

1958-2011 by Coralee Bodeker

Several years ago, two Boxelder (*Acer negundo*) trees stood sentry above my chicken coop. In 2008, when my family took up permanent residence on this rural parcel, these two trees were full of woodpeckers and nuthatches swooping through the branches, climbing along the trunk. Robins often built nests in the crooks and squirrels chattered away from the swaying tops. While alive I didn't pay much attention to these two trees. It is only now, six years after the sentries fell from their posts in the July sky, that I ponder their existence.

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My chicken coop boxelder trees, along with many other trees in the yard, were victims of the July 2011 Midwest Derecho [a widespread, long-lived, straight-lined wind storm] that pummeled through the Vinton area in the wee hours of July 11, 2011. One of these two boxelders landed on the roof of my chicken coop and caused, miraculously, little damage, while the other crashed onto the driveway. Following the storm's exit, their limbs and twigs were quickly picked up or sawed apart, likely fuel for our winter woodstove. Their trunks were then sawed flush to the ground and left, semi-forgotten, to decompose. Today, as I pause over the space where these trees once stood, one of the shaved stumps has rotted, a large hole formed in its center and filled with woodchips. The second stump, apparently, has plans to stick around longer than its counterpart, showing only minimal signs of decay on the very edge of its bark. This tree stump is perfectly smooth and its rings easily counted. A tree's rings are much like an autobiography—clues left of a life long after death. Earlier today I counted this second boxelder's rings and found the tree to be 53-years-old at its passing. Most boxelders don't make it to 100 years as it is a fairly short-lived, fast-growing species. I surmise the tree was nearing the end of its natural lifespan anyway when it was abruptly flattened in 2011.

Counting a tree's rings is easy compared to reading the rings; "reading" a tree's rings requires a bit more research and often a lot of imagination. My tree's newest rings (next to the bark) are thin (relative to its base). Working my way from the outside-in, it thus isn't long before I leave the rings my tree produced during my family's years of occupancy in its shade. During this relatively short period, a Baltimore Oriole's nest swung from the highest branches and the tree watched multiple groups of chicks fledge.

The rings spanning 2008 to 1998 mark the time when the original owners of our home resided here. The tree stood near the build site and probably listened as the first layers of cement were poured. It is likely that many trees were cleared when our house went up, but not this survivor, it continued to grow and lay thin, wavy rings.



Moving farther back into the 1990s and '80s, my tree's rings grow thicker and more uniform. In these days the tree stood on the edge of a worn-out Iowa farm. Abandoned, quite possibly, due to the poor quality of the soil and tendency of the land to flood. The boxelder witnessed an older neighbor of ours set fire to the original, dilapidated barn that stood where our house stands now. In the woods behind where the barn stood, exhaust caps from disused tractors slowly rust to this day.

From the '70s back through the '60s, the history of our land becomes unclear, as do the rings on my tree. They are thick and even (indicating decent growth conditions), but it is hard to tell where one ring begins and another ends, a sign of wear on my tree. I did my best to imagine what the farm looked like during this period. It is no doubt my tree grew well in its days on the working farm, laying down new rings and sprouting new green branches every year. I know from countless layers of bedrock found underneath our current garden that when the farm was active the area to the south of our house was a large cattle lot. When the tree was younger, it probably swayed over the cows as they milled to and fro, fattening up on corn grown in nearby fields.

In the late '50s, my tree was a sapling, perhaps watched with care by the landowners or disdained by its sudden, unwanted appearance. Then, as my finger crosses over the centermost ring I read the birth of my boxelder tree—1958, the year when my tree first emerged from the soil and sprouted tiny leaves.

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A tree can stand for years playing sentry while countless people hurry by on the path of life, paying no mind to why and what a tree *is* until, perhaps, it isn't anymore. The derecho that silenced my tree's growth also left behind hundreds of damaged branches in the remaining boxelders along the driveway. These decaying limbs in turn have attracted many more woodpeckers to our land than resided here prior to the storm. On the stump that once was a shade tree for my chicken coop now flourishes moss and also the fairly frequent Downy Woodpecker, zooming in quite unnoticed to feed on ants.