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Rare chestnut tree survives at Sheldon

By **TOM JACKSON** | Saturday March 22 2008, 3:25am

HURON TWP.

Erie County harbors a rare treasure: A full-sized American Chestnut tree that somehow survived an epidemic that wiped out untold numbers of other chestnut trees.

The tree stands 89 feet tall and measures 64 inches around the trunk. Its crown spreads 41 feet. It's a shocking anomaly at a time when most surviving chestnut trees are dwarfs sprouting from the roots of trees killed by the chestnut blight.

It's the largest known chestnut in Ohio, said Andy Ware, assistant chief of the Division of Forestry in the Ohio Department of Natural Resources.

"To our knowledge, we don't have any that come close to this size," said Gary Obermiller, a regional manager for the Division of Natural Areas and Preserves in the ODNR.

Jittery about preserving the very rare tree and worried about the eagle's nest located in it, state officials won't reveal the tree's exact location in the 465-acre Sheldon Marsh preserve.

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In fact, the existence of the tree has been kept quiet for years by state officials.

"We found the tree probably seven years ago," Obermiller said. "We didn't spread the word about the tree a whole lot."

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Sean Logan, director of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, revealed the tree's existence during Wednesday's meeting of the Ohio Lake Erie Commission in Oak Harbor. Logan bragged about the tree's size and said he was going to visit it later that day.

After the meeting, reporters began phoning ODNR for more details. Spokeswoman Cristie Wilt set up interviews with ODNR officials after asking the scribes to promise they won't give away the tree's specific spot.

Obermiller, however, says his boss didn't breach state arboreal secrecy when he mentioned the tree at a public meeting.

After the Strickland administration took over, the new chief of Natural Areas and Preserves, Steve Maurer, decided the public ought to be told about the tree, Obermiller said.

"He realized this was a very special tree," Obermiller said.

Maurer has contacted the American Chestnut Foundation to see if the group wants samples of the tree to determine if it is resistant to the chestnut blight, Obermiller.

Erie County's chestnut tree produces fruit, but the seeds aren't viable because there isn't another tree to pollinate it, Obermiller said.

American Chestnuts were once found all over Ohio and all over much of the U.S., Ware said.

"They are often referred to as the redwood of the east because of their tremendous size," he said.

Old chestnuts

* American chestnut trees once made up about 25 percent of the eastern North American forests.

* They grew up to 100 feet tall and lived up to 600 years.

* Chestnut wood was valued because of its straight, light-weight, rot-resistant qualities.

* In 1904, a non-native species of fungus was first identified. It probably arrived on imported Asian chestnut trees as much as 10 years earlier. The American chestnut trees in the New York Zoological Park began dying.

* By 1910, the trees across Pennsylvania were dying, and the blight was moving south at a rate of 50 miles a year.

* By 1912, all the American chestnut trees in New York City were dead.

* By 1913, the blight entered North Carolina.

* By 1950, the American chestnut had ceased to exist as an ecological factor in the eastern Appalachian forest.

--Source: The American Chestnut Foundation

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gary larizza wrote on Mar 23, 2008 2:37 PM:

" after reading this story their is a male and a female chestnut tree in berlin heights ohio at 42 west maint street in the back yard. they used to belong to my father in law myron nickols. the house has since been sold. their is another chestnut tree in berlin heights at 27 south st. "

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jseoxtp wrote on Mar 23, 2008 12:35 PM:

" There is also a patch of chestnuts south of Norwalk near North Fairfield (off of Rt. 162 I believe. I believe those trees produce fruit. "

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" Why not take cuttings from the tree to start other trees? "

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" And then who would fund your welfare checks. Get a life! As for the tree it would be nice to see it but some dumb a-- would probably try to kill it for fun, has happened before. "

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