SEANCE FOR A STAND OF OAKS

AN ATTEMPT TO COMMUNICATE WITH SPIRITS FROM THE PAST

Jeff Fossett and Elise Washburn

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 believed that nature provided "an education in the love of beauty" and was deeply moved by the beauty of these oaks, calling upon Bostonians to "rally" to preserve "these scenes of natural beauty which, by great good fortune, still exist near their doors."

PHOTO: A DESCENDANT OF THE WAVERLEY OAKS IN BELMONT, BY DENISE LEWIS

The Waverley Oaks inspired Charles Eliot to create the world's first public land trust to preserve natural and cultural landscapes "just as the public library holds books". The land trust movement birthed the Metropolitan Park System in Boston (the nation's first public regional park authority) which acquired the Beaver Brook reservation in Belmont, home of the Waverly Oaks, as its first property.

Over the ensuing years, the Waverley Oaks faced fire, disease, and heavy use of the park. It's believed that most of the original stand died off in the mid 1920s, though their descendants – and perhaps one last survivor – still remain.

1. BEGINNING THE POTION

On a winter day 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 recent wind or snowfall, half bent over, dragging its curled leaves on the 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.

II. AN OLD PHOTOGRAPH

Ernest Henry Wilson was a prolific plant collector and documentarian. After a two-year tour of the world's botanical gardens, he returned to Boston to take up a post at the Arnold Arboretum in 1922. In 1923, he began driving around New England with his glass plate camera, photographing prominent trees. Wilson wrote that trees were "virtuous citizens of the earth and "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.

PHOTO: "QUERCUS ALBA MASSACHUSETTS (WAVERLEY)" BY ERNEST HENRY WILSON, 1924. FROM DIGITAL COMMONWEALTH

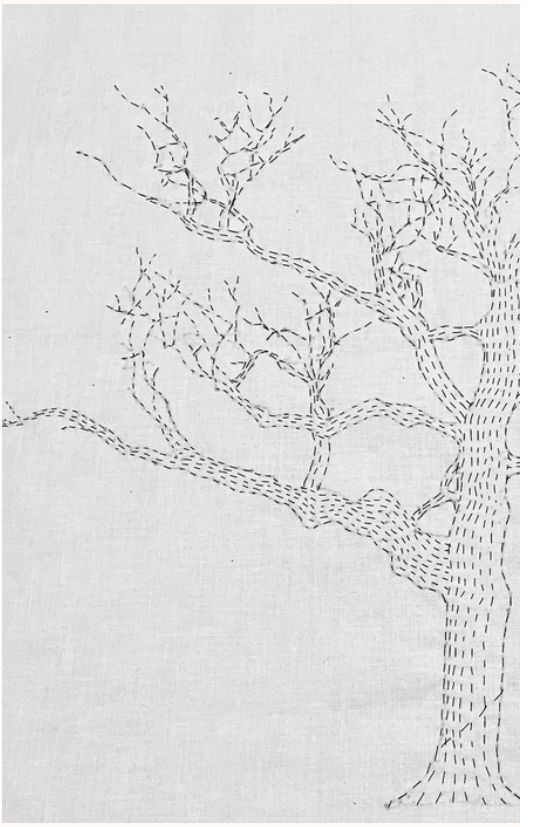
III. STITCHING THE SHAPE

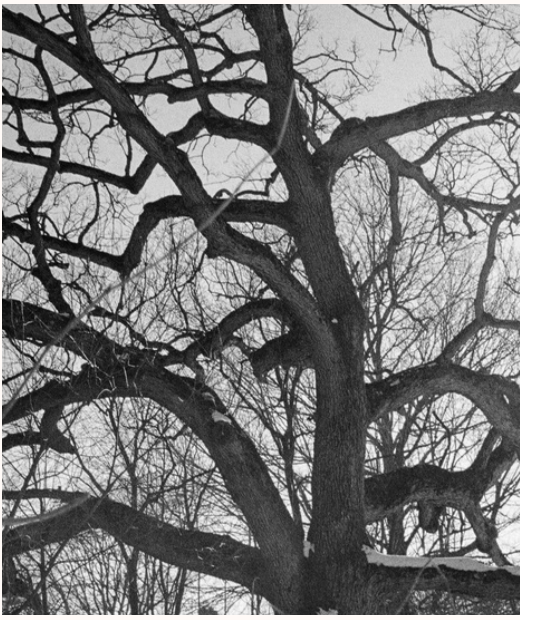
Shibori is an ancient Japanese resist-dyeing technique that has been practiced for thousands of years before the Waverley Oaks were saplings. It involves folding, twisting, or stitching fabric to create intricate, three-dimensional patterns. Inspired by shibori and Wilson's image, we set out to hand-stitch the great oak's image into 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, deliberate process, made not of large moments but of many small efforts, day after day, year after year. Each moment presents the option to continue remembering.

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?





 PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE AUTHORS

IV. COLLAPSE

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?

V. EMERGE

A few days later, I arrived back in Belmont to walk The Waverley Trail, a walking trail created by Jim Levitt and other conservationists in 2007 to honor the oaks. 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.

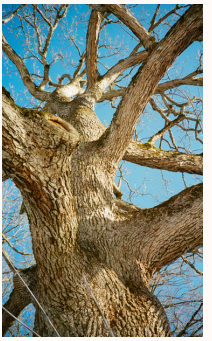
The trail ends near the home of what Levitt and the Waverley Trail Project call "The Last Surviving Waverley Oak", a large white oak near the corner of Wilson and Waverley Oaks Roads.

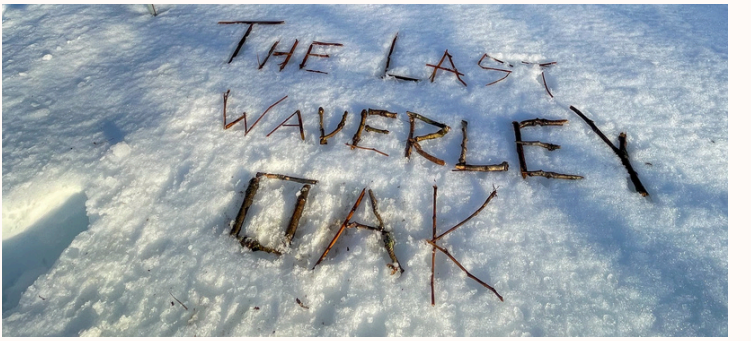
I waded through deep snow to approach the old tree, unprepared as I was in jeans and sneakers. I felt the tree's bark and looked up through its bare winter branches. I noticed those marks of past trauma where it'd lost whole branches, and yet still continued, adapted.

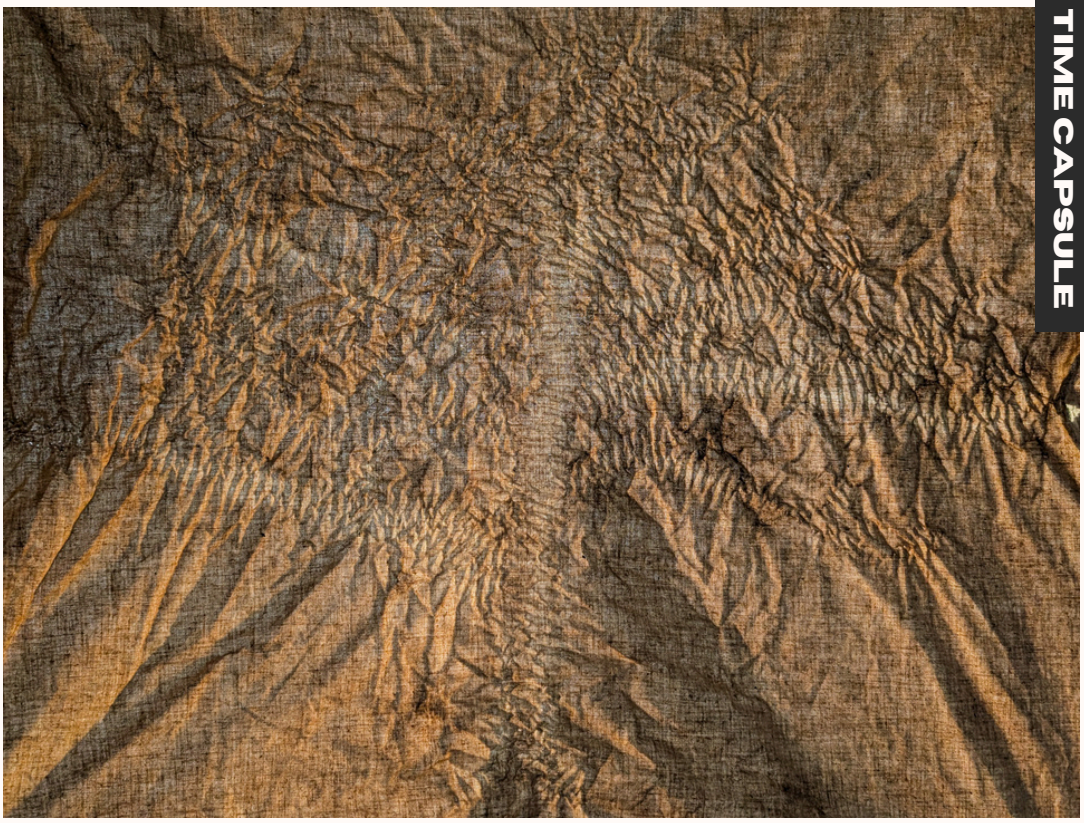
I circled the tree, taking in its size. According to Charles S. Sargent – botanist and first director of the Arnold Arboretum in Boston – the largest of the original Waverley Oaks had a girth of over seventeen feet, far larger than even this substantial last survivor.

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 anyone who might walk by. But the signpost now stood empty, its message 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.







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