

# From an ancient oak, an eagle soars

## Sculptor brings a new life to a landmark tree

By William Gordon  
STAFF-LEDGER STAFF

After workers had cut away the dead upper branches, reducing the once-towering white oak to a 12-foot-high trunk, its rings were counted and found to number 300-plus, which would make it more than 100 years old when George and Martha Washington stopped at the nearby Alpha Hotel in 1793 to imbibe the curative waters of the Schooley's Mountain Springs.

After three centuries of casting shade over the rural intersection of Schooley's Mountain Road and Flocktown Road, the stately oak, known as the Liberty Tree to some and the Hanging Tree to others, is no more, but its massive trunk survives in the form of an eagle carved by wood sculptor Harry Robinson of Bernardsville.

And it's hard to find anybody in Washington Township in southwestern Morris County who is not absolutely delighted. As the 72-year-old sculptor and his helper, Henry Wulf of Hackettstown, put the finishing touches on the big bird and prepared to take down their scaffold, passing motorists and truck drivers slowed to offer praise.

"Hey, guys, good work!" hollered a beaming young woman, provoking a shy smile from the bearded Robinson in his straw hat and big-pocketed canvas apron.

"Imagine, at my age, being called a guy," he said, putting away his tools. "Makes you feel young, that you're still considered a guy."

After more than 10 years of feeding nutrients to the tree in an effort to prolong its life, the Morris County Shade Tree Commission advised the township that the tree was beyond reviving, a victim of surrounding asphalt, road salt and just plain old age. What limbs remained were in danger of falling onto the roadway. It would have to come down.

As local officials pondered this dire fate at a township committee meeting, Minault Dave, a reporter for the weekly Observer-Tribune of Chester, who had written a story about Robinson and his reputation for

transforming dead trees into works of art, suggested he might be a solution. Dave gave the sculptor's phone number to Dianne Gallets, township administrator.

"I learned that he had done some religious themes, like angels for a church in Mendham, and told him we were a municipality and it could not be religious," recalled Gallets. "He said, 'I'll go and see what the tree wants to be.' Later, he came in with a little sketch of a standing eagle. He said he'd do it for \$3,500. The committee at its next meeting agreed. Everyone thinks it's wonderful."

The eagle dominates a small, wedge-shaped island at the juncture of Flocktown and Schooley's Mountain roads. The plot contains a stone marker dedicated to the memory of all the township veterans who lost their lives fighting for liberty in the nation's wars.

"An eagle seemed logical at a memorial to veterans," said Robinson, who carved the word "Liberty" in letters 18 inches high on the base.

Robinson began work with a chainsaw and wood chisels a little over two months ago, starting with the eagle's head, which the sculptor had visualized in the remains of a heavy, jutting lower limb.

At this point, Wulf, 58, a retired maintenance inspector at M&M Candies in Hackettstown, happened by and offered to help, revealing he had some experience at wood carving, primarily of Indians. Robinson was glad of the offer.

"This was entirely Harry's project," said Wulf. "I just followed his directions. This was probably Harry's first cooperative partnership."

"I'll never tackle anything this big by myself again," said Robinson.

As they whittled away, the two uncovered a few surprises imbedded deep within the massive tree trunk — an assortment of old nails and spikes, a small caliber bullet, and a steel ring with an anchoring staple that may have been used to tether horses.

"The ring was at the 160-year mark," said Wulf. "I hit it with my chainsaw and it ripped all the teeth off it. It was awesome. If this tree could tell a story, what

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PHOTO BY STEVE KRAVER

Harry Robinson uses stain and preservative on the eagle he carved from the trunk of a 300-year-old tree.

# Landmark

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stories it could tell."

Marcee Kenny can tell one of the stories. Kenny and her family live in a 180-year-old house adjacent to the tree site. Standing on her porch, she said she misses the extra shade the tree used to provide, but admires the eagle.

Kenny said the previous owner of her house, the late William Snyder, told her an Indian had been hanged from the ring in the tree, and that his spirit is said to still haunt the spot.

"I don't know about that," she said, "but an awful lot of cars seem to break down on this corner."

Dr. Eddy Palmer, a 79-year-old physician whose house is next door to the Kennys, was able to elaborate on the hanging.

"The last Lenape family left Schooley's Mountain in 1850, so it was

about 1840 that a young Indian boy — a teenager — was hanged from the tree," said Palmer. "He was alleged to have molested a young girl and was hanged by iron miners who worked in the area."

Palmer said the Schooley's Mountain springs, a half mile down the road from the tree, were known for their healing qualities. The springs became the site of the country's first health resort, long in use by the Indians, and then the colonists, with people flocking to the site from 1820 to the 1870s.

The springs were high in iron, lime, magnesium, soda and silica. To the Lenape, they were a remedy for rheumatism and skin eruptions.

"There were three hotels," he said. "The Heath House was the biggest. Its carriage house is still standing and in good shape. In 1945, when they were widening the road opposite the springs, they blasted a fissure that drained the springs away. The site is still wet, but there's no flowing water."

Robinson, a retired structural steel engineer, began his artistic avocation at the age of 40 when he was sidelined by a case of mumps. To ease

the boredom of convalescence, his wife, Nancy, gave him some clay with which he fashioned a tiny likeness of his infant daughter, Martha.

The result was so good that Robinson developed an interest in ceramics, turning out chess sets and other small objects.

He carved his first wood sculpture — the head of a mournful-looking prophet Jeremiah — to adorn a backyard rock garden.

The feel of the chisel modeling the wood, and the beauty of the revealed grains, captured Robinson's interest. Wood sculpting became a passion. Over the years he has turned out close to a thousand figures and transformed about 15 dead or dying trees.

He tackled his biggest project in 1977 when the owner of a large, lightning-killed white oak tree on property off Route 202 in Meyersville invited him to take a whack at it.

What emerged was a 24-foot-high, gently smiling Good Shepherd, one arm aloft in greeting passing motorists, the other holding a lamb. It took four months.

"It's sort of my Mount Rushmore," Robinson said.

The sculptor's most recent work before the Liberty Tree eagle was a grouping of nine angels from a huge copper beech tree with three enormous main branches at the First Presbyterian Church on Hilltop Road in Mendham.

A source of continuing pride for Robinson, a Presbyterian, was an ensemble of the Holy Family, and statues of St. Patrick and St. Anthony, carved from ash wood some 10 years ago for St. Patrick's Church in Chatham.

"When I was carving the Holy Family, I was having an awful time making them fit together," he recalled, "but when time came to install them in the church the pieces just fit together perfectly. It was amazing."

He also recalled an incident that will remain a source of gratification to him always.

"I had finished putting the figures together and was gathering up bits of Styrofoam and other packaging materials," he said. "I turned around and there was a lady kneeling, praying in front of something I just carved. It was a very moving experience."