

Class Tree Wars

What goes up must come down

Editors's note: The following piece was written by Kalev Leetaru '04 ENG as part of his senior thesis, "Voices From the Grave," a historical record of the University of Illinois. The article is based on the recollections of Charles Albert Kiler, Class of 1892, in his book, "On the Banks of the Boneyard."

While the students of today may seek shelter from the hot summer sun beneath the shading branches of a campus tree, seldom do they think back to the memories that tree might represent. Not every tree on campus was planted by campus planners; some are memorial trees, commemorating people, organizations and even classes, proclaiming their deed to the future.

The classes of the University's early days, through the final years of the 19th century, were eager to memorialize their tenure at the University by planting a class tree, under which "descendants of the members of the class would assemble ... in future years and dwell on the lives and achievements of their ancestors." It was then the duty for "members of other classes to attempt to destroy this tree and thwart the desire of those who planted the tree to leave such a testimonial." The battle between protector and destroyer was not one of spite but rather "simply a test of wits and vigilance."

The only lasting remnants of this class tension are two stone markers from the 19th century – a glacial boulder bearing the inscription "Class of '76" and a rectangular white limestone marker emblazoned with "Class of '77." Young pine groves now stand where the mighty elms once flourished. While the original trees are lost, the markers provide one of the last glimpses into a world of class rivalry which has long since faded from memory.

The gravity of these rivalries is evident in the story behind the gift from the Class of 1881 – a massive elm tree that once stood at the southeast corner of the Illini Union. The two trees which had gone before it had perished in the class tree wars tradition, with the first one "tarred and feathered and ridden on a rail" like the fellow with the hard heart" and the second simply plucked from the ground. After seeing their first two attempts destroyed, the "he-men of '81 got

organized [and] hid themselves in the bushes armed with shotguns," meaning to ward off the attacking underclassmen and letting the class gift grow to its full glory.

The tree wars could become quite involved and even violent, as happened between the classes of 1882 and 1883. The Class of 1882 planted a memorial tree during its senior year, "a measly little sapling about an inch-and-a-half in diameter," but chose to place it in a grove of "large evergreen trees whose branches grew close to the ground and afforded fine shelter for those who wished to guard the tree from those who might have designs on it." Two members of the Class of 1883 took advantage of a University event one evening and chose to make a run on the tree while the seniors were otherwise occupied. Unfortunately for them, several members of the senior class had elected to stay behind to guard the tree, and the two were met with a welcoming party. They made a run to escape, but one was apprehended and gave up the other's name, causing them both to be threatened with expulsion.

To avenge the fate of these imperiled comrades and just to "finish the job," several days later a group of their fellow classmates decided to "make a raid on the tree that night ... [and] along toward midnight the 'army' assembled at [a farmhouse just off campus], each man with a shotgun, and at the appointed hour made a raid on the University grounds." Upon the group's arrival, the designated hatchet man "proceeded to chop down the tree while [one of the boys] stood over him with a shotgun to protect him. The seniors rolled out from under the trees, and there was a battle." The hatchet man's bodyguard was hit with more than 105 birdshot shrapnel pieces across his entire body but held his ground, and the tree was lost.

– Kalev Leetaru

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Kalev Leetaru Photo

North of Altgeld Hall, a boulder inscribed "Class of '76" marks the site of a class tree, now long gone.