

White Pine

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The old saw “money doesn’t grow on trees” will remain valid unless bartering ever becomes the norm, in which case fruit and nut growers will be awash in tree-grown currency. Figuring exchange rates would be quite a headache, I imagine. Our eastern white pine (*Pinus strobus*) isn’t considered a crop-bearing tree and it certainly doesn’t sprout cash, but it has borne priceless “fruit” all the same.

The tallest trees east of the Rockies, white pines of up to 70 metres have been recorded by early loggers. Ontario’s champion white pine stands at 47 metres, and down in the US, the current record-holder is a North Carolina giant measuring 57 metres. As a climbing arborist in northern New York State many years ago, I had the privilege of climbing – ropes only – about 37 metres in a pine at an historic estate, with a good 4 metres above my head still. A more average mature size in today’s Canadian forests would be roughly 30 metres tall, and a diameter of around 100 cm.

In terms of identification, white pine makes it easy. It’s the only native pine out east that bears needles in bundles of five, one for each letter in “white.” To be clear, the letters are not actually written on the needles. Its branches tend to curl upwards at the ends, and it produces attractive, 10-15 cm-long cones with resin-tipped scales, perfect for fire-starting and for wreaths and other holiday decorations (might want to keep those away from open flames).

White pine is renowned for its exceptionally wide and clear (knot-free), straw-coloured lumber used for flooring, paneling and sheathing as well as for structural members. Much of Eastern Canada and the US New England region was built on white pine, and in some old homes, original pine floorboards 50+ cm wide can still be found. Impressive as its premium lumber is, its most precious gifts are invisible.

Haudenosaunee or Iroquois oral tradition indicates that around a thousand years ago in what is now the northeastern US, five nation-states were convinced by the prophet known as Peacemaker that they would be far better off cooperating than fighting each other. Peacemaker held the white pine, with its five needles joined at the base, as a symbol of a novel democratic federal structure, which is codified in a Constitution called the Great Law. To this day, the white pine remains a symbol of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. The tree was, and still is, depicted with a bald eagle, five arrows clenched in its talons to symbolize strength in unity, perched at its top.

Many American Colonial leaders wrote of their admiration of the Haudenosaunee confederacy. After their Revolution, these men helped draft a Constitution profoundly influenced by the Great Law. Among the earliest US flags was a series of Pine Tree Flags, and the eagle is always depicted on US currency, holding in its talons a bundle of arrows symbolizing strength in unity, or *E Pluribus Unum*. I suppose in a metaphoric sense, US money did grow on a tree.

The Haudenosaunee confederacy comprises fifty elected chiefs who sit in two legislative groups, with a single elected Executor or grand chief. Historically, only women could vote. They also had the sole power to depose a chief not acting in the public best interest, and could quash decisions they deemed rash or short-sighted. US (Anglo) women’s-rights pioneers of the late 1800s credit Haudenosaunee women as inspiration. Thus, the white pine is deeply connected to women’s rights as well.

The white pine, of course, is Ontario’s Provincial Tree. It remains an economically important species in its range, which extends from western Ontario to the Atlantic Provinces.

Paul Hetzler has been an ISA-Certified Arborist since 1996, and is a member of ISA-Ontario, the Canadian Institute of Forestry, and the Society of American Foresters. His book “Shady Characters: Plant Vampires, Caterpillar Soup, Leprechaun Trees and Other Hilarities of the Natural World,” is available on amazon.ca