

A Tree Named Grover Cleveland

By Larry Kidder

On the afternoon of the last Friday in April 1893 William Reep helped his students from Mount Range finish planting a tree near the Pleasant Valley schoolhouse that they had come to visit that day. As a small crowd of children and adults looked on, he named the tree Grover Cleveland in honor of the recently elected president. This announcement drew applause from the assembled children of the Pleasant Valley School and their guests, the students from nearby Mount Range School in West Amwell and several visitors from Pleasant Valley. Grover Cleveland was the first of 19 trees planted that afternoon. The 1893 Arbor Day celebrations had been planned by the Pleasant Valley School teacher, Virginia Reep, and her brother, William, the teacher at Mount Range. Two more trees planted by the Mount Range students that day were named in honor of New Jersey Governor Werts and Benjamin Harrison, the former president who had served a single term after Cleveland's first term.

When the Mount Range students had finished, the other sixteen trees were planted and named by the Pleasant Valley students who chose to honor various historical, political, and literary people in addition to the state of New Jersey itself. Christopher Columbus received a namesake, as did poets John Greenleaf Whittier and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. When Miss Reep planted her tree, she dedicated it to George Washington. The selected names were appropriate for a ceremony whose origins dated back to the early days of human history and that over the years had celebrated trees as a religious and literary symbol of life and hope for the future.

The tree planting ceremony came after the Pleasant Valley School children put on a special program they had prepared for their invited guests. The program consisted of a number of readings, recitations, and songs reflecting the themes of Arbor Day. The religious element was evident in the opening scripture reading, the recitation by young Hugh Parkhill on The Weather Proverbs, and Lida Larowe's reading "Forest Hymn." After an opening song called "Arbor Day," rendered by students Bertha Pidcock and Lida Larowe, Miss Reep presented a reading on "Why Arbor Day Should be Celebrated." The esthetics of trees were extolled in readings on "Beautiful Trees" and "Beautiful Things." The value of trees was explored in a recitation "What do we plant when we plant the tree?" and "What one tree is worth." There were other songs to nature in general and "The Birch Tree" in particular. A patriotic flavor was added at the end with a recitation on "A Flag Day" and the singing of the *Star Spangled Banner*. After the program, visiting teacher William Reep addressed those assembled and then began the tree planting ceremony with the planting of the tree named Grover Cleveland.

The *Hopewell Herald* correspondent from Pleasant Valley, Rachel Williamson, reported that the Arbor Day program was a pleasurable experience and the program, complete with the names of the participating students, was also published in the paper. Throughout the 1890s and early 1900s the paper reported Arbor Day in Pleasant Valley as an event primarily celebrated by school children. As an American holiday, Arbor Day had originated in Nebraska with settlers who missed the trees back east and wanted to create a more forest-like environment on the plains. Over a million trees were planted on the first Arbor Day in 1872. New Jersey inaugurated Arbor Day in 1884 and for a time the date for the celebration fluctuated between late April and May. Today, national Arbor Day and the official New Jersey Arbor Day occur on the last Friday in April, just it was celebrated in Pleasant Valley in 1893 when the tree named Grover Cleveland was planted.

Throughout the 1890s in Pleasant Valley, Arbor Day celebrations consisted of tree plantings and school programs much like the 1893 celebration. In 1895 there was a religious focus to the ceremony and it featured addresses by several local ministers. The single maple tree planted after the children's exercises was dedicated to Rev. Samuel J. Milliken of the Titusville Methodist Church, who preached frequently in the Pleasant Valley Schoolhouse on Sunday afternoons. There was special symbolism in the species of the trees chosen for planting in 1897. A willow tree was chosen by the students and named for their young teacher, Miss Mai Fleming. The other was a "tall straight maple" named for the stalwart county superintendent of public

instruction, Abel Hartwell. On this occasion the names of everyone present were written on pieces of paper that were placed in bottles and planted with each tree. This is a custom often practiced at Arbor Day plantings and signifies the commitment of those present to care for the tree as it grows.

During the 1890s two significant changes occurred. The number of trees planted each year declined from 19 to just one or two and the honorees changed from historical, political, and literary figures in 1893 to a local minister in 1895 and to the teacher and superintendent in 1897. Significantly, all those honored were people who either had helped direct the future or were judged to be influencing it in the present. In its purest form, Arbor Day is a celebration of the future, rather than the past, making it different from most holidays. Planting a tree is an act for the future when the tree will reach its full potential. Mature trees provide beauty as well as wood products, erosion control, habitat for wildlife, and shelter. Who better to celebrate Arbor Day than school children who themselves have the potential to grow in ways that will benefit humanity? Who better to name a tree for than someone whose life will inspire school children as they grow?

In the early 1900s, Arbor Day in Pleasant Valley took on a different flavor. The editor of the *Hopewell Herald* noted in 1908 that, "when the observance of Arbor Day was begun, in 1884, the main object was to interest the people in the planting of forest trees. Gradually we have been getting away from that, and now in many public schools quite as much attention is given to the study of the economic value of bird life." Even the Supervising Principal of Hopewell Township, Elmer Wagner, while noting that Arbor Day that year was celebrated with greater interest than recently, seemed more concerned about beautification in general than the inspiring symbolism of trees. He noted, "With very few exceptions all schools improved the appearance of the schoolrooms and grounds by a general house-cleaning. Trees, shrubbery and flowers are now to be found in most school yards, which with a little added each Arbor Day will soon make our school grounds cheerful and home-like." By 1910 Supervisor Wagner commented on Arbor Day by suggesting, "In addition to the planting of trees, and the literary exercises, I would suggest that it be made a day for cleaning of the school grounds. Let every school do its duty in this request and our school grounds will be cleaner, healthier and more beautiful."

It is clear that by 1910 the Arbor Day emphasis had shifted from a focus on trees, as symbols of life dedicated to important historical figures or present leaders affecting the future, to a focus on an effort to make schools cleaner and more esthetically pleasing. Presumably, the tree named Grover Cleveland was seventeen years older in 1910. Had it been cared for by those who planted it? Was it bringing some of the benefits that Valley residents were hoping for in 1893 when 1910 was still in the distant future? Was it helping to beautify the schoolyard? Was it still known as Grover Cleveland?