

## Spruce Trees as Seen From Bench One of the Kuse Farm Nature Trail

A row of spruce trees is planted along the northern boundary of the Kuse property along Allman Ave. They were planted by Walter Kuse in the late 1920's and were offspring of trees that grew around the Harris property on the north side of the road. The family spoke of them as "Black Hills Spruce". The following account written by Dr. Martin Piehl, a grandson of the Harris family and a botanist who taught at UW Milwaukee, was sent to the Kuses to provide information about the ancestry of those trees.

To my life-long friends and their Museum. Martin

### THE MEDFORD (WI) BLACK HILLS SPRUCE AND THE TRAVELING PREACHER

It's the mid-1920's and the Trial Orchard of the Medford unit of the state experiment stations has been in existence since 1901. It displayed a mix of apple varieties for testing their suitability in this locale which when it was started was still of relatively recent white settlement. Also planted at the orchard were limited numbers of crabapples and plums.

The orchard ground was donated by S. F. Harris, a civil war veteran, who had taken up a homestead and later acquired additional land around it. He was also an agent for the Wisconsin State Horticultural Society and received their shipments of young trees, planted them, pruned, and recorded how successful each horticultural variety was here. He communicated the trees' performance to them, and on at least one occasion went to Madison to report and meet with the assembled members of the Society. The location of that orchard of over 100 years ago is on the northwest corner of roads that are now named Allman St. and Woodland Dr., a mile NW of downtown Medford.

In addition to the fruit trees Mr. Harris contracted with the state to plant, some ornamental trees and shrubs were planted at the Harris home place, since he was also an agent for certain nurseries, particularly that of George Moulson, Rochester, New York. He traveled by train, horse, or just walked to talk with the public and especially farmers about fruit trees or other plants and about farming and homesteading in general in this newly-opened region. When selling trees he carried in his saddle-bag several large tomes describing fruit tree selections and brightly illustrating some in color. If a viewer became interested enough to make a purchase he took their order for future shipment from the New York nursery. He apparently enjoyed conversing, as the tale was told even many years later, that his trotter horse, as its buggy moved along Medford streets, surmised Mr. Harris always talked, so it pulled up close and stopped at EVERY pedestrian and buggy that happened their way ... leaving some folks astonished and speechless!

Some of the original ornamental trees still stand, such as Silver Maples and Cottonwoods near Woodland Drive. Also standing today and occasionally reseeding nearby are trees with a different history. These are the spruces along Allman St. and a few other sites in the area. These spruces are not natives and locally have been called Black Hills Spruce, though they have demonstrated a degree of adaptability by forming viable seed and seedlings now and then, especially if a slightly sandy or gravelly seedbed is at hand. With such seedlings convenient to roads they are known to have been transplanted to Eau Claire and possibly elsewhere. It is with this tree that our mid-1920's timeline comes in.

Apparently S. (amuel) F. ("Frank") Harris' enthusiasm for trees and planting seedlings was enough to influence others, even after his passing in 1912. He was a State of Mainer as a younger man, who enlisted from Maine in the Union army, and was wounded, in his right arm in the battle of Hatcher's Run, VA, confining him to several army hospitals. He was of British ancestry, and besides him, also immigrating after the war from Maine to Wisconsin with prospects for better land were his father and three brothers. One of his brothers, George Washington Harris, ("Uncle George" in early Medford) was a preacher who traveled doing his ministry. In the 1920's George, while traveling in the South Dakota area was impressed by the local trees, especially the

conifers. He liked the spruces, which appeared different than those in Wisconsin, and happened onto an area where there were many spruce seedlings, more than could likely survive into trees. The soil was such that they could be easily extracted, and his horticultural leanings caused him to begin taking up seedlings. By the time he finished he had gathered them by the dozens, with the idea of shipping them to show friends and family back home these nice trees.

Their destination was Medford, Wisconsin. My father, Emil Piehl, was one of the recipients of the seedlings, and said they came nicely wrapped in burlap and were quite small, measuring in inches, not feet. Father was concerned about their ability to survive and take hold in the heavy soils here. He planted them with their becoming windbreaks in mind in two main sites, one just about 50 feet south of highway 64, and one in a single row interspersed with Jack Pine about 200 feet further south along his property boundary with Hessing, later Schneider, then Hoffman, property. At times over the years the spruces gave shelter and roost to various uncommon domestic fowl kept there. His place was in Section 28, also the site of "Piehl's Woods," then Medford Township, now Medford city. The trees' age and planting date was corroborated by annual growth ring counts on a tree that died at this site in the 1960's. Emil Piehl too was a traveling salesman for years in Taylor and adjoining counties and was disposed to bringing home or trading plant starts from farm homes or towns he visited. In his later years these spruces at his place began to form seedlings and he may have distributed some of those to interested persons.

Other trees of this shipment were received by sons of S. F. Harris and were planted near the houses, barns, and boundaries of the homestead property. Some surviving today were also planted in a row of hardwoods on the north side of Allman St., west of Woodland Dr. and bordering the original orchard. It is quite probable that others were planted on the nearby farm of another son, Fred Harris, which fronts on present Anderson Road. S. F. Harris, and one or more sons, were active in the original planting of trees at the Medford Evergreen Cemetery. Whether any Black Hills Spruce were added to other spruces, particularly at the cemetery where there are Harris plots, is uncertain.

With identifying specific spruces in mind the "Black Hills Spruce" as used here is a naturally occurring geographic variety of the wide-ranging White Spruce (*Picea glauca*), a Wisconsin native, having a huge, transcontinental range from Nova Scotia and Main to Alaska. Its distinctiveness is considered to be at the subspecific level within that species, though it often is not differentiated by scientific name. Unfortunately, today "Black Hills Spruce" is applied in a different sense in nursery trade, to a horticulturally selected dense growing form called *densata*, and as such distinguished as a cultivar or as a taxonomic variety. Thus, one need be cautious in applying "Black Hills" for spruces since it is applied in two or more different ways, particularly around Taylor County. In the Medford area this botanical immigrant like its human counterpart immigrants of different genetic lineages and nationalities have adapted to a new homeland, overcoming a new set of challenges. Here the grown trees and offspring of Preacher G. W. Harris' enthusiastic introduction radiate their conical, dark-green silhouettes, as Tannenbaume, now and again decorated with water droplets, frost etchings, or ice crystals that sparkle as they reflect beads of light of heavenly or earthly source. And each spring these one-time Dakotans march to a Wisconsin annual cycle, forming glistening cone-to-be "flowers" awaiting puffs from nearby pollen-bearing clusters in its new home, and thereby they live on.

A memory writing by Martin A. Piehl, chilly snowbound evening at Burlington, WV, 7 December 2003 ©