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Bill McHenry was riding his bike on a back road in Milford Township about two years ago when an unusual tree caught his eye.

The “crooked” tree has a sharp bend with an upright branch shooting up at a 90-degree angle about seven feet off the ground. McHenry, of Farmington Hills, has studied Native American history and knew this tree had to be more than an oddity of nature.

“I saw it from a distance and thought – ‘no way, we have to stop,’” said McHenry. He and friend Chris LeVasseur photographed it, noted the species (sugar maple), took compass readings, measured how high the “elbow” rose above the earth – all qualities which could distinguish it as a Native American marker tree.

McHenry notified the Milford Historical Society of his find, and an arborist was hired to evaluate the tree, which is estimated to be around 300 years old. On December 14, MHS brought in Dennis Downes, founder of the Great Lakes Trail Marker Tree Society, to authenticate the tree.

Downes, of Illinois, has spent 30 years researching, documenting and preserving Native American marker trees throughout the United States and Canada.

“I’m happy I made the trip,” said Downes, who noted the tree society gets thousands of photo submissions, questioning whether a tree is a trail marker. They filter out unlikely candidates, and only visit sites that fit certain criteria.

The Milford tree exhibits an altered branch off the “elbow,” as indicated by the diameter of the upright branch, which is smaller than the trunk. Additionally, the age of the tree “falls in that timeframe of when Native Americans would’ve actually shaped this,” said Downes.

“Native Americans knew more about trees than we could even imagine,” he continued. They knew which tree species would last for centuries and spent 10 years shaping saplings to serve as navigational markers.

“These things were incredibly useful to mark portage routes between two bodies of water, or a river and a lake, to get you where you want to go,” said Downes. “It was truly a unique system of land and water navigation that was cleverly devised not to be confused with trees that are bent over by another tree, or lightning strikes or deformities. That would only add confusion. They were taught what these things meant and oral language was everything to them; taking trips with their elders who would teach you what to look for and then it was your responsibility to listen to

them and that would save your life and make you truly know where you were going, and you would pass that on.”

Downes’ interest in trail marker trees took root when he was young, from his own Native American heritage and his aunt taking him for walks in the woods to explain how Native Americans ingeniously used natural resources. Downes built his own body of research on the back of Raymond Janssen, a professor from Northwestern University who researched trail marker trees nearly 100 years ago, in the 1920s and 30s.

“If it wasn’t for tribal members working with the Daughters of the American Revolution, and professors from Northwestern, this could have easily slipped out of history,” said Downes. “My goal, when I’m done, is to have bronze sculptures of trees based on ones we knew were documented, so it can never pass out of history.”

Now that the Milford tree has been authenticated, the Milford Historical Society has formed a small tree committee to oversee obtaining a Michigan Historical Marker through the State of Michigan, as well as a temporary exhibit about the tree at the Milford Historical Museum.

“When you consider the fact of disease or insects or just using it for firewood, or the phenomenon that we’ve been through our third forest growth cut down, our area having built Chicago and Cleveland – to see that it’s still standing today is really a miracle,” said Ron Wilson, MHS member.