

The farmstead here on the knoll looked a bit different as the 20th century began. A log house, not very big but with second floor sleeping areas, stood just where our cabin now has provided us shelter for forty-five years. The kitchen of that first house had east and west windows and a wood shed adjoining it on the north as well as a summer kitchen. When summer temperatures made the wood burning range in the kitchen add too much heat for comfort, the stove was moved out to that screened “summer kitchen,” really just a covered porch. The south part of the house was divided into a bedroom on the west and a living room on the east. And a front porch extended the width of the south side of the house. Steps led from the porch to the yard on that side of the house. There were fruit trees—a sweet apple, two Duchess trees, a Greening, two Northern Spies, and even a cherry tree. A little farther south was a row of maple trees.

The farm buildings lay to the west and southwest of the house, all occupying this high spot between the wetlands to the east, north, and west.

Eight children—from eleven year old Nellie to baby Constance—along with their parents, Lars and Cornelia Erickson, and Cornelia’s father, Lars Augustineson, occupied the log house. The lively youngsters climbed trees, ate green apples, played in the dirt, and learned to help on the farm and in the farmhouse.

The good neighbors who had lived north of the Augustinesons when they homesteaded the farm in 1873, the Perketts, had moved to Traverse City a few years before the end of the 19th century, but they occasionally came down on the train for a visit. In 1901, Oliver Perkett made one of these visits to his old friend, Lars Augustineson. Benedicta had died on the eve of 1900, and the elderly gentleman was cheered to see his old neighbor. And Oliver had brought a little present with him.

The two men thought a bit about just where to locate the gift and finally decided that a place just south and east of the steps to the front porch would be perfect. So, they took a sharp shovel, made a slit in the fertile soil, and inserted the little silver maple seedling that had made the trip with Oliver from Traverse City.

Those lively kids were probably sometimes a danger to that tiny tree, but with admonitions from their parents and from Morfar, they managed to avoid destroying it. For about ten years, the sapling grew in the midst of the family that had also grown a bit with the addition of the last two children.

Lars Augustineson didn’t see many years of growth in the little tree, as he died in 1902. Lars and Cornelia Erickson were having trouble, too, as time went on, finding room for the six boys and four girls as they grew. A new house was in order.

They built the new house in a different location, and the old log building became the farm blacksmith shop. For several years, Lars Erickson and the boys used the forge they had installed there to take care of the needs of the farm horses and equipment. Sometime in the late teens or early 1920s, though, the building burned. Although the little silver maple, now a sturdy young tree, was very close to the front porch of the building, it was not injured.

The tree was allowed to grow in peace as the farmers and livestock scurried around, scarcely giving it a thought. It was just there, as, in the minds of the young Erickson men and women, it always had been.

Lars Erickson died in 1929, and the family gradually dispersed as the young people married and started families of their own. Most of them, though, didn't go far. The attachment to the home place was always strong. Even those who lived in other areas were often "at home" visiting their mother and siblings.

In 1934, Einar, who had been two years old when his grandfather, Lars Augustineson had planted the silver maple seedling, married Frances, the young schoolteacher at the corner one-room school. He built a log cabin that summer and fall, locating it on the same footprint as the old house. The silver maple was over three decades old now and big enough to provide shade for the cherrywood cabin.

Einar and Frances and their three children lived in that small log house until late 1943, when Einar's mother, Cornelia, needed someone to live with her. So, the family moved to the "big house," leaving yet another cabin on that lovely knoll in the middle of the farm.

But, that silver maple continued to grow. By 1975, the little cabin Einar built, unoccupied for over thirty years, was too damaged to save. We took down that cabin and built our frame cabin on the same spot. Digging the basement, we encountered the log walls of the cellar of the original house.

And the silver maple, now known as The Big Maple, continued to grow. We planted four of her daughters in our yard, too, two on the east side and two on the north. They are now forty years old. Other children of the maple have grown up in sight of the house—a couple on the edge of the swamp and even at least one in the woods across the road, several hundred meters away. And, descendants of Lars Augustineson have also taken home seedlings from the old tree to plant in various location around the country.

This past summer, Runo and Matt, a cousin from Portland, measured the circumference of the silver maple. It was twenty-two feet, eight inches at about three feet from the ground. The old matriarch had continued to add inches since we built our cabin in the 1970s. She and her daughters provided shade for our house, keeping us comfortable in the warm summers.

A little over a week ago, Runo was helping me wash windows on the high east side of the cabin. He was on a ladder, and I was inside, cleaning the other sides. He looked puzzled, and I asked him what it was.

"I don't know," he said, and then looked puzzled once more. Then, not with a crash, but with a gentle whoosh and a dull thud, one large limb/trunk of the silver maple fell, landing headed southeast, away from the cabin. We had not had an indication that there was anything wrong with the old tree. There were no holes in it, no obvious rot, no big dead limbs, and it had leafed out and had seemed to flourish this past summer, just as it had done for a hundred and twenty years.

Now, though, we could see the inside of the tree. It was nearly hollow. A second much bigger trunk ended in very large limbs that hung over the cabin.

It was quite obvious, even to someone who knew nothing about such things, that the venerable silver maple had to come down.

A good friend who is a timber framer, looked at the tree and agreed; it not only had to come down—it had to come down very soon! We were so very fortunate that he knew a person he called “the best tree man I know” and that agile and talented gentleman came yesterday, and in one day—climbing up into the far reaches of the tree, cutting limbs and dropping them, eventually dismembering the part that hung over the cabin— took the tree down in one day. The last, biggest trunk and limbs he fell in one piece.

We will miss the silver maple and her shade, but we know that even Mother Trees do not live forever. When I checked facts about this species, I read that one hundred twenty to one hundred thirty years is about the lifespan one can expect. So, our Big Maple was ready to go.

I wonder, though, what old Lars Augustineson, who came to America on a sailing vessel in the 1870s, would have thought if he could have seen what had become of that tiny seedling he slipped into the ground alongside the sharp point of a shovel. Some might think that he would have been sad. I doubt it.

I believe Lars would have marveled at the skill and fortitude of that figure, harnessed to a high limb of the tree, taking it down piece by piece, making our cabin safe for us. Chain saw spitting chips, chunks of heavy limbs carefully lowered on lines, with no more than an errant leaf touching the metal roof, what would a man like Lars think about this? I think he would have seen the respect for that tree in its end as well. The Big Maple did not end her life having caused damage to another. Instead, a man with skill and daring, combined with an evident love of trees, ended her life in the most humane manner. Lars Augustineson probably would have thought that just about perfect.