations over the decades to ask for closure, so the refraction was perpetuated for another twenty years. Certainly we owe it to those courageous men in whose names the trees were planted to settle their accounts with Clio once and for all. There are, in fact, thirty-one Memorial Oaks standing to the east and to the south of LSU's Union Building, arranged in an alphabetic horseshoe with "A" to the west and "W" to the east. There is one tree for the Unknown Soldier and thirty for LSU's dead, just as the 1926 scheme intended, and a plaque at the base of each tree. And now, on to a more important dimension of the Oak Grove story.

Who were these crusaders? What can be said of them as a band of brothers who share in common Louisiana, LSU, death in war, and the Memorial Oak Grove?

They came from all quadrants of their home state and ranged in age from twenty to thirty-seven.* Thirteen held undergraduate degrees from LSU. They wore the uniforms of the Army, Navy, Marines, and Air Corps. Their bronze plaques tell us that there were ancestors in their families from England, France, Germany, Ireland,

*I am obliged to report that Lt. David Ewing's plaque is in error with regard to his birth year. He was born in 1892, not 1897.

and Scotland. In their time they were a typical cross-section of backgrounds, styles, talents, and aspirations. Six were killed in action or died of wounds suffered in combat on the Western Front. Disease and accidents struck down the remaining twenty-four. Half of them expired during the lethal month of October, 1918. They died in Louisiana, France, and in nine other states of the Union from California to Massachusetts.

The Legionnaires who supervised the preparation of the Grove knew, as Oliver Wendell Holmes once expressed it, that trees "outlive the memory of more than one of those in whose honor they are planted." Giant oaks, like the bodies of the dearly departed, merge with their physical environment and become a part of the earth's future. But bronze plaques inscribed with names and dates are not so transcendent. They are fixed in time. Unlike the oaks they seldom modulate from the particular to the universal. And that is precisely why the plaques were sunk into the ground. When the oaks outgrew their original meaning and attained a higher significance, visitors to the Grove would see the names of LSU men and be forced to ask: Who were they? What did they do? We know what they did for their country. We know that were it not for them LSU would be poorer in spirit. We know that the message of Memorial Oak Grove begins: "Greater love hath no man... ." We need only to listen to what the oaks are whispering and we will all be enriched.

Memorial Oak Grove Honor Roll

Milton W. ADAMS (Summers 1916, 1917)

Leslie P. BACKES (1916-1917)

Lawrence E. BROGAN (1899-1905)

David J. EWING, Jr. (B.S. 1916)

John F. GOODRICH (B.S. 1909)

Ike H. GOTTLIEB (B.S. 1913)

James O. HALL (B.A. 1913)

Henry N. HUCK (1915-1917)

Leslie C. HUNT (B.S. 1918)

John S. JOSEPH (1912-1913)

Alan L. LABBE (1907-1909)

David T. LAND, Jr. (B.S. 1915)

Ireanus J. LIETEMEYER (1900-1903)

Lewis H. MARTIN (B.A. 1911)

Philip J. McMAHON (1912-1916)

Alan L. MELTON (1916-17)
William D. MORGAN (B.S. 1907)
Cecil A. NEUHAUSER (B.S. 1915)
Jasper J. NEYLAND (B.A. 1914)
Daniel J. ORY (1907-1909)
Walter A. PHILLIPS (1910-1913)
Maurice J. PICHELOUP, Jr. (1909-1910)
Thomas J. POWELL, Jr. (1901-1903)
Daune H. RUTLEDGE (1914-1917)
Julian B. SANFORD (B.S. 1900)
Wilburn E. SCOTT (B.A. 1912)
Stuart D. SIMONTON (B.S. 1917)
Charles N. SINGLETARY (1914-1917)
Henry R. THAMES (1917)
Charles P. WILLIS (1912-1913)

... and the UNKNOWN SOLDIER