

Polk County tree is a witness to history

JUSTIN MUCH Statesman Journal

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ZENA – The “Witness Tree,” namesake for the Witness Tree Vineyard, recently became the second arboreal site in Polk County to receive the Oregon Heritage Tree designation.

The other Polk site with this designation is the Valley of the Giants, deep in the coast Range near the Lincoln County border.

An Oregon White Oak tree is the bosom of a Spring Valley hillside northwest of Salem; the Witness Tree is about 250 years old.

Its historical significance stems from service as a survey marker. Copies of original survey notes on display at the vineyard are dated July 8, 1854, and indicate the then 2-foot-diameter tree was used as a landmark from which a boundary for donation land claim No. 51, the “Clairborne C. Walker” claim, could be located.

Witness Tree Vineyard proprietor Dennis Devine applied for the historical designation about a year ago through the Oregon Heritage Tree program.

With help from Scott McArthur of Monmouth and the Polk County Historical Society, his application was accepted and confirmed. He received a letter of acceptance in mid-February.

A statewide dedication ceremony is scheduled for the first week in April 2010.

Today, the tree’s diameter at its base is 4 feet 6 inches. Devine said the original survey marks incised into the tree’s trunk were later cut away, presumably by souvenir hunters. This has left a significant cavity in the trunk, yet the tree has survived.

“The Witness Tree predates the arrival of the first white settlers,” Devine said. “It is one of the few trees in the area that survived the annual burning of the land in the early 1840s by the Luckiamute Band of the Calapooya Indian tribe, which ranged over the land prior to the coming of the white settlers.”

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Laced with mistletoe and shed of a west-leaning branch from December’s icy storms, the Witness Tree stands strong with a recently added designation as an Oregon Heritage Tree. The tree stands in a vineyard by the same name, and is only the second Polk County site to receive the designation.



Witness Tree Winery owner Dennis Devine inspects a gap where surveyors extracted historical markings from his vineyard’s namesake tree. The tree was given a historical designation recently.
ANNETTE UTZ |
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WITNESS TREE

What: A 250-year-old Oregon White Oak

Designation: Joined the Valley of the Giants as the only tree sites in Polk County to be accepted into the Oregon Heritage Tree program.

Location: Witness Tree Vineyard, 7111 Spring Valley Road NW, Salem (near Zena)