

OUR TREE HERITAGE:

Thong Trees, Indian Trail Trees

Help needed in locating these heritage trees

Recently I came across some information on and became aware of thong trees. No, it's not a tree wearing women's underwear! A thong tree is a tree, usually a one inch or so diameter White Oak or other hardwood species bent to the ground by our Native American Indians. These trees were bent over a forked stick and attached to the ground by a "thong" (a strip of deer leather or a piece of bark from another tree) attached to a stake that was pounded into the ground. Over the years, as these trees grew in the understory of our woods, epicormic shoots would sprout and the tree would take on a shape similar to an odd looking "4" or "r".

Thong trees were early American road/trail signs. They always indicated the best route through the woods, the location of a water source, location of medicinal herbs, the location of a cave for shelter, or the location of a salt-lick, i.e. a good hunting site. The trees were not usually isolated but rather one tree pointed towards another, until you reached the site that they were directing you. These trees today are located on rough forest land which was never suited for farming, pasture, or park land. Spared from burning, storms and the ax alike, a few of the many trees once vital to Indian communication and survival are alive today, speaking to anyone who knows how to listen.

I have seen references to these trees in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas, Southeast Missouri, and a few in Virginia and northern Georgia. Supposedly, all of the Eastern band Indians used these trail markers. I recently had the pleasure of seeing my first here in Tennessee. It is along the highway between Monterey and Jamestown, Tennessee. To find this tree, get off Interstate 40 at the Jamestown-Crossville exit and go north on State Highway 127 (also known as York Highway) toward Jamestown. Go approximately 14 miles and turn left on Highway 62 and travel approximately one mile towards Monterey. The tree will be on the right near the edge of the Highway. It is a 62 inch circumference White Oak bent that points in a southeasterly direction, possibly toward a spring or potable water source. I have heard tales of other thong trees seen in the Big South Fork area, at least five in the Townsend, Tennessee area adjacent to the great Smokey Mountains National Park, and supposedly a line of them through Anderson, western Knox, and Loudon Counties.

It is my opinion that these trees are all over our state and other eastern states. They need to be located, documented, and submitted as state Heritage trees so that they can be preserved for future generations. **I need your help. If you know of the whereabouts of one of these trees, contact either me at jim@corteseetree.com, or someone with the Tennessee Division of Forestry, or the Tennessee Urban Forestry or the Tennessee Urban Forestry Council.** Care needs to be exercised in making determinations about thong trees. You may see or be told of trees that resemble them, but a closer look shows them to be misshapen by natural causes. These trees are simply casualties. Trees could be bent by storms, or another tree branch may have fallen on a sapling, causing it to grow in a similar fashion. An authentic thong tree has well defined thong scars in the bark under the hip bend and on top of the second bend.

*By Jim Cortese, owner of Cortese Tree Specialists
and a member of the Knoxville Tree Board and a past TUFC president*