

## **Sheboygan, once a City of Elms**

For the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the mighty American elm dominated urban landscapes. Treasured for its v-shaped canopy, a mature elm often soared to 100 feet in height with a trunk that exceeded ten feet in diameter. In many cities the graceful trees arched over streets creating scenic tunnels of shade. Sixth and Seventh Streets in Sheboygan, just north of downtown, were particularly beautiful neighborhoods.

But, by the 1950s those beauties began to die from a fungus carried by insects. Known as Dutch elm disease, it was first reported in the United States in 1928, when it arrived in a shipment of logs from the Netherlands. The European elm bark beetle spread the disease rapidly from Ohio north into New England, where it decimated the famous elms of New Haven, Connecticut, America's first Elm City. By 1950, the blight reached Detroit and moved on to Chicago by 1960.

The fungus clogs the vessels needed to transport water throughout the tree, leaving the elms to die of dehydration. Rapidly wilting leaves on the crown of a tree, or a sickly yellowish streak on the trunk give notice of impending death. Summer's heat brings the insects and increases the spread of disease. By fall, each year, the annual crop of once-healthy trees succumbs to the disease.

Of the estimated 77 million elms in North America in 1930, over 75% were dead by 1989.

Now why all this talk of Elm trees? Sheboygan was once known as the "City of Elms." In 1941, Charles Broughton, Editor of the Sheboygan Press, suggested it as an appropriate moniker for the city. As part of his campaign to promote the slogan, a contest was sponsored by the newspaper. Prizes of \$25, \$15 and \$10 were awarded for the three best essays based on the idea of the elms and the community feeling they inspired.

On August 29, 1941, more than eight thousand people attended an evening of entertainment at Kiwanis Park to launch the Broughton's "City of Elms" campaign. The Wuerl band played a 'monster' concert and a new musical march written by Henry Maas, veteran band director, was played for the first time. Winners of the contest were Reynale Angelbeck, Mary McCormack and Mabel Colton.

The city council passed a resolution designating Sheboygan, "The City of Elms" as the official slogan on January 5, 1942 by a vote of 11-4. This whole campaign inspired a source of pride for the city. The parks department furthered the campaign by planting thousands of seedlings in 1948.

Regrettably, Dutch elm disease found its way to Wisconsin in 1956, and to Sheboygan just four years later. The first 81 casualties were removed in 1966. Over the next five years Sheboygan would lose another 3000 of its 5,300 elms.

Naively, Dutch elm disease was not considered a serious threat, even as an aggressive program of spraying began in 1957. DDT was the pesticide of choice, recommended by the State of Wisconsin Agriculture Department and the DNR. Sprayed by plane and truck in Sheboygan, the

City of Sheboygan Falls used helicopters. Spraying slowed the progression of the disease, but certainly did not stop it.

City officials knew they were losing the battle by 1968. Trees were dying at a rate of 1,000 per year in the city. In a September 1966 editorial, the slogan “City of Elms” was quietly retired.

In early 1969, Wisconsin declared DDT to be a hazardous pollutant and recommended strongly that the pesticide not be used in the state. It was banned in 1972 because, as we know now, DDT didn't kill just the beetles. The poison was ingested by earthworms, and the worms were eaten by American Robins and other birds. The DDT concentrated in the tissues of the birds, so a little DDT in an earthworm became a lot in a robin eating dozens of earthworms in a day. The birds' eggshells became so thin they could not come to term and hatch. Bird numbers dwindled.

Even Sheboygan's most famous elm tree, a gift from the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, succumbed to disease. In 1971, a descendant of the elm under which General George Washington took command of the Continental Army in 1775 had to be removed from the lawn of the Sheboygan County Courthouse. Planted in 1938, it was grafted from a tree that was grafted from that famous elm in Virginia.

In that short twelve-year period from 1960 to 1972, Sheboygan's arboreal landscape changed drastically. The American Elm was gone, but those same neighborhoods, once treeless and birdless because of Dutch elm disease and DDT, have rebounded. The elms have been replaced by specimens of great variety and beauty. Albeit different, the city is picturesque and retains memories of its time as the “City of Elms.”