INDIAN TRAIL MARKERS IN ILLINOIS

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In various areas throughout the Mississippi Valley and eastward, and particularly in northern Illinois, may be seen numerous curiously bent trees. They are most numerous in Cook and Lake Counties north of Chicago. Here they may be seen in the woods and along the streets of North Shore villages.

The casual observer would look upon these trees merely as malformed growths. But careful observation discloses a pronounced peculiarity of deformation which ascribes to the trees an aspect quite different from that of ordinary deformed growths, bespeaking of deliberate, rather than accidental, deformation. This consists of a sharp-angled bend in the main trunk at heights varying usually from two to five feet above the base.

Research failed to disclose any scientific treatment relating to such misshapen trees. Scattered reports of historians, however, indicated that these trees might have been bent when young and supple by Indians for the purpose of marking routes through the forests.[1-6] In order to verify these reports, if possible, a systematic study was instituted and carried on over a period of several seasons.

The results of this study confirmed the reports and indicated that a custom had been developed whereby young saplings were bent and fastened in position in such ways that they became permanently deformed. The saplings were not broken, but merely bent, with the direction of bend paralleling the direction of the route to be followed. Consequently, a long line of similarly bent trees would be distinguishable from the surrounding trees of the forest, and could be readily followed by proceeding from one to the next according to the direction indicated.

It has been found that various methods of securing the saplings in position were used. Sometimes the saplings, after being bent, were weighted down with a rock or a pile of dirt. But most frequently they were tied in position with a strip of rawhide or a tough vine* (see figure).

The deformation of the saplings had a serious effect upon their subsequent growth. The trunk and branches were distorted earthward, and hence could no longer function normally. Compensation for this treatment occurred only after new vertical stems—secondary trunks—began to appear along the bent primary trunk. During this readjustment period, growth was retarded; hence such trees are not as large as normal trees of corresponding ages. After the new stems became established, the extremities of the original bent-over trunks usually atrophied and decayed away. But occasionally the original trunk tip took root at its point of secondary contact with the ground. When this happened, the tree functioned thereafter with two sets of roots.

There is a popular motion among many individuals that primitive peoples possess an infallible sense of direction, and consequently require no trail markers. There is no scientific basis for this belief which is refuted by most ethnologists. Even if this were true, however, it does not necessarily follow that a mere knowledge of the right direction is all that is needed to travel readily from one point to another.

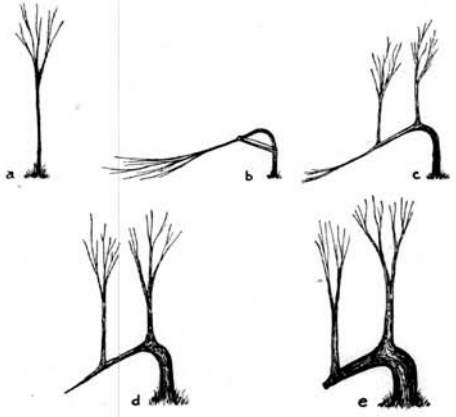
There are numerous reasons for marking a trail even though the general direction might be known. A direct route from one locality to another might be obstructed by natural barriers such as unusual elevations or depressions in the terrain, dense thickets of thorny underbrush, treacherous swamps, or non-fordable bodies of water. To facilitate travel, a marked detour might be advisable. Various other reasons may also suggest themselves.

On the other hand, long established and important routes of travel apparently were not marked inasmuch as the paths themselves, worn well into the ground, were readily followed. In nearly all cases, the trails indicated by tree markers trended at cross angles to the main thoroughfares of known Indian travel within the region. Consequently, it can be concluded that trees were used to mark trails of secondary importance, or possibly of seasonal or temporary use only. They seem never to have been used to mark trails which were conspicuous in themselves inasmuch as the marking of such routes would have been superfluous.

The casual observer often encounters difficulty in distinguishing between trail markers and ordinary malformed trees. Deformities may occur in many ways. A large tree may fall upon a sapling, pinning it down for a sufficient length of time to effect a permanent bend. Wind, sleet, snow, or depredations by animals may cause deformities. Such injuries, however, usually leave their marks which are apparent to the careful observer, and these may serve to differentiate such trees from those which were purposely bent as markers.

Observations have shown that the fall of a large tree upon a smaller one may cause the latter to break, or else to bend in a wide arch beginning from the base. Indian trail markers are not bent from the bases. Also, unless trail markers have been subsequently injured, they do not bear scars other than the knob left by the atrophy and subsequent decay of the original trunk extremity. Such knobs might be termed remnant-scars as compared to injury-scars. In any event, a line of similarly bent trees, spaced at intervals, and all directed parallel toward or away from each other, would preclude the possibility of accidental deformity.

The ages of the trail markers in Illinois are all upwards of a hundred years, thus placing them well within the period of Indian occupancy. The last Indian title in Illinois was not extinguished until 1833, the date of the Treaty of Chicago between the Government of the United States and the Pottowattomie Nation. But wandering bands of Indians continued to inhabit the region for many years thereafter because the treaty gave them the right to hunt and fish within the area as long as title to the land remained vested in the American government. Because of the longevity of trees, many of the trail markers still stand as living reminders of the day when savage tribes met in council at old Fort Dearborn, and bark canoes lined the shores of the Chicago River.



Steps in Development of a Trail Tree Marker

a. Sapling, young enough to withstand acute bending near base; b. Usual method of securing sapling in position by hitching, thereby effecting a sharp bend near base of trunk; c. Later, one or more secondary stems appear along the bent trunk, replacing the original branching structure; d. Several seasons later, the new structures have made considerable progress while the original branches have disintegrated; e. Many years later, the portion of the original trunk beyond the point of emergence of the farthest secondary stem has entirely atrophied and decayed away. Such is the general appearance of trail tree markers today.

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* This latter method is reported in use at the present time among the jungle natives of the Philippine Islands. Personal communication from Dr. Fay-Cooper Cole, University of Chicago.