

J. STERLING MORTON

Before there was Earth Day, there was Arbor Day. J. Sterling Morton (1832–1902) was a prominent Nebraska pioneer who arrived there in 1854 and was appointed by President Buchanan to serve as secretary of the territory in 1858. He was interested in farming and forestry; with some combination of Muir’s romanticism and Marsh’s pragmatism, he felt that Nebraska needed more trees for many reasons, from natural beauty to natural windbreaks. His advocacy of a tree-planting day in the spring spread through American schools, and it soon became an official holiday in many states, celebrated on the last Friday in April: “the only anniversary in which humanity looks futureward instead of pastward.”

About Trees



A tree is the perfection in strength, beauty, and usefulness of vegetable life. It stands majestic through the sun and storm of centuries. Resting in summer beneath its cooling shade, or sheltering besides its massive trunk from the chilling blast of winter, we are prone to forget the little seed whence it came. Trees are no respecters of persons. They grow as luxuriantly beside the cabin of the pioneer as against the palace of the millionaire. Trees are not proud. What is this tree? This great trunk, these stalwart limbs, these beautiful branches, these gracefully bending boughs, these gorgeous flowers, this flashing foliage and ripening fruit, purpling in the autumnal haze are only living materials organized in the laboratory of Nature’s mysteries out of rain, sunlight, dews, and earth. On this spot, in this tree, a metamorphosis has so deftly taken place that it has failed to excite even the wonder of the majority of men.

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Here, sixty years ago, a school boy planted an acorn. Spring came, then the germ of this oak began to attract the moisture of the soil. The shell of the acorn was then broken open by the internal growth of the embryo oak. It sent downward a rootlet to get soil and water, and upward it shot a stem to which the first pair of leaves was attached. These leaves are thick and fleshy. They constitute the greater bulk of the acorn. They are the first care-takers of the young oak. Once out of the earth and in the sunlight they expand, assume a finer texture, and begin their usefulness as nursing leaves, "*folia nutrientia*." They contain a store of starch elaborated in the parent oak which bore the acorn.

In tree infancy the nursing leaves take oxygen from the air, and through its influence the starch in the nursing leaves is transmuted into a tree baby-food, called dextrine, which is conveyed by the water absorbed during germination to the young rootlet and to the gemmule and also to the first aerial leaf. So fed, this leaf expands, and remains on the stem all summer. The nursing leaves die when the aerial leaves have taken their food away, and then the first stage of oakhood has begun. It has subterranean and superterranean organs, the former finding plant-food in the earth, and the latter gathering it in the air, the sunlight, and the storm. The rootlets in the dark depths of soil, the foliage in the sunlit air, begin now their common joint labor of constructing a majestic oak. Phosphates and all the delicacies of plant-food are brought in from the secret stores of the earth by the former, while foliage and twig and trunk are busy in catching sunbeams, air, and thunderstorms, to imprison in the annual increment of solid wood. There is no light coming from your wood, corncob, or coal fire which some vegetable Prometheus did not, in its days of growth, steal from the sun and secrete in the mysteries of a vegetable organism.

Combustion lets loose the captive rays and beams which growing plants imprisoned years, centuries, even eons ago, long before human life began its earthly career. The interdependence of animal and tree life is perennial. The intermission of a single season of a vegetable life and growth on the earth would exterminate our own and all the animal races. The trees, the forests are essential to man's health and life. When the last tree shall have been destroyed there will be no man left to

mourn the improvidence and thoughtlessness of the forest-destroying race to which he belonged.

In all civilizations man has cut down and consumed, but seldom restored or replanted, the forests. In biblical times Palestine was lovely in the foliage of the palm, and the purpling grapes hung upon her hillsides and gleamed in her fertile valleys like gems in the diadems of her princes. But man, thoughtless of the future, careless of posterity, destroyed and replaced not; so, where the olive and the pomegranate and the vine once held up their luscious fruit for the sun to kiss, all is now infertility, desolation, desert, and solitude. The orient is dead to civilization, dead to commerce, dead to intellectual development. The orient died of treelessness.

From the grave of the eastern nations comes the tree monition to the western. The occident like the orient would expire with the destruction of all its forests and woodlands.

Twenty-five thousand acres of woodland are consumed by the railroads, the manufactories, and the homes of the United States every twenty-four hours. How many are planted? To avert treelessness, to improve the climatic conditions, for the sanitation and embellishment of home environments, for the love of the beautiful and useful combined in the music and majesty of a tree, as fancy and truth unite in an epic poem, Arbor Day was created. It has grown with the vigor and beneficence of a grand truth or a great tree. It faces the future. It is the only anniversary in which humanity looks futureward instead of pastward, in which there is a consensus of thought for those who are to come after us, instead of reflections concerning those who have gone before us. It is a practical anniversary. It is a beautiful anniversary. To the common schools of the country I confide its perpetuation and usefulness with the same abiding faith that I would commit the acorn to the earth, the tree to the soil, or transmit the light on the shore to far off ships on the waves beyond, knowing certainly that loveliness, comfort, and great contentment shall come to humanity everywhere because of its thoughtful and practical observance by all the civilized peoples of the earth.