Boone County’s most beloved tree took root some 400 years ago in rich fertile soil of the Missouri River bottomland – located today just off the Katy Trail and near Eagle Bluffs Conservation Area in McBaine. The Missouri and Osage peoples were hunting and fishing in the area while the Burr Oak began to grow. Explorers on a famous keelboat expedition, led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, may have noticed the stately tree that would have attracted birds, squirrels, and red-tailed hawks to its branches and offered food from its acorns. The Big Burr Oak or “Big Tree” as its often called, grew to become a healthy, champion tree and the current title holder of Missouri’s biggest Burr Oak. In 2021, it was also tied with another burr oak in Kentucky for the largest of the species in the United States.

A rainbow appears above the Big Tree in McBaine, August, 13, 2019. Photo courtesy of Dennis Smarr.

**How Big Is Big?**

74 Feet Tall

129 Feet Spread

The keeper of the tree is the Williamson family that has farmed the land for six generations where Big Tree grows. John Sam Williamson still lives and farms the land he inherited and looks out for Big Tree, along with many of its admirers – by the thousands – who have felt the coolness of its canopy and the strength from its beauty. It’s been written about by nearly every journalism student who came through the hallowed halls of the world-famous and first journalism school at the University of Missouri in nearby Columbia. Articles about the Burr Oak have appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* and stories were told about it on National Public Radio. It even has its own Facebook page, *The Big Burr Oak*, a public forum of near 4,000 members from around the world. Four years ago, a member of the group posted on the tree’s page, “I spent many a night at the big tree while a student at the University of
Missouri. In many ways, you could say this tree made me who I am today.” A woman in Colorado wrote, “I went to MU and made frequent trips to the Big Tree during my time there. The tree has been my profile picture for as long as I’ve been on Facebook!” Another man posted how his father, a forestry professor, would often talk about the tree and its history. He said his dad gave him a special ornament featuring the Burr Oak, which he treasured, added, “Really, it’s my most precious possession of my life.”

Oceans away, memories of the tree came from a man in Australia who wrote, “Hi all. I come from Broome, western Australia, and we have Boab trees much like your Burr tree. Very old but still strong with deep roots. Long may it stand.” And finally, closer to home, a Boone County resident wrote, “Love the Big Burr Oak - just down the road from us. So many memories...visiting it late at night during college days...photos that remind us of visits with our kids and cousins when they were little...and now our kids are visiting it with their college friends. The circle of life.”

The tree’s owner, John Sam Williamson, isn’t surprised there is so much love for the tree. It’s been a special part of his own family’s lives where many generations have gathered for picnics, family portraits, and even a marriage proposal by his now son-in-law to his daughter. “People often ask me, ‘How is my tree?’ We own the land where the tree is, but it’s everybody’s tree. We don’t claim it for ourselves. We just try to protect it,” said Williamson. Big Tree has survived countless lightning strikes, vandalism, droughts, and flooding, include a 500-year-old flood. During the Great flood of 1993, the Burr Oak stood in 9-feet of water for a long period of time until the water eventually receded. Even some of the lower branches were underwater. It was a threat Williamson thought would destroy the old tree. But it survived, “It’s genetic superior or it wouldn’t have lasted that long, but it’s really lucky,” said Williamson.
In late October, 2020, while the world-wide COVID-19 pandemic was surging in Missouri and elsewhere, more bad news came when Williamson and other protectors of the Big Tree were alerted to a lightning strike that caught the Burr Oak on fire. Smoke was coming out from a large gash in the tree where the lightning bolt struck it, just below the main branches. Fire personnel put out the fire, quickly, and everyone, including the Williamson family, waited to see if the damage would hasten the end of its life. Soon after, foresters surveyed the damaged tree and thought it would survive from its latest calamity and likely outlive all of us present-day admirers. The damage to the tree and the prognosis of its recovery would be a sign of hope, that we, too, as humans, would get to the other side of the pandemic as scientists rushed to get a vaccine approved that would keep us out of harm’s way from a deadly virus.

(Top) Boone County Fire Department fire fighters extinguish the fire using a foam substance to cool down the fire, Oct. 23, 2020. Photos courtesy of Nick Barwick.

(Below) *The Giving Tree* children’s book and a pen were placed in a sealed plastic bag at the base of the tree a few days after lightning struck the Big Tree, Oct. 25, 2020. Visitors stopping by to check on it wrote their thoughts inside the book. Photos courtesy of Beth Pike.
“I love you tree. Please heal so you can keep bringing joy.”

❤️ Judy

Notes written by visitors to Big Tree inside The Giving Tree book.

For generations, children and their children and their children discover the magic of Big Tree. College students and local residents fondly recall their visits to the state’s biggest Burr Oak even when they move away from the area. It may very well be one of the most photographed places in Boone County. Many people are drawn to capture the tree in its many seasons, as noted in the photos, below, from amateur and professional photographers, alike.

(Right) The Crews family give a big hug to the Big Tree, circa 2018. Courtesy of Doug Crews.
(Top) Children playing under Big Tree. Below the top image, a drone captures an aerial photo of the Burr Oak and its surroundings. Photos courtesy of Heath Cajandig.
“As a photographer shooting Big Tree, I think the majestic nature of the tree's size, along with the history of what it has witnessed, makes the mighty Burr Oak a very interesting subject. The open scene of the area and all of Missouri's different seasons make it a subject that is always fresh and interesting to capture. It has drawn a lot of attention from photographers and that spurs a little internal competitiveness to try and come up with a new shot that hasn't been captured.” – Scott Schaefer
(Top) Road leading to Burr Oak, Feb. 27, 2013. Courtesy of Scott Schaefer. (Below) photo taken during a snow storm on March 24, 2013. Courtesy of Dan Hemmelgarn.

**Winter**

“In this image of the famous burr oak tree, the snow was wet and blowing almost horizontally. The falling snow created a perfect, soft, white background giving the appearance of what I find resembles a pen and ink drawing, even though it is in fact a full color photo.”

– Dan Hemmelgarn
“I love that old tree. It broke my heart to hear of the recent lightning strike shortly after we moved out of the area. Anyway, on the particular night with the Milky Way in the sky, I shot this image, June 25, 2020, I was trying to capture something different. We have a small tent, so I brought it along to use as a prop. If I had set the tent up right under the tree, it got lost in the vastness of the tree. So, I had to move it down the side of the road about 100 feet. I was also scared by a doe that night, as well. Who knew they made such scary sounds in the dark of the night? It was near midnight. To get the tent to glow, I used the light on my phone and covered it with about four layers of sheets. Otherwise, it would look like an alien in there.” – Vicki Winton, Winsome Glimpse Photography
(Top) Big Tree at night. Courtesy of John Gilbert.
(Below) Floodwaters surround Big Tree June 8, 2019. Courtesy of Matthew Matlack/Sea Turtle Creative.

“The Bur Oak photo was taken on June 8, 2019 during the flooding that summer. It was shot with a DJI Phantom 4 Pro drone with a 3-shot AEB process edited to an HDR image.”

– Matthew Matlack
Shortly before plein aire landscape artist Brian Mahieu and his husband, Tom Harris, moved from Central Missouri to their current home in Langley, Washington, Brian wanted to paint the Big Tree as a fundraiser for Missouri River Relief. Using the Missouri bottoms as his subject for decades, Mahieu had never painted the Big Tree until this day. He painted under the canopy of the tree looking out, but on this day, the tree would become his subject. “This tree has always been a comforting presence,” said Mahieu. “You knew it was here. A sentinel. Not far from here is the Missouri River - the state’s most important geological feature. It crosses the state, unifies the state, divides the state. It’s just this beautiful serpentine prairie that really follows the river on either side of the flood plain where the ancient Burr Oak stands today.”

“Van Gogh says the landscape becomes the soul scape. You’re projecting your emotions into the landscape and I’ve always done that.”
– Brian Mahieu

Artist Brian Mahieu, Videographer Steve Hudnell, and Producer Beth Pike pose for a group photo at dusk after filming Mahieu paint the Big Tree. The video produced for the Missouri Department of Conservation. Watch here. Photo courtesy of Tom Harris.

Hudnell and Pike also produced a separate short video on Big Tree featuring the “Keeper of the Tree” John Sam Williamson. Watch here.
(Top) Artist Rob Behne painted and donated a street piano for the public’s enjoyment featuring the Burr Oak. The piano is located on the sidewalk in front of The Heidelberg restaurant, 410 South 9th St. in downtown Columbia. Photo courtesy of Kristina Lewis.

“I created this painting based on photographs of the Big Tree during a painting class in which I learned the techniques for painting the background sky.”

– Yvette Joy Liebesman

(Left) painted on July 26, 2020.
Rachael Buxton and Kendall Pearl were wedded under the Big Tree on Oct. 10, 2019. They were drawn to this majestic tree that had withered many storms and stood for centuries. Rain was on and off for the day, but the tree’s canopy provided cover from the light rain while the couple exchanged wedding vows according to the photographer. Courtesy of Schaefer Photography.

The golden hour before sunset as visitors enjoy the waning moments of the day and the majestic Big Bur Oak in McBaine. Photo courtesy of Heath Cajandig.