



# DOCUMENTING THE URBAN FOREST

## Background & Interesting Project Tidbits From Historian Joanna Dean

I have been researching the history of Ottawa's urban forest for over ten years now, and the Bytown Museum exhibit is a way for me to share my research with a wider community.

How did I start researching in this area? After the 1999 ice storm, I fundraised for tree planting on city streets and served as the chair of Ottawa's Forests and Green-

of trees and our feelings about them, we might be better able to protect the urban forest.

The exhibit allows me to work in a different medium and communicate ideas through images and material artifacts. Trees are very visual, tangible things, and it has been interesting choosing photographs and objects to share.

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**The bur oak pictured above was chosen for the display because it is the same age as the City of Ottawa. It is a massive reminder that trees have a history.**

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space Advisory Committee for a number of years. As a historian (I had just completed a Ph.D. in Canadian history), I was struck at how little people thought about the history of their street trees. It seemed to me that if we better understood the history

The most challenging part has been the bur oak section, mainly because of its size. The piece I have is over four feet across, and was initially five inches thick. It didn't fit in my car, and I needed at least two other people to lift it into my trailer each time

it was moved. Over the past six months, I have been soaking it in preservative, sanding it down, freezing it (to kill any bugs) and finishing the surface with tung oil. I chose the bur oak because it was about the same age as the City of Ottawa. It is a massive reminder that trees have a history.

The most interesting aspect of the project has been the collection of tools. Bill and Judy Gardiner, Gardiner Tree Trimming and Removal, have donated a set of tools from the 1960s and 1970s, including an early climbing saddle and chainsaw. Bill has a story to go with each tool, and he has agreed to lead a tour of the exhibit with me in the spring.

Arborists will likely be most interested in the campaign conducted by the Ottawa Horticultural Society (OHS) in the 1920s for more professional tree trimming. The OHS was upset about the "tree butchery" done by utility companies and wanted the city to manage street trees. As a result of their lobbying, thousands of trees were removed and many more trimmed. Arborists will also enjoy looking at the drawings of tree trimmers in a 1950s Davey Tree Company booklet. They would fit right into a Mad Men episode. Lastly, arborists will be amused, or horrified, at the instructions given for tree climbing in a 1940s hydro manual.

Museum exhibits are expensive, and I am fortunate to be funded by both a Jack Kimmel Grant and by NiCHE, Networks in Canadian History and Environment. NiCHE is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council to disseminate environmental history.

Once the exhibit is mounted, I will be returning to the usual academic work of writing a book on Ottawa's street trees. I am interested in talking to retired arborists, from Ottawa, but also from other cities, so I can learn more about how the profession has evolved since the 1940s. I can be reached at Carleton University in the history department: joanna\_dean@carleton.ca. 📧

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**Photo Above.** The author rolling the large bur oak section into the freezer. It had to be frozen to -20 degrees C twice to kill any bugs before it went to the museum. Photo by William Knight.

# THIS WINTER AT THE BYTOWN MUSEUM

## 2011 Jack Kimmel Recipient Joanna Dean's Urban Forest Exhibit

**T**he exhibit *Six Moments in the History of an Urban Forest/Une forêt urbaine: six histoires d'antan* will open at the Bytown Museum in Ottawa on January 26 for four months. The exhibit will then be taken on the road for such events as the 2013 ISA Conference. It examines six moments from Ottawa's past: the persisting native forest, the planting of large street trees in the late nineteenth century, the campaign to "control" those trees in the early twentieth century, the reforestation of suburbs in the postwar era, the planting of the Almey and Royalty crab apple trees for Canada's Centennial year, and the development of arboricultural expertise after Dutch Elm Disease. While in Ottawa, the exhibit will also include an exploration of the conflicted history of Lovers Walk and the surrounding woodlands on Parliament Hill.

The exhibit opens with a massive tree section, over 4 feet across, which was taken from a bur oak cut down in central Ottawa. The tree was a remnant of Ottawa's original oak forest, which sprouted just after Ottawa was incorporated in 1855, and was cut down for infill development in 2011. It symbolizes the persistence and the vulnerability of city trees, which have been subjected to pressures of development since the first sidewalks were installed in Ottawa. The exhibit also features a display of arboriculture tools from the 1970s, donated by Bill Gardiner of Gardiner Tree Trimming and Removal. It will include a computer display of geospatial mapping of historical aerial photographs, as well as numerous photographs of Ottawa's trees demonstrating the changes to the urban forest over time

