

A Tree Story

by Bruce Edwin Robinson



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This is a story about trees and about a vision for the future.

In 2011, John H. Tate Jr., a senior lawyer from Marion, envisioned an ongoing project to plant trees for the continuing replenishment of Virginia's hardwood forest. John was a towering figure, much like the trees he cherished. He insisted on native Virginia trees and wasn't much on decorative trees, which are pretty but short-lived in Virginia's climate and geography. Thus was created the Senior Lawyers Conference Trees for Virginia project, a nonprofit endeavor, spearheaded by Tate, with John Oakey Jr., a fellow senior lawyer from Richmond, handling the fundraising. All of the funds to purchase the trees for this project came from private donations, and no public funds or Virginia State Bar funds were used.

John handled all the orders and deliveries in 2011, driving his Chevy Tahoe all over the commonwealth. Many of the donations were for replenishment of trees in Southwest Virginia, which were destroyed as a result of tornados and other storms. In 2012, Robert Vaughan Jr., a senior lawyer from Danville, and I pitched in to assist John. We spent an evening in Waynesboro learning of John's passion for fast cars and the German Autobahn over dinner. Early the next morning, we shoved off to deliver 7,150 seedlings harvested by the Virginia Department of Forestry and picked up from the Augusta Forestry Center in Crimora. John made two trips, one to Northern Virginia and the second to Southwest Virginia, making a big L along the perimeter of Northern and Western Virginia. Vaughan delivered to Southside Virginia. I had the central corridor from Charlottesville to Norfolk, with a hand-off in Mechanicsville to Warren Haynie, another senior lawyer, for plantings in the Northern Neck. In November 2012, John Tate was eager to get the planning for the 2013 tree distributions underway. But like a towering hard-

wood suddenly stuck down by nature, John became terminally ill and died in December 2012.

In 2013, I was asked to follow in John's giant footprints and head the tree project. As I solicited orders, I learned that the tree plantings by previous recipients had been quite successful. Most 2013 orders were along the I-81 corridor from Winchester to Abingdon, and in Southside and the Northern Neck. As Vaughan and I were coordinating the tree deliveries, Augusta County was hit with twenty inches of snow; therefore, there was a delay in plans. The Forestry Center worked diligently to fill the order as soon as the snow was washed away by heavy rain. I made the journey to Crimora to pick up the order one afternoon, and headed to Winchester for the first delivery and to spend the night. I was met by a blinding snow storm with huge snowflakes, which fortunately didn't last long. The next day was gorgeous as I headed south on I-81 with stops in Staunton, Wytheville, Marion, Saltville, Glade Spring, and Abingdon, then along US 58 to Martinsville and then back home to South Hill. It had been a number of years since I had been through the "Valley," with its rugged beauty. I was reminded of the hardiness of the people who settled the region, and noted that it is still heavily forested and exceedingly beautiful. The final delivery was days later to Haynie in Mechanicsville for the Northern Neck folks.

In reflection, I think I had a firsthand glimpse of John Tate's vision as he cruised the state highways—the perpetual need to maintain this blessed resource. It has been my privilege to participate in this project.

The Senior Lawyers Conference of the Virginia State Bar will recognize John Tate with a tree planted in his honor in Marion, with John's widow and family in attendance.