

Seance for a Stand of Oaks

by Elise & Jeff

A seance is an attempt to communicate with spirits from the past.

In 1890, Charles Eliot wrote: "At Waverley is a steep moraine set with a group of mighty oaks". The mighty oaks Eliot referred to were a group of 24 trees—22 large white oaks, one swamp white oak, and one large elm—growing across a few acres in Belmont, near Waverley train station. They were large, ancient trees, likely some four or five hundred years old at the time, though some claimed they were even older.

Eliot was deeply moved by the beauty of these trees. Continuing in the same piece of writing, he made an impassioned argument for the importance of preserving natural beauty.

“Lovely natural scenery supplies an education in the love of beauty”, Eliot wrote. He called upon Boston’s lovers of nature to “rally to preserve for themselves and all the people ... these scenes of natural beauty which, by great good fortune, still exist near their doors”.

Inspired by the Waverley Oaks, he would go on to propose—and help create—the world’s first public land trust to acquire and preserve natural and cultural landscapes “just as the public library holds books”. The movement would also lead to the creation of the Metropolitan Park System in Boston, the nation’s first public regional park authority. The MPC’s first acquisition was Beaver Brook reservation in Belmont, where the beautiful Waverley Oaks stood.

Alas, over the ensuing years, the Waverley Oaks would face difficulty from fire, disease, and heavy use of the park. It’s believed that most of the original stand died off sometime in the mid 1920s, though their descendants — and perhaps one last survivor — still remain.

On a winter day in February some 100 years later, Elise and I gathered at Beaver Brook reservation in hopes of remembering, honoring, and perhaps connecting with the spirit of the Waverley Oaks.



We took buckets through deep winter snow in search of their modern descendants. We gathered leaves from a large red oak tree which had cracked under some recent wind or snow. It was now half bent over, dragging its curled leaves on the snowy ground. I said that it was strange how it was frozen, static in its moment of dissolution. Elise said that it would be a great home for mushrooms in the spring. We sought out white oak leaves too where we could find them, those true descendants.

At home, we placed the gathered leaves in the buckets, and covered them with water gathered from the nearby Beaver Brook. We hoped to create a kind of potion of remembering.

How do you remember something you did not experience first-hand?

Ernest Henry Wilson was a prolific plant collector and documentarian. In 1922, he returned to Boston after a two-year tour of the world's botanic gardens to take up a post at the Arnold Arboretum. In 1923, he purchased an automobile and began driving around New England with his glass plate camera, photographing prominent trees. We don't know why Wilson began this practice of photographing New England trees; however, in subsequent work, he wrote:

Trees are ... the noblest expression of vegetable life. Take them from the landscape and its whole appearance changes completely – luxuriance gives place to barrenness...The arresting characters of trees, their height, spread of crown, bulk of trunk and ruggedness

of bark, are unique features without which this world would be largely bereft of its scenic grandeur. No, trees are virtuous citizens of the earth, rich in permanent qualities – indispensables.

Among Wilson's photos is this 1924 image of one of the original Waverley Oaks, those rich, indispensable, virtuous former citizens of the earth:

It is a forceful and scraggly tree, bare in what must have been winter. If the dates are to be believed, it would have been near the end of its centuries-long life, carrying with it a record of the place in its rings, its roots, its branches.



Struck — perhaps like Eliot and Wilson — by the tree's arresting silhouette, we hoped this image could help us remember.

Shibori is a manual dyeing technique for creating patterns in fabric that originates from Japan. Examples of shibori-dyed cloth date back to at least the mid-8th



century, hundreds of years before even the Waverley Oaks might have emerged as saplings in Beaver Brook.

Inspired by *shibori* and Wilson's image, we set out to hand stitch the great oak's image in cloth. With each stitch we tried to recall what we had never experienced, tracing the oak's bark and many

branches, grown slowly and consistently over so many years.

Collective remembering — like hand-stitching — is a slow, continuous, and deliberate process. It is made not of large moments, but of many small efforts, day after day, year after year. Each moment is a choice to continue to preserve what is here, and to continue to remember. Or not.

As we continued the slow process of stitching, the ancient oaks seemed to draw closer. I dreamed of them at night. Were they approaching, reaching out through nighttime revelation?

When the stitching was at last complete, the moment of change was finally upon us. We pulled tight the many threads, stitched over many hours, and the oak's image vanished into a tangled compress of fabric. We wondered whether we had done enough.

The stew of water and gathered leaves now smelled of decomposition, earthy and damp. We placed the cloth into the oak leaf dye and waited, praying for transformation and revelation. Would the spirits now appear?





A few days later, I arrived back in Belmont, with plans to finally walk The Waverley Trail, a walking trail created by conservationists in 2007 to honor and remember the natural heritage of the area. In an interview around the trail's inauguration, organizer Jim Levitt said of the Trail:

[The Waverley Oaks' story] had largely been forgotten by people who lived in this neighborhood. And one of the wonderful parts of this ... Waverley Trail Project is that we've brought the memory of these oak trees — and also what they inspired — back to the children and adults who live here.

I locked my bike near Moraine Street and set off down the trail, following its painted green guideline and labeled placards. The Trail runs along Trapelo Road in Belmont and then into Beaver Brook Reservation.

The trail ends near the home of what Levitt and the Waverley Trail Project call “The Last Surviving Waverley Oak”, a large white oak near the corner of Wilson and Waverley Oaks Roads.

I waded through deep snow to approach the old tree, unprepared as I was in jeans and sneakers. I felt the tree's bark and looked up through its bare winter branches. I noticed those marks of past trauma where it'd lost whole branches, and yet still continued, adapted.



I circled the tree, taking in its size. According to Charles S. Sargent — botanist and first director of the Arnold Arboretum in Boston — the largest of the original Waverley Oaks had a girth of over seventeen feet, far larger than even this substantial last survivor.

Nearby this last great oak, I noticed a small metal signpost marking the spot. I imagined it might once have carried words, perhaps naming the tree or sharing a bit more of its story for any who might walk by.

But the signpost now stood empty, its message perhaps lost or weathered away.

I turned and began gathering dead sticks and twigs from nearby. I arranged them into letters in the snow near the old oak's trunk and the empty signpost.

I knew that my message wouldn't last long. Perhaps a day or two. Maybe less. But it was better than the alternative.

