



## The Old Lone Tree

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## THE OLD LONE TREE

BY P. S. HEATON

**T**HREE miles south of U. S. Highway 30, on a dirt road which makes a junction with the highway approximately six-tenths of a mile west of Central City, in Merrick County, stands a granite monument, in the shape of a tree trunk, bearing this legend: "ON THIS SPOT STOOD THE ORIGINAL 'LONE TREE' ON THE OLD CALIFORNIA TRAIL."

The Lone Tree, a giant cottonwood, was an important landmark for overland travelers making their way through the Platte Valley to California and Utah—although the inscription might more appropriately have referred to the Mormon Trail than to the trail to California. The Lone Tree stage station, from which the town of Lone Tree—now Central City—took its name, was located a few yards away. When the tree was destroyed in a storm, probably in 1865, its trunk was inscribed to a height of thirty feet with the names of travelers, and parts of it had been carried away by relic hunters.

C. E. Persinger begins his *History of Merrick County*<sup>1</sup> with a statement regarding the famous old tree. Because the volume, published in 1898, now is quite rare, an extended extract is reproduced herewith:

The early history of Merrick County (which was in its earliest years identical with that of Central City) seems to center about an old cottonwood tree which, in those "desert days," stood a lonesome but welcome sight on the north bank of the Platte river. Legend—such as so young a country as ours dares aspire to—hints to us that the old "Lone Tree" was the place of assembly for the red man in the days of his undisputed possession. Beneath the shadow of the old cottonwood the chief is said to have summoned his braves for consultation concerning a proposed hunt for the then plentiful bison. Or perhaps some thoughtless traveler on his way east or west had come into the red man's domain alone and with-

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<sup>1</sup>C. E. Persinger, *A History of Merrick County, Nebraska* (Central City, Nebraska, 1898).

out protection. Then the "Lone Tree" heard the guttural tones of the council of war, and in its solitude saw the red man creep silently nearer the unfortunate traveler and with his blood-curdling yell flash suddenly upon him and bury the tomahawk in his brain. Then followed the old tree's unwilling listening to the deeds of blood boasted of by the braves gathered beneath its boughs. Only in old age did its branches shelter peaceful pursuits and mark a resting place of the westward-moving van of civilization and settlement.

Such is the character which legend, born doubtless in the vivid imagination of some undeveloped novelist, but supported in no small degree by the facts of early history, gives to the veteran cottonwood from which our town took its first and best-known name. But passing by unauthenticated legend, the old "Lone Tree" loses little of either importance or interest as we approach the days of earliest settlement. This solitary guardian of the Platte was situated about fifty rods westward from the southeast corner of the farm now occupied by Eugene Hilton. For many years it was one of the famous landmarks on the long and weary journey to the great west of unknown extent and amazing possibilities. But few of those who had learned to love the old cottonwood could forbear carrying away a branch or piece of bark as a memento, or at least carving a name or sign upon its rough surface, and overcome at length by the weight of its friends' remembrances, and its end hastened by old age and the many fires kindled at its foot, the old "Lone Tree" fell a victim to the fury of the great storm in 1865. Pieces of its scarred body have gone from one end of the land to the other as mementoes of the long journey from east to west across the plains. For a year after its overthrow a large slab of the tree was to be seen on the platform of the newly-erected "depot" at Central City, but it, too, failed to withstand long the attack of the curiosity seeker and disappeared entirely. Mr. Hilton informs us that the trunk and lower branches of the old tree were, during its later years, entirely covered with names to the height of thirty feet. Unfortunately for the interest of our history, no one ever secured a photograph or drawing of the "Lone Tree" and we are forced to content ourselves with an illustration of the spot where this veteran giant of the forest once raised his head toward the sky and cheered the lonely traveler for forty miles of his journey. Perhaps, however, the mere location of this historic character may fix a little more firmly upon the minds of our younger readers the knowledge of the object around which centers the affection of all those who helped to lay the foundation of our county's history.

Under the date of Jan. 31, 1893, Mr. Brewer<sup>2</sup> writes as follows:

"The first time I saw the old Lone Tree was on the 20th day of September, 1860. It was then a green and vigorous tree. The next time I saw it was in 1863. It was then dead and leafless. The repeated fires of the pilgrims about its roots had done the work. It stood there, gaunt and blighted, an emblem of death and desolation, for two years. It went

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<sup>2</sup> J. G. Brewer, an early settler of Merrick County.

down in the great storm of 1865. In its prime it was a glorious tree—a typical cottonwood, between three and four feet in diameter at the stump height, and twenty feet to the first limb. The branches were wide-spreading and the whole tree was remarkably symmetrical in its proportions. It was visible for twenty miles up or down the river. Seen from these points it appeared to stand a long distance from any other tree, but really it was only about eighty rods to other timber above on the bank of the Platte. It was a noted landmark in the old days of overland travel and was known in every town and hamlet from the Atlantic to the Pacific.”<sup>3</sup>

While Mr. Persinger was preparing his *History* a number of “In Memoriam” articles appeared in the *Central City Nonpareil*. The following was devoted to the Old Lone Tree:

There is something sort o’ lonesome about this history of Merrick County. It gives me the “blues” to have such old associations stirred up. If there wasn’t a little streak of sunshine glimmering through at times the “blue” devil would reign supreme with his somber wings shadowing the past.

If old Lone Tree had given the world an ante-mortem statement, how much of sunshine and how much of shadow it would have contained! It would have told us of savage scalp dancers; of victims tortured to death. It would recount the amorous wooing of the dusky swain, and in later days of some not so dusky. And how softly and mournfully its leaves would rustle as it depicted the laying away of loved forms from the sight of men forever; were those forms dusky or white, yet were they followed by tears wrung from bleeding hearts. It would have told us of love and of lust, of noble deeds and of hellish crimes; for its bright leaves have fluttered in the pure atmosphere of the prairie above, while under its spreading arms the air was polluted by the presence of Jack Slade. It has been honored by sheltering the noble form of John C. Fremont. In my mind’s eye I see the tent of Brigham Young nestling beneath its shelter after a hard day’s march as he led his persecuted followers into the wilderness, where they could serve God according to the dictates of their own consciences. And they did serve the “meek and lowly one” in a manner that could be profitably imitated by the so-called Christians who were their persecutors and murderers. Their history, divested of the rancorous lies that cling about it, would shine out much more white and free from crime than our own, and while we deplore their falling into the polygamy so much practiced in the Bible times, we should deplore crimes of a like nature that, unlike theirs, are sneakingly hid from the view of man by those who were the first to cast a stone. How often the skirt that is haughtily kept from contact with that of a fallen sister is worn by one as frail! This has been proven so often that we have learned to look with a shade of suspicion upon those who are too ready to condemn others. Well now, I wonder if this is digressing.

Please come with me out of the long ago into times nearer

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<sup>3</sup> Persinger, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2.

our own and listen to the stories of the old tree. It is telling you now of smiling on dear old Mother Martin as she hurriedly passed under it on her many visits of mercy to the bedsides of the sick. It tells how often our quaint old Grandma Hilton rested in its cooling shade after ushering into the world so many of the little ones who now fill places left vacant by death. It has laughed as John L. Martin stopped to free his mind on some imaginary foe, and at Uncle Isaac as he would menacingly shake his crutch in the direction of John L's ranch. Old Sammy would quote scripture under it by the hour, and Uncle Jason would quietly sit on its protruding roots and take a big chew of tobacco, while his honest old face shone with good will to all.

It was under the muse-awakening rustle of its leaves that young Beery composed the famous impassioned poem to the idolized but unresponsive Delia Hurley, ending with these reproachful, tear-stained lines.

If you are not fair to me,  
What care I how fair you be!

Who blamed him for being captivated by the fair and roguish Delia! By Joe! she had us all at her feet, and she could have packed her pretty bright dresses in any of our trunks, begging our gunny bags' pardon.

One day I copied some of the hieroglyphics carved on its bark by thoughtless but friendly hands, little thinking that they were wounding their old friend to death. The name "Sid" was plain, and a living "comedy" came into my mind. On the other side of the tree—that is, in the deepest shadow "on moonlit nights"—were cut several series of initials. It seemed that in the long ago someone had cut the initials "J. V. & ——(blur)" and I think that if the carving had discovered the handwriting of the carver, Jim Vieregk would have been detected; and it would not take a great stretch of the imagination to see a Miss Martin at his side, smiling up at him as he cut their initials in the old tree in commemoration, perhaps, of a freshly spoken betrothal. Prompted by the above, no doubt, another series appeared, and "J. K. & Vi" were plainly visible. So John, you and "Vi" also did some sparking under the old Lone Tree, did you? But you didn't dream it would tell! Well, she was mighty pretty in her girlhood days; and better still, she hasn't gotten over it, and never will as long as her honest, jolly soul sparkles through her brown eyes. And I am glad that she has had a tender arm around her and a manly man at her side all these years since you disfigured the old landmark. Lower down and fresher showed the letters "T. J. & E." and I'll bet a bright new penny that Tom Johnson and Ella Doolittle were not far away when this engraving was done. I hope life is as sweet to them now as it was in those their wooing days, for Tom was brave and handsome and Ella—lord, but wasn't she sweet!<sup>4</sup>

The author was not then a resident of the county and as the articles were very interesting much curiosity was

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<sup>4</sup> Central City *Nonpareil*, April 14, 1898.

aroused as to the identity of the author.

Upon an occasion, when the question was being discussed on the street in Ed Persinger's presence, George Wells, the editor and publisher of the *Central City Democrat*, was trying to secure from him some hint as to the identity of the author, and during the discussion Mr. Wells stated, "In my opinion Charlie Adams is the author." Persinger hesitated a few moments and then stated, "Then Jim is the author." It then became the general belief that Jim, a well-known columnist with the *Rocky Mountain News* writing under the name of James Barton Adams, was the author and this belief continued until the following article appeared in the *Nonpareil* on May 4, 1899:

During the publication of "The History of Merrick County" in the *Nonpareil*, many of its readers were deeply interested in a series of articles written in connection therewith, titled, "In Memoriam." Through the courtesy of the former editor of this paper, C. E. Persinger, we are permitted to publish extracts from a personal letter to him from Mr. C. W. Adams, that breathes so tenderly the friendly emotions that permeated all of those articles, and shows what it was in him that attracted the warmest affections of the loving friends who knew him best, and who attested their sincere friendship, by sympathizing with his bereaved loved ones, and assisted in depositing his mortal remains in the cemetery, amidst the associations of more than twenty-eight years that his active life had been spent in building up its material interests, and where his body peacefully rests by the side of the loved wife and little children who had preceded him to that blissful country, where partings are no more. This letter was written in answer to one that Mr. Persinger had written to Mr. Adams on the day of the death of his wife of whom he so tenderly speaks, and was a request that he would furnish other "In Memoriams" and also permit his name to be associated with their publication. We are glad to pay this tribute to the memory of so good a man.

"1120 North 18th St., Omaha  
Dec. 12, 1898

Dear Ed:—I am now trying to pull what is left of a poor heart-broken old fellow together, enough to answer many letters from kind friends, whose comforting words come to me in this my time of sorrow.

I seemed to desert you with "In Memoriams", but Ed, a black cloud was fastening its merciless fingers about my heart, and slowly, but surely forcing my dear, sweet wife from my arms, and I was, oh! so helpless, that I could do nothing but cry, like a woman. I tried so hard to continue it while sitting at her bedside, but my interest could not be revived, and I forgot everything but her. So, knowing now why I so sud-

denly failed you, you will forgive me, I know. I had Judge Ewing's outline in my mind, as well as that of McAllister, Hartwell, and old mother Eatough, but the outline was as far as it got.

I enjoyed hearing my wife so often wonder who was writing "In Memoriam" and for that reason, principally, did not want my name mentioned. Then again, I thought others would not look upon it as kindly as you did. But now, if for any reason you wish it known, I have no objections, as I can think of nothing in either of the articles, or the Omaha letters that any one should be offended at.

Yours affectionately,  
C. W. ADAMS."

With the passing of time agitation for the erection of a fitting memorial to the tree increased and the board of supervisors of Merrick County decided to supply such a memorial.

Eugene Hilton, the owner of the farm upon which the tree had stood, donated the site.

The present monument, of fine Vermont granite, designed by W. S. Desch & Sons of Central City, was erected and dedicated on August 9, 1911.

In the early spring of 1934, Joe A. Hayes, then secretary of the Merrick County Old Settlers' Association, planted a cottonwood but a few feet from the monument, and on Arbor Day, 1934, the day being the 75th anniversary of the arrival of the first white settler, according to tradition, dedicatory services were celebrated by the Old Settlers' Association.

Due to extremely unfavorable weather and lack of care the tree planted by Mr. Hayes withered and died, and on Arbor Day, 1941, P. S. Heaton planted another tree in the same spot. This tree is still growing and in time may be a fine memorial to the old tree.