

Autumn 2010

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STRIKING OAK OPENINGS DREW COUNTY PIONEERS

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Finy soft pink leaves are expanding on the burr oaks around the county these weeks just as they have for centuries.

Morris and Alonzo Cutler, 129 years ago, must have felt goose bumps on their arms when they looked for the first time on our unique oak openings. A local historian of long ago wrote about our first settlers' initial visit:

"Their journey to Milwaukee was not a pleasant one, for roads were unknown. They journeyed on horseback, following the shore of the lake and camped wherever night overtook them.

"When they turned inland from Milwaukee, they found a delightful change from the monotonous scenery and almost impenetrable undergrowth. Oak openings were spread over an undulating surface of the ground, and at the feet of these monarchs of the forest, there was no undergrowth of tangled brush to obscure the view or impede the progress of travelers.

"When these youths reached the eminence overlooking the magnificent valley of the Pishtaka (Fox River), they considered it nearly a realization of earthly paradise. Far over the hills in every direction appeared the soft velvety green of the oak trees, while at one side of the amphitheater at their feet was spread a little prairie."

Waukesha County's surface is composed of prairies, small hills, lakes, small marshes, and the oak openings. Many marshes were drained and used for meadows, hills were grazed and the prairies and openings were the rich productive and valuable land.

Oak openings were considered a distinct and special botanical area with plants and animals peculiar to themselves. Flora and fauna of the openings gave richness and variety different from those of our prairies, forests and marshes.

White and burr were the greatest of our native oaks. White oaks were the largest and most important: the wood was strong and durable. It rated first among all woods for making wagons, coaches and sleds, for stave and hoops for barrels and casks, for archi-