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BOOKMONGER

Tapping into an oak's genius

By BARBARA LLOYD
McMICHAEL

Although National Arbor Day is always celebrated on the last Friday in April, in the Pacific Northwest we observe Arbor Day earlier in the month. I seem to remember that when I was growing up, Arbor Day was regarded as a quaint throwback, a pioneers' holiday that had lost its relevance.

My, how times have changed! With the verified confirmation of significant climate change within our own lifetimes, the importance of trees and their role in carbon sequestration has led to a renewed and urgent appreciation for tree-planting campaigns everywhere.

If you aren't able to plant a tree, I'd like to suggest an alternative that also will have a long-lasting impact: read Lynda V. Mapes' reflective and exquisitely crafted new book, "Witness Tree."

In the early years of this nation, witness trees were the most prominent trees in a landscape, used as landmarks by surveyors. This book takes a somewhat different tack.

An environmental reporter for The Seattle Times, Mapes took a year's leave from her job to spend time in a research forest located in western Massachusetts and operated by Harvard University. Once settled into her home away from home, she singled out a particular tree, a century-old red oak, to study in depth – and in height.

From its roots to its leaves, on the ground and in its branches, Mapes becomes intimately acquainted with

'Witness Tree'
Lynda V. Mapes
Bloomsbury
240 pp - \$27

this oak.

She taps into all the resources she can find: archives rich in stories and data from the past; sophisticated technology that measures changes in the surrounding environment; and people who are glad to share their special expertise – foresters and carpenters, as well as a landscape ecologist, wildlife biologist, wetland scientist, mycologist, historian, artist and professional tree climbing twins.

Mapes studies core samples and fungal filaments, blights, pests, chemical processes, and – in the most coherent explanation I've ever come across – the significance of carbon sequestration.

She ranges through the surrounding forest and considers how the research being done there might be applied to ecosystems elsewhere.

In a nod to citizen science, she discusses the value of phenology — a homespun practice of recording the seasonal cycles of natural phenomena (such as capturing the date every year of the first call of spring peepers).

In exploring the oak's ecology and its daily and seasonal rhythms, Mapes discovers how profoundly a tree bears witness to the life and times around it. And one day, while cradled in the boughs of the oak, she has an epiphany.

"I'd noticed the oak's genius in abiding with other species above and below ground,

in a diverse, interconnected nation of lives," she writes.

Perhaps, she muses, our naturally anthropocentric view is thwarting us. Perhaps we should be adopting more of "a tree culture, a nourishing mutualism that embeds us in creation, working with one another in collaboration with nature to sustain us in our common home."

"Witness Tree" is filled with thoughtful observations such as this, felicitous phrasing, and an ultimately buoyant outlook. This book is a gem.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at bkmonger@nwlink.com

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By RYAN HUME

SCOW [skəʊ]

noun

1. any number of large, flat-bottomed boats that are used primarily for hauling heavy cargo or dredging

2. Scow Bay: a largely forgotten shallow tide flat that used to separate downtown Astoria from Uppertown. The bay emerged from the Columbia River between 18th and 21st streets. There was a bridge built over the bay in 1878 around what is now Exchange Street. Both the Scow Bay Iron and Brass Works and the second in-

carnation of the Clatsop Mill were on the shore. Part of the bay was filled in 1908 to create athletic fields. Following the fire in 1922, the rest of Scow Bay was filled and Commercial Street was raised on pilings to connect the separate sides of Astoria. Today Scow Bay is buried beneath the site of Columbia Memorial Hospital and the former John Warren Field

Origin:

Enters English in the mid-17th century from the Dutch *schouw*, meaning "ferry boat." There are several surviving Scow Bays on the Pacific Coast, including ones in Washington state, Alaska and British Columbia.

"Also open Saturday is a Queen Anne built in the 1890s. Around the turn of the century, it

slid one block to the edge of what was then Scow Bay. Two teams of horses hauled it back up the hill, where it was placed facing the cross-street, giving it a new address."

— "Holidays with history," *The Daily Astorian*, Thursday, Dec. 7, 2006

"My grandfather, James Lovell, ran a foundry, the Scow Bay Iron and Brass Works, in what was then known as Scow Bay — that's where the (John Warren) athletic field and the 4-H fairgrounds are now. The business was going to the oldest son, James Jr., as things happened in those days. Grandfather suggested to my father (the son next in line) that he go into the automobile business. Dad was a machinist in the foundry, so he had a good background for going into the car business," [Bob] Lovell said."

— Bob Olmos, "Longtime car dealer a walking history book," *The Oregonian*, Saturday, May 15, 1982, P. 36



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