



Honoring Plano's Bicentennial Tree By Evelyn Harding

Located in the Southeast section of Bob Woodruff Park, Plano's Bicentennial Bur Oak tree is the largest, oldest tree in the City of Plano. This report explores the history of the land where the tree stands to determine how the tree was allowed to grow and mature to its estimated age of 239 years. The section of Bob Woodruff Park, referred to as bottomland, is historically subject to flooding; therefore no private structures were ever built on the property. The soil is very rich containing sediment brought in from other areas by heavy rains and flooding.

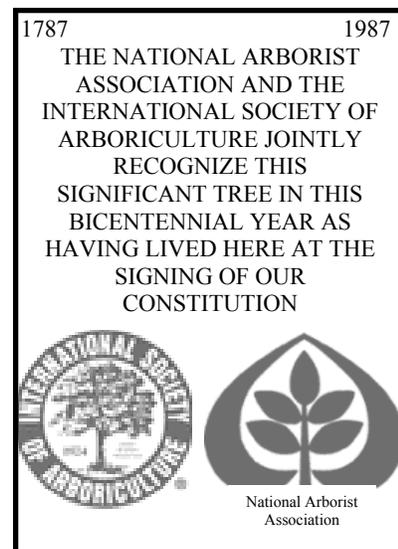
The history of the area is also rich. Prior to the land becoming a city park, previous owners included the Dr. Daniel Rowlett Family, Colonel Landon W. Oglesby, William T. Land Family, William D. Prince, and the Claude C. Albritton Family. The Land family used the timber on the property for their west Plano farm, but somehow the bur oak tree was spared. The citizens of Plano celebrated the life of this magnificent tree and recognized the history of the land surrounding it at Plano's 2002 Arbor Day Celebration.

Plano's Bicentennial Bur Oak Tree

Bur Oak trees are generally found along stream bottoms and adjacent slopes in North and East Central Texas. The wood is heavy, hard, impermeable and durable, and the trees are very hardy, tolerating drought and city pollution. The thick corky bark enables the bur oak tree to withstand fire and other damage better than most oaks.

The bur oak tree provides a deep shade, has few insect or disease problems and in winter the corky twigs and stout branches give it a picturesque appearance. The large acorns are sought after by wildlife.¹ The Texas State Champion Bur Oak, located in Cooke County, is 75 feet tall, 268 inches in circumference and has a crown spread of 111 feet.²

Plano's Bicentennial Bur Oak tree is approximately 90 feet tall, 186 inches in circumference and has a crown spread of 80 feet. The tree was designated the Bicentennial tree in 1987 and was recognized as having lived here at the signing of the U.S. Constitution. In February 2002, the tree was registered with the Dallas Historic Tree Coalition.



**Plano's Bicentennial
Tree and Plaque**



Pre-Settlement

Early settlers who came in ox wagons to settle on Rowlett Creek found the country with broad rolling prairies, dotted here and there with groves of timber, and streams of clear running water, with thickets bordering their banks. It was the most colorful country they had ever seen for there were wild flowers of every color and variety all around them, and wildlife in every direction: antelope, deer, prairie chickens, quail, wild waterfowl and buffalo. It is said that in the fall of the year, buffalo came to the watering places in great numbers and when given a scare, would stampede, making a noise like thunder.³

Early settlers often chose their locations with water and timber in mind; therefore, many settled along Rowlett Creek. Indians camped along the creek, bringing fear to the early settlers. Several miles upstream from Bob Woodruff Park, on Rowlett Creek, is the site of the Muncey massacre. In 1844, the entire family of Jeremiah Muncey along with McBain Jameson, the first white man known to settle in the Plano area, and William Rice's son were killed during an Indian raid. The massacre occurred in the early morning, probably after the family got up and while Mrs. Muncey was preparing breakfast. A party of men followed the Indians westward, but they traveled fast and were not overtaken. This was the last known tragic Indian raid in Collin County.

After the massacre the Indians sometimes came to the settler's camps interested only in horses and food, but the settlers lived in fear for years to follow. The Caddo Indians lived in Collin County and were an agricultural people who were generally not hostile. Attacks were always blamed on the fierce Comanches, who made raids from the west.⁴

A Texas Historical Marker marks the site of the Muncey massacre, located at 2800 Spring Creek Parkway, on Collin County Community College Spring Creek Campus, Plano.⁵

Settlement of Texas

In order to encourage settlement, First Class land grants were issued to those who arrived to Texas before March 2, 1836, the date of the Declaration of Independence of the Republic of Texas. These grants were unconditional and the rights as well as the land could be sold at once. Heads of families were eligible for one league and one labor of land (4,605 acres); single men over the age of 17 before March 2, 1836 were eligible for one third of a league (1,476 acres).

The Fannin County Board of Land Commissions issued Andrew Piara a certificate for one third of a league (1,476 acres) on April 26, 1838.⁶

Andrew Piara sold half of his certificate to Curtis Moore and half to Daniel Rowlett on October 29, 1838. Curtis Moore had 738 acres (his half of 1,476) in Fannin County surveyed and patented in 1847. Daniel Rowlett had 738 acres (his half of 1,476) in Collin County surveyed in 1842, but he died in 1848 never applying for a patent on the land. In 1850, Andrew Piara sold Curtis Moore 738 acres in Collin County; however, he had already sold the rights to the land to Daniel Rowlett in 1838. At that time, Andrew Piara was living in the Choctaw Nation (Indian territory which is now Oklahoma).⁷ A lawsuit followed from 1857-1870, lasting through the Civil War.

Dr. Daniel Rowlett Family

The lawsuit over ownership of the property was titled the Heirs of Daniel Rowlett vs. Curtis Moore. A change of venue was granted from Collin to Fannin County in 1857.⁸ The first trial ended in a deadlock in 1868. The suit was tried again in 1869 with a verdict for the plaintiff, the Heirs of Daniel Rowlett. In 1870, a third and final trial was held with the same results.⁹

Dr. Daniel Rowlett was never a resident of Collin County. He was born in Prince Edward County Virginia, in 1786 and came to Texas in 1836 from Calloway County, Kentucky, with his third wife, Mary "Polly," his three daughters, Matilda, Celinda and Nancy, and six other families. He settled in present day Bonham and had an extensive plantation. He had three more children, Mary "Polly," Daniel and John and was said to have been the wealthiest and most versatile of Fannin County pioneers, being a physician, lawyer, large slave holder, land contractor and surveyor, ferry operator and Indian fighter.

During the Republic of Texas, he was the first congressman from Fannin County. Rowlett Creek bears his name and his ancestors cherish the idea of all his accomplishments in early Texas. He died in 1848 and was buried in the Old English Cemetery in Bonham.¹⁰ A Texas Historical Marker marks his grave.¹¹



**TEXAS
HISTORICAL
COMMISSION**

The State Agency for Historic Preservation

Colonel Landon W. Oglesby

Colonel Landon W. Oglesby purchased the property from the Heirs of Daniel Rowlett in 1871.¹² His use of the property is unknown and his ownership only lasted for a short time. He was born about 1834 in Tennessee and came to Texas in 1866 or 1867 after serving as a Colonel in the Civil War, bringing his wife, Mary Martha, and his children, Hardin, Samuel B., Nancy Belle and Mary Lucetta. As soon as he arrived, he began buying property in Plano. He lived in a beautiful two-story home in the southeast section of Plano and had four more children, Landon W. Jr., Martha M. “Mattie,” John and Earl.

In 1873, he owned a general store in downtown Plano with William M. Lee, called Lee and Oglesby. The general store sold supplies for families, including farm tools, and “goods, wares, merchandise and provisions” necessary for a family to establish and maintain itself and to raise a crop. Some of these families pledged their future wheat crops as collateral for the supplies bought on credit.

In 1878, he became tax assessor/collector for Collin County, a position he held until November 1886. It is reported that he misappropriated funds from the County causing great losses for his bondsmen.¹³ His great granddaughter, Nancy Judson of Morgantown, Indiana, reports three accounts told to her regarding his death in 1887. One account said he died at home of congestion of the brain, a second said he took poison at home and a third said he committed suicide in the St. George Hotel in Dallas.¹⁴ He is buried in Plano Mutual Cemetery.



Colonel Oglesby’s Bondsmen

The bondsmen for Colonel Oglesby were responsible for the losses the county sustained when Colonel Oglesby, acting as Collin County tax assessor/collector, used the county funds for his own. Jeremiah Boggess, an early settler to Plano, was one of the bondsmen who suffered heavy financial losses. Worry and stress over the losses caused Jeremiah Boggess to have a massive cerebral hemorrhage causing his death in 1888. William Sachse, also an early settler and bondsmen, had to raise \$40,000 in a hurry and sold his most valuable holdings in the heart of Dallas. He was a breeder of fine mules and hundreds of his choicest animals were sold to cover the losses.¹³

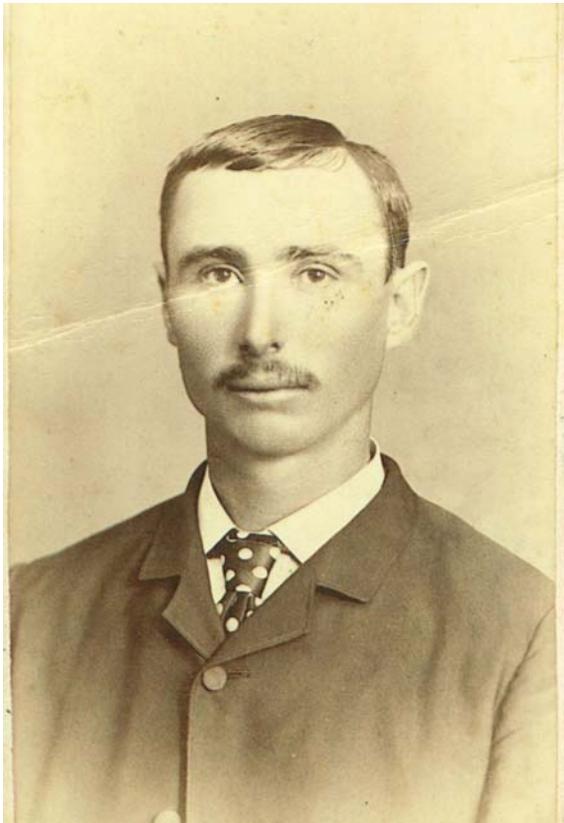
The Landon W. Oglesby Family

William T. Land and Family

William T. Land and wife, Mary, came to Texas from Charleston, East Tennessee in October 1866. They had one wagon and a span of mules. The family sharecropped on the farm of Captain John Coit, near the present town of Renner, for two years and then sharecropped with Colonel Landon W. Oglesby just south of Plano for three years. William T. Land purchased this property on Rowlett Creek and 150 acres of prairie land in west Plano from Colonel Oglesby on December 16, 1871.¹⁵

The 150 acres of prairie land, located at present day Plano Parkway between Coit Road and Ohio Drive, became the Land family farm raising cotton, wheat and corn until the late 1960s. The Rowlett Creek property was used for timber for the farm because timber was scarce on the prairie land. It is unclear why the bur oak trees on Rowlett Creek were spared from use. Area men were paid \$4 an acre to break the prairie land with ox teams, ten yoke of oxen to the big plow and five or six yoke to the other plow. The prairie land was fenced with bois d'arc posts in the ground eight feet apart and rails from oak trees on Rowlett Creek. The rails were fastened with smooth wire, three rails to a panel.¹⁶

William T. Land and wife, Mary, had one son also named William T. Land. Their son, William T. Land, and his wife, Mattie A., had one son, Willie T., who married Mattie B. Culver and had three children Martha, Willie T. and Annie. Martha Land Gunter remembers gathering firewood on the Rowlett creek property to use on the farm and gathering pecans to be sold at Christmas time. She still resides in Plano and her only son, George T. Gunter, resides in Allen. George T. Gunter's children include Virginia, Kathleen, Gregory T. and Grant T.¹⁷



William T. Land 1860-1938



Mattie A. Land 1866-1905

William Dexter Prince

William Dexter Prince purchased the property from the Land family in 1946.¹⁸ He came to Texas by train in the late 1890s from White Pine, Tennessee with his recently widowed mother, Martha “Mattie,” three brothers, Zade, Zach and Boss and a sister, Bessie. His mother got off the train in Plano because it reminded her of Tennessee. The family originally lived near downtown Plano. William Dexter Prince left home at age 12 and earned money working for his sister, Bessie Wright and her family. He worked in the Tulsa, Oklahoma oil fields for a short time and returned to Texas, receiving his business degree from Sherman Business College in 1921. He had four daughters Catherine, Martha, Peggy and Patsy and a son, Dexter, with his wife, Lillian, and lived on Armstrong Avenue in Highland Park. William Dexter Prince was a pioneer certified public accountant in Dallas, establishing the firm of Prince, Harris & Co., which merged with Arthur Young & Co. in 1953. He continued to purchase property in Plano, owning more than 1,000 acres at one time. Registered white-faced Hereford cattle grazed on his properties. As an avid golfer, he dreamed of building a golf course country club in Plano.

He also loved trees and was the first in the area to hand graft paper shell pecan buds onto the native pecan trees, grafting over 1,000 pecan trees along with his son, Dexter. For many years, people would come to the Prince property to gather pecans and thousands of pounds of paper shell pecans were harvested. People still enjoy coming to Bob Woodruff Park in the fall to gather pecans.

His grandson, William Dexter Prince II, remembers his childhood days of exploring and hunting in the area with his brothers, always returning home before dark, as red wolves were plentiful on the property and there were sightings of a black panther at one time. William Dexter Prince died in 1972. His grandsons, William Dexter Prince II and Larry Prince still reside in Plano.¹⁹



The Prince Family: William Dexter, Zade, Bessie Wright, Zack and Boss

Claude C. Albritton Family

Claude C. Albritton, Sr., and Claude C. Albritton, Jr., purchased the property from William Dexter Prince in February 1951.²⁰ Claude C. Albritton, Sr., was the youngest of seventeen children of Matthew Ford Albritton of Snowhill, Alabama. He was a businessman in Corsicana and moved his family to Dallas in 1929 when his only child, Claude C. Albritton, Jr., enrolled in Southern Methodist University (S.M.U.). Claude Jr. earned degrees in Geology and Geography from S.M.U. and received his Ph.D. in Geology from Harvard University. He was a Geology professor at S.M.U. and served as Dean of the Graduate School and Dean of the Library during his career. He and his wife, Jane Christman Albritton, had three children Jane, Claude III and Elizabeth Ann.

The land now known as Bob Woodruff Park was once The Albritton Farm, growing maize, corn, alfalfa, coastal Bermuda and pecans. It was a fertile area, but was subject to flooding so the crops were never very dependable. The floods also brought trash onto the property, and any children who visited the farm were paid a penny a can to pick the trash up. The land around the creek, thick with underbrush, required clearing. Claude Jr. relieved the stress of being a University Administrator by taking out saplings with a large ax, giving them names and then saying “off with their heads.” At the end of a day busy with clearing, friends and family would gather for a picnic and to roast marshmallows in the embers of brush bonfires.

The deep woods around the creek were often referred to as Albritton’s bottom. There the family would ride their horses. Boy and Girl Scout troops camped on the property over the years, setting up their tents in the lower woods and learning outdoor skills that earned them badges.

Mrs. Albritton, now 86, reflects: “The impact of the Farm, now Bob Woodruff Park, on our children and their neighbors in the 3400 block of University Blvd. in University Park has been long lasting. From their early childhood through college years, they understood that the Farm was a place of refuge, a place to learn about nature, a place to appreciate an open space in a crowded world and to care for it for the future. The Farm was a place of fun: picnics, horse-back riding, campouts, 4th of July celebrations, a place to hike, to read a book, to dream by the creek or act out mock wars in trenches using mud balls as weapons. It was a place to safely learn to drive a four-on-the-floor Jeep, to learn the value of work and see the results of labor. The family and their friends who grew up loving the Farm with its special memories are so pleased that Bob Woodruff Park will be there always for future generations to dream in and enjoy.”²¹



The Albritton Family wanted the land preserved for future generations and sold the property to the City of Plano in 1976.

The Albritton Family in the 1970s: Claude, Jr., Jane C., Elizabeth Ann, Jane, and Claude III.

Bob Woodruff Park

The City of Plano purchased the park land in 1976 from the Albritton Family. The park was originally named Oak Grove Park and was renamed Bob Woodruff Park in 1987 in dedication to Plano's late City Manager, Robert H. Woodruff, Jr., who also served as the city's Parks and Recreation Director from 1969 to 1978. During his tenure, the city's parks system received national recognition and awards. Bob Woodruff was instrumental in the land acquisition and development of the park and spent leisure time at the lake on the north side of the park.²²



Dedicated in Memory of
Robert Woodruff, Jr.
City Manager - City of Plano
1985 - 1987

Summary

Trees have stood as silent witnesses to the events that formed history. Plano's Bicentennial Bur Oak tree witnessed the buffalo, which came to Rowlett Creek for water and the Caddo Indians that lived in the area. During the early settlement of Plano, the land was cleared for firewood and fence posts, but somehow the tree was spared. The tree witnessed the Prince brothers exploring the area and Albritton family's recreational use of the property. Now located in a city park, the tree continues to grow and thrive after 239 years, therefore representing not only Plano's past but its future.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Renee Burke-Brown, Plano's Urban Forester, who was responsible for the idea to recognize the Bicentennial tree on Arbor Day and explore the history. Thanks also to Bob Winn for assisting with the historical research and to George T. Gunter, William Prince II, Marty Prince Nichols, Lester Prince, Jane C. Albritton and her children Jane, Claude III and Elizabeth Ann for sharing their photographs and memories.

Endnotes

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- ⁵ Texas Historical Commission. Official Texas Historical Markers. Muncey Massacre. January 2002. <www.thc.state.tx.us/Markers/mkrguide.html>.
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Additional Photographs



Mattie A. Land and only son, William T.



Jane C. Albritton and daughter, Elizabeth Ann



Dexter Prince



Elizabeth Ann on horse, Pep