



September 2024 Musing
The Girls and the Burls
by Anne Torrey
Lower Eau Claire Lake

A little child lies in wait as I wander through the forest in the crisp autumn air. She lurks just below the surface, monitoring my meandering thoughts and observations. Suddenly, she points and shouts, “HEY! What is THAT!?” Startled, I stop and take stock of what I had been looking at without really seeing. The child’s voice thrusts itself into my brain. “What’s on that tree?” she says. “Is it a disease!?”

I move off the trail to take a closer look at a dark protuberance sticking out from the side of an aspen tree. It is rough, lumpy, and rounded, almost scaly. I know what it is. It’s called a burl. While it looks like a strange aberration, it is in fact a healthy process that takes place when a tree experiences some sort of environmental damage or is attacked by bacteria or a fungus.

To help the tree heal as rapidly as possible, callous cell tissue forms a protective covering around the offending assailant, completely enclosing it, effectively sealing it off from the rest of the tree. This all happens mysteriously, under the tree’s bark, making it difficult to understand what exactly has happened to stimulate this process.

Once instigated, the burl begins to grow and doesn’t stop. Unsprouted bud tissue folds, rolls, and compresses, creating growth patterns unique to each burl. Like snowflakes, no two are alike. When the tree dies, burls may be harvested, revealing the beautiful patterns in the wood that can be made into stunning treasures—

bowls, platters, jewelry, even furniture.



I close my eyes and watch my child self climbing the big maple tree near the shore by our cabin. Her small hands are grabbing gnarly branches. The toes of her little bare feet are gripping first one, then another rotund growth protruding from the trunk, lifting her upward as she stretches mightily to reach the next branch.

How could that child have known that those giant craggy footholds would help that maple live to grow into a large and healthy tree?

As the little girl climbs into her companion's large branches, she nestles with her book for an afternoon of reading, daydreaming, and watching the birds and bugs going about their daily rituals. When the summer heat becomes too oppressive, she catapults herself into the lake from an old rope swing.

Soon our friend's gorgeous crimson leaves will become works of art. The little girl will press them with a hot iron between sheets of waxed paper, preserving them as cherished memories before the white winter days draw her further and further from the heat of summer and the brilliance of autumn.

The burls will remain, silently growing, swirling and folding. Perhaps one day, when the tree is no longer able to stand, they too will become beautiful works of art.

In Memorium:

Lloyd "Buzz" Pickering, who died August 3, 2024, at the age of 94, was remembered by Paul and Ann La Liberte with a memorial gift to FOECLA's Clean Boats/Clean Waters Fund. Buzz's family owned a cottage on Lower Eau Claire Lake for four or more generations, according to the La Libertes, who wrote that he was "devoted and committed to keeping and improving the quality of the water and forests."

Our sympathies to the Pickering family and our thanks to Paul and Ann La Liberte for the very fitting memorial gift.

wetlands, forests and attendant wildlife resources.

BAYFIELD AND DOUGLAS COUNTIES, WI

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