

Sleepy Hollow Oaks

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In 1990, when we purchased a home in Brookfield, Wisconsin's Sleepy Hollow Subdivision, it held two oaks. The first, near the crest of a slope, was dead when we arrived. We had it sawn off at ten feet and made the trunk central to a playground with a lookout tower on top and a sandbox around the base. Eventually it deteriorated so we had the trunk taken down and sawn into cross-sections, called "cookies" by dendrochronologists.



Assistant Professor of Geography Chris Underwood (a dendrochronologist in the UW-Platteville Trees Lab) and his students analyzed a cookie from the sandbox oak and determined it began growing in 1854, six years after Wisconsin became a state, and died in 1988, a drought year in Southeast Wisconsin.



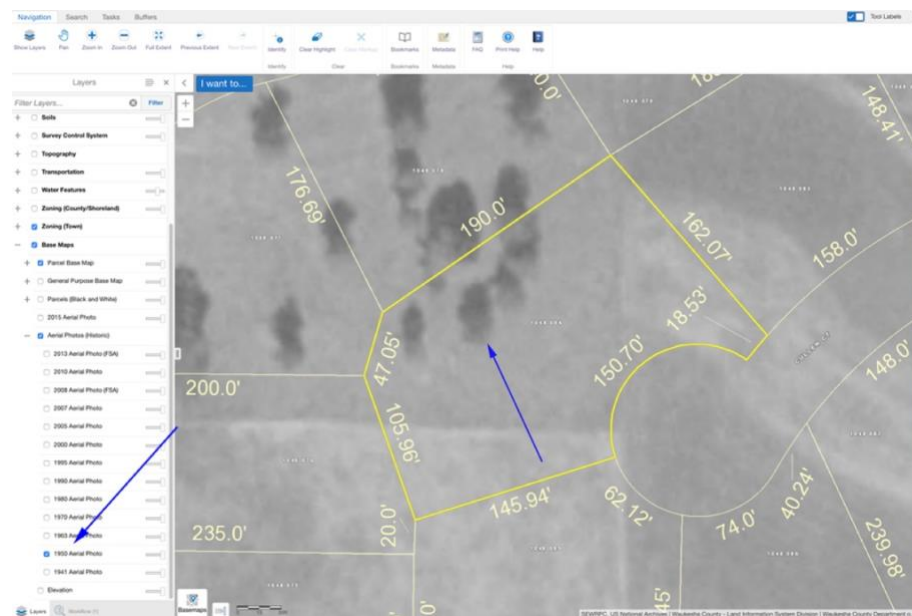
I made a small donation to the university foundation and, in addition to the lacquered and dated cookie, he sent the pin pictured below.



Professor Underwood thought the tree might have been a "Leopold Oak" based on Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* in which he notes after settlers plowed Wisconsin fields, fires were reduced and "seedling oaks forthwith romped over the grasslands in legions...All trees except the oldest veterans date back to the 1850s and the 1860s."

Not sure our Brookfield property was prairie, I contacted the Waukesha County Land Conservancy; Dan Carter, a Wisconsin Department of Transportation biologist, replied that according to an 1836 survey, our area was populated by stands of "maple, ash, elm, white oak, red oak, black oak (actually probably Hill's oak), and ironwood" and not prairie.

He thought it likely new oaks "began growing after Europeans at least partially opened the canopy by harvesting or clearing timber, which would have increased light and favored oak trees disproportionately."



Above: Waukesha County aerial photograph from 1950 showing our lot when it was pasture. The arrowed tree was on the crest of a hill when we bought

the place in 1990. To its left is the second oak we encountered on the property. Trees to the right were long gone by the time we arrived.

Below: The second oak grew down the hill from the first and lived until the summer of 2016 when suddenly all but a few leaves turned bright yellow and the tree died.





Above: The second oak was about 18 inches in diameter.



Above: We had the second oak processed by First Choice Tree Care of Mequon. The branches were sawn into 24" fireplace logs, but we preserved most of the trunk in two 10-foot-long sections that First Choice dragged to the edge of the street.



Above: Pat Wallace of Wallace Sawmill, Sullivan, picked up the trunk sections and quarter-sawed them...



...into 1.5" thick planks. He also kiln-dried the material.



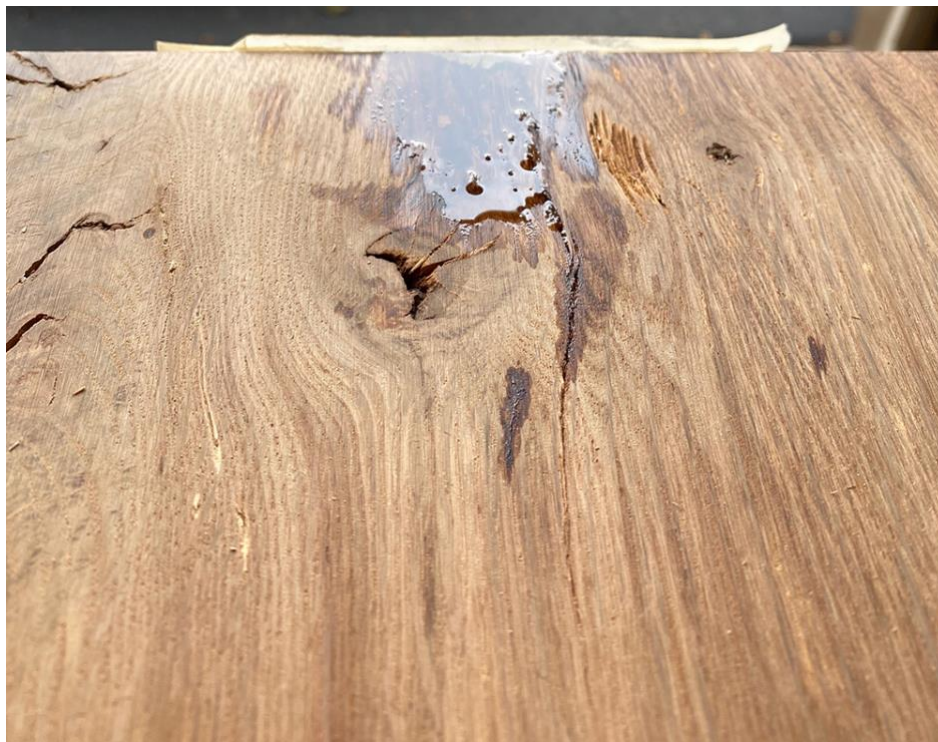
Cabinetmaker extraordinaire Jerry Kloehn (below right) of New Berlin, planed, joined, sawed, sanded, glued, and clamped the boards into table tops.



Jerry did most of the work on the tables helped occasionally by Bruce Annoye (above left), a skilled carpenter and woodworker. Now and then I acted as Jerry's assistant. Four tops were produced. Finish sanding, staining, and varnishing were completed in our garage near where the tree grew.



Above: The table that went to daughter Ann had voids that I filled with System 3 resin. Tape on the underside holds resin when clear-through voids needed to be filled.



Above: Resin when first applied.



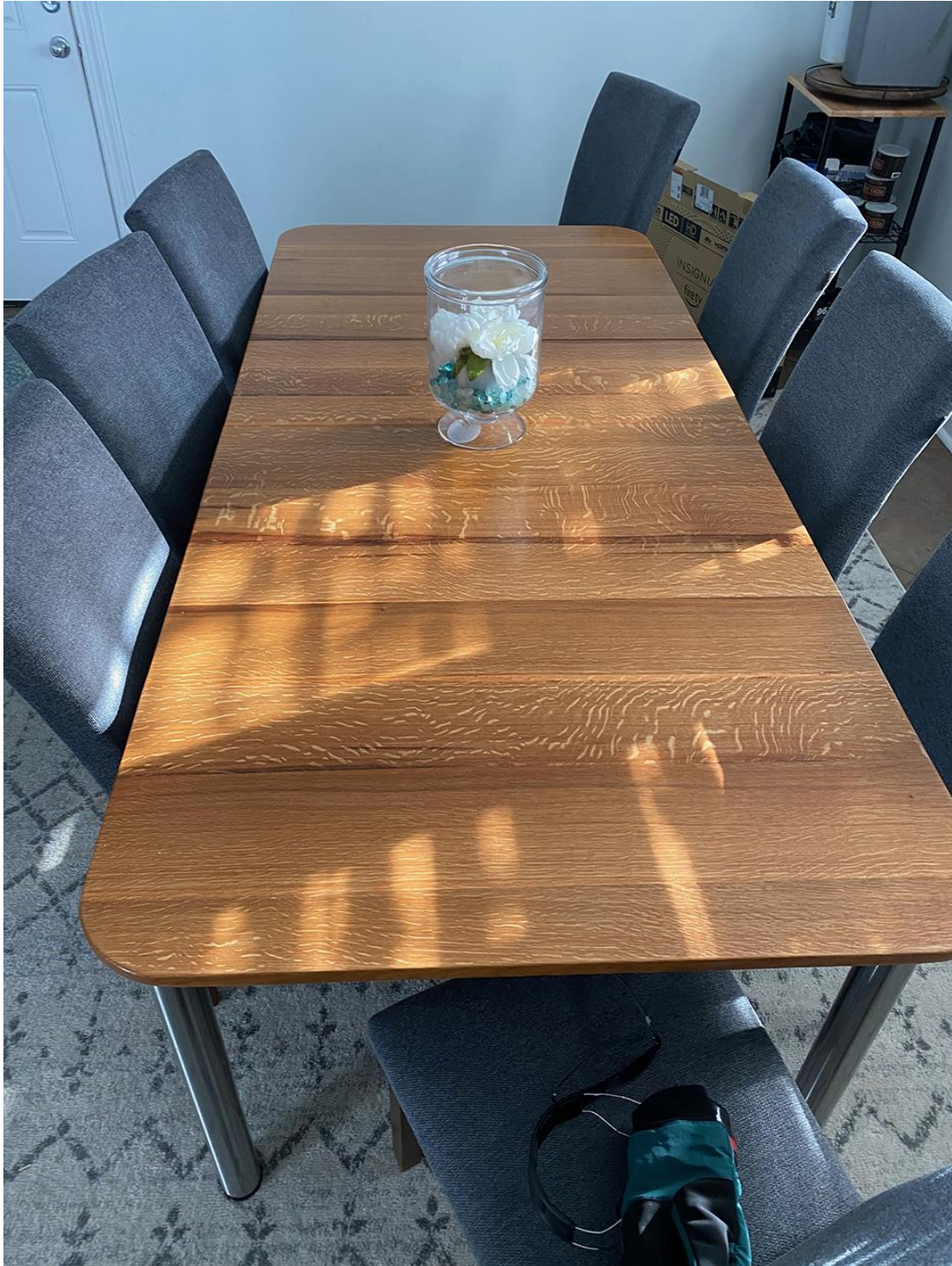
Above: Hardened resin is sanded, stained, and varnished with the rest of the top.



Above: The first table was donated to the Brookfield Public Library along with the original cookie dated by UW-Platteville dendrochronologist and Assistant Professor of Geography Chris Underwood. Cabinetmaker Jerry Kloehn built the display case.



Above: The largest single-piece table belongs to daughter Ann who lives in Franklin with husband Travis, grandson Silas, black lab Ava, and two cats, Cato and Milo aka Moo who photobombed the image before I could talk with his agent.



Above: Son Troy wanted an expandable version which was a major challenge especially since about two-thirds-of-the-way-through Jerry sold his shop. Poking around online I discovered Steve Kunda, a talented Menomonee Falls-based woodworker who completed work on this one. The table has two leaves, both in when the image was recorded.



Above: Steve Kunda in his Menomonee Falls woodworking shop.



Above: Close view of Troy and Sarah's expandable table.



Above: The fourth table is in our basement and will remain with the house.

The Beginning

The Sleepy Hollow Oaks tables project started with a beat-up desk my wife Pam and I acquired when we moved into a 1953 custom ranch in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin. The home was designed and built by a man whose first name was Wallace; we purchased it from his widow in October, 1978. Two old desks were left in the basement shop area—one with its top covered in heavy-duty metal painted green.

When we moved to our second home in Brookfield, we took the desks along much to the dismay of friends helping us relocate—both desks were heavy.

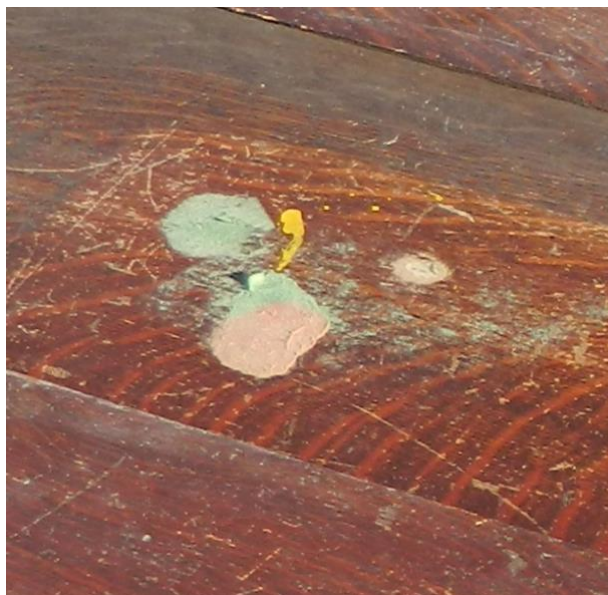
After many years, they started falling apart so I decided to scrap them but was curious to see what was under the metal cladding and pleasantly surprised to find a beautifully grained top made of solid, one-inch-thick planks. The pieces originally were joined using tongue-and-groove and wood glue, but when I removed the metal cladding, the top separated into three pieces. I stored the planks for about ten years trying to think of a way to re-use them.

One day Pam mentioned she wanted me to refinish our oak kitchen table which we had purchased from a store called Naked Furniture. I suggested building a new one using the reclaimed planks. As the accompanying before photograph shows, the planks were in rough shape, so I took them to cabinetmaker Jerry Kloehn who had a shop named Across the Grain in West Allis. Jerry

immediately identified the wood as quarter-sawn white oak and said, "firewood." He likes working with new wood. Nevertheless, he agreed to help turn the planks into a new table top and his assistance was beyond invaluable. The first thing he said I should do was take the planks to Kettle Moraine Hardwoods (KMH) in Hartford.



Above and below: The original, well-used and abused boards that were under the desk's green metal cladding.



A technician there said KMH's sander was capable of accepting 30-inch-wide pieces but first as much varnish as possible would have to be removed because it gums up the sandpaper. In addition, about 1.5 inches on each end needed to be sawed off due to innumerable nails. The KMH tech said these too would ruin the sandpaper roll and a replacement cost \$40.00.

I dissolved the varnish using paint stripper, and then took the planks to Jerry who sawed the tongue and groove off the loose pieces and re-glued them, saying tongue and groove was the old way of doing things and not necessary in this era of greatly improved adhesives.

Next, I sawed the ends off and, following Jerry's direction, used an old hand plane to remove large imperfections before embarking on many hours of hand sanding with a sanding block and extra coarse 40 grit paper.

KMH then ran the top through its sander for about five minutes at \$1.80/minute which greatly smoothed the surface and made the pieces more uniform. The tech also sanded the underside to clean it up some, but I wanted it left rough to show future owners what the surfaces looked like originally.

The planks together were only about 30.5 inches wide so I needed to increase this to match our previous kitchen table's width. Jerry had various pieces of scrap lumber and produced a relative of mahogany called andiroba that seemed to match the darker colors in the quarter-sawn oak. KMH had a slab of andiroba that was 1.5 inches thick by 6.25 inches wide and 8 feet long for \$53.58. Jerry expertly cut it down to size in all needed dimensions and glued the new pieces to the oak planks.

He then used a can to trace the arcs at the corners—as he did later with the Sleepy Hollow table tops—and cut along the lines with a saber saw. I acted as his assistant and was impressed by his level of know-how and craftsmanship.

Back at our place, many hours of sanding with belt and orbital sanders and a sanding block followed. The lightest paper I used was 180 grit. I then applied Danish oil fruitwood stain which was recommended by members of an online woodworking group and seven coats of oil-based, floor-grade varnish suggested by personnel at a hardware store Jerry referred me to.

The legs were purchased online from a company in Maryland, and I added metal bracing to make it less likely some fool standing on the table would crash through—I now realize that was probably unnecessary.

Below: Kitchen table made from roll top desk and andiroba planks.



I also researched the history of the small brass part that I polished and left in place. Looking closely, I noticed a logo that I traced to the P. F. Corbin Company.

A 1911 catalog I located on the Web included a graphic that looks something like the one on the brass part. Additional research led me to discover that the part is known as a trap-door or catch plate. Its purpose is to receive the lock striker of the moving part of an old-fashioned, roll top desk, indicating that this is how the planks began life. Although I couldn't trace the exact age of the original desk, a variety of lock and cabinet experts I communicated with online thought it probably was made between 1890 and 1910 with the earlier year favored based on the appearance of the logo and the fact that the planks were solid—not veneered.



Logo on brass plate.



Logo in 1911 catalog.



Rolltop lock parts.

White oaks are able to live 600 years, so it's possible the tree that yielded the planks started growing before Columbus sailed across the Atlantic.

Sadly, two of the planks on the table top separated, and I had to strip and refinish the table. Jerry warned me that the old tongue and groove approach and adhesives couldn't be trusted and recommended redoing all the joints with modern wood glue. But one seemed solid, and I wanted future owners to see how the planks were originally joined. Good intentions gone bad.

Jerry resawed the planks and glued them for me. Stripping was easier the second time around, but I sanded for a number of weekends and then applied 11 coats of varnish.

* * *

The wood in the Sleepy Hollow Oaks tops began growing in the middle of the 19th century before the Civil War. And the quarter-sawn oak in the original roll top desk whose top became our kitchen table might date from many centuries before that. It's satisfying to me that they've endured all those years and have many years of existence ahead of them.

Huge thanks to Jerry Kloehn who did more to produce the five tables than anyone and to Bruce Annoye who helped along the way.

Steve Kunda is the primary reason the expandable table was brought to a successful completion. After Jerry produced the four separate sections I tried to make them slide together myself but couldn't get the pieces to line up well enough to call it done. Steve to the rescue!

Using additional material from the Sleepy Hollow Oak that lived until 2016, Steve also helped me complete a number of shelves for my daughter and son-in-law's home in Franklin, Wisconsin.

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