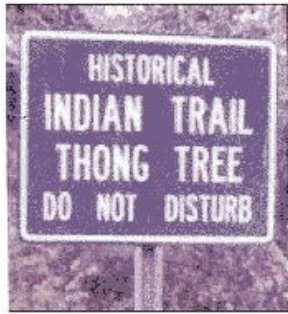


Indian Thong Trees

By Thresa B. Ziak



The Stone County thong tree is marked and noted to inform the public and protect the tree.

Living Relics Are Rare, But Still There

In the enclosing forest in Stone County, Mo., near the small town of Galena, just off KK Highway, stands a fascinating Indian thong tree. So valued is this tree that it is now registered with the Missouri Historical Society to help preserve its authentic characteristics.

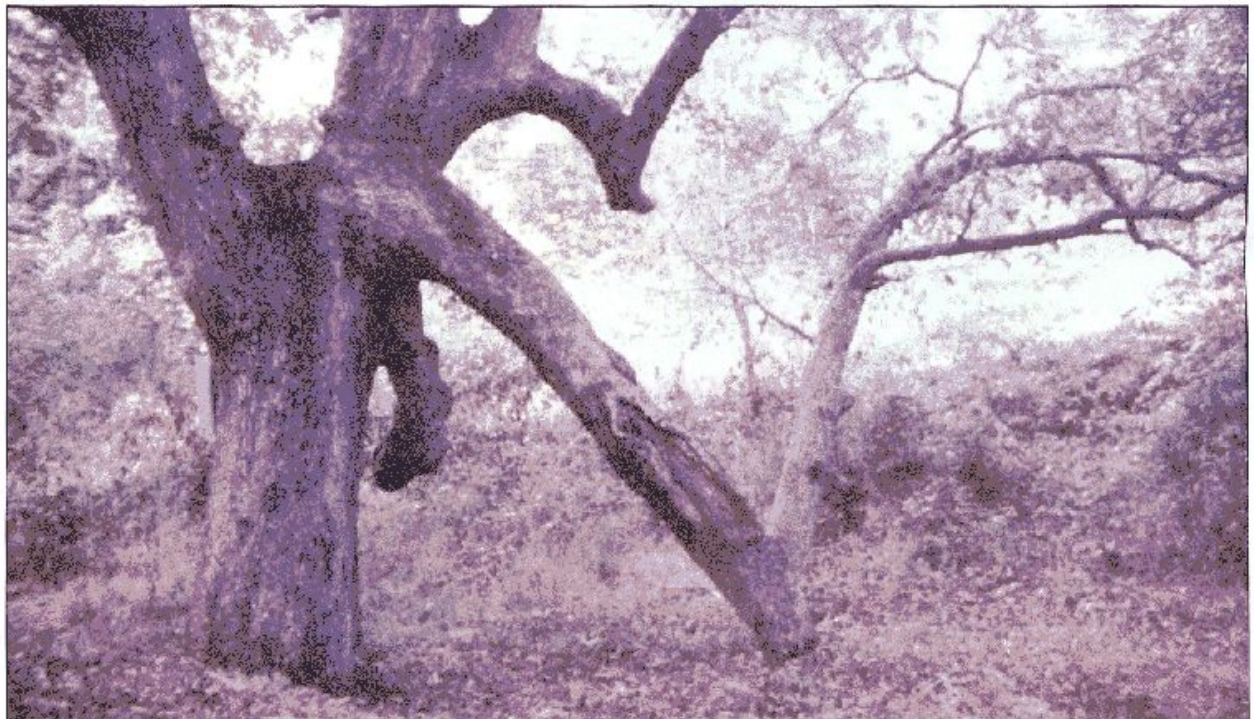
For centuries the Indian tribes of this region were the Fox, Sioux, and the Big and Little Osage. They were the responsible groups who ingeniously pioneered trails and avenues and secretly marked certain trees in the forest to designate areas that had water sources, caves that provided shelter and safety, medicinal herbs, burial and ceremonial sites, villages, and good hunting spots. Sometimes one tree would point to another tree indicating the presence of a tree trail to the desired destination. Travelers from different tribal groups who were unaccustomed to the area depended on this general timber language to aid in their survival.

Thong, when referring to these trees does not refer to a leather strap, but a cut forked branch that was used to form the contorted shape in saplings. It was

an easy process to form a thong tree. It could be done with a stone axe and two large "Y" shaped boughs. These supports had to be tough enough to endure the pounding of a stone axe, and firm enough to withstand the tension of a growing sapling. Usually the base of the forked branch was close to 6 inches in diameter, which was adequate for a one- to two-inch thick sapling. This substantial thickness and close grain warded off the gradual rotting process during the length of time it took the sapling to grow and permanently attain its bent shape. White oak was the preferred tree variety to use as marker trees due to its flexibility and hardness. If it was not available, any hardwood tree was used.

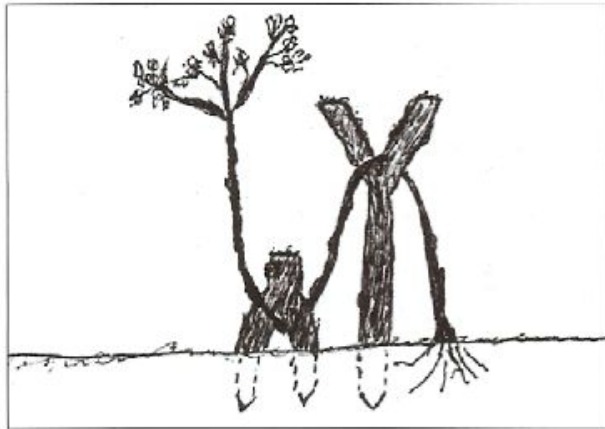
The first process of shaping the sapling was to drive one forked, freshly cut branch into the ground, close to the foot of the sapling, then bending the small, pliable trunk through the fork to form the first bend (also called a hip bend). Then the other forked branch was placed upside down over the trunk about two or three feet towards the crown of the tree, using the stone axe to pound the two prongs into the ground. Although the sapling's trunk was confined horizontally, the tree top was left to grow toward the light, and by the time the forked sticks would have decayed, the tree would be permanently shaped.

Messages, information, directions, warnings were



Surviving thong trees can be quite large or small, depending on soil conditions. Only bore samples and scars can provide verification.

indicated by slitting the bark of these maturing trees and inserting charred bark of the same kind of tree. Rosin or pitch was used to seal the slit and to keep



out insects. Permanent bumps and marks would grow around these cut as the tree aged.

Most thong trees are small in size although they can be centuries old. A number of reasons can be attributed to their growth being stunted: the bending process, drought, not enough sunlight, poor soil or other natural complications. This altered tree probably survived early settlers' axes because its gnarled form made it useless for their needs.

Today a number of thong trees found measure

around 12" in diameter, some are older than others, although they are the same size. Only a trained forester with an increment bore can really verify their age if the trees are in good health and do not have heart rot.

There are many trees that resemble thong trees and are accidentally formed by natural conditions. The way to determine the genuine identity of a point tree is to establish that the thong imprints in the bark under the hip bend and on top of the second bend are accurate and well construed, grow upward or rot away, thus forming the second bend which became the nose. Most of the side off-shoots and sprouts were removed, leaving only the top two branches growing upward.

After about three to four years, the sapling would retain its pointing pattern. These remaining trees are scattered throughout our forests and protected as cultural landmarks. They are being studied to help us understand the mysterious secrets of the past embedded in their unique forms, living relics of our nation's past. ☼

— Thresa B. Ziak, Galena, Mo., is a frequent contributor to *The Ozarks Mountaineer*. See also the article "Thong Trees: Messengers from Long Ago" by Terry Jacobs-Davis in the November, '04 issue for additional information about the subject.