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87¢ (Plus Taxes)

Sackville's own Copper Beech

By Paul Bogaard

Amidst the trees on the front lawn of the new Civic Centre is one particularly handsome tree with an interesting story about how it got there. It is a "Copper Beech" and as its leaves reach out of their already swollen buds, they will reveal that dark and delicious coppery purple colour for which they are famous. The town has decided this tree is so distinctive and so appropriately marks the "civic" ground on which the new centre now stands, that this tree will receive a new stone marker on Arbor Day - this coming May 19.

Copper Beeches are quite unusual in our area. There are a few others in Sackville, though none so large and handsome as this. And all must have been planted where they are, since this species is not a native. There are native beech trees (and must have been stands of them once upon a time on Beech Hill) but today most of our native beech are struggling against a fungal infection. The European Beech seems to be free from this threat, and all Copper Beeches are the purple-leaved variety of this European cousin.

Which leaves us with a mystery. How did this Copper Beech come to be planted here? To solve this mystery it would help to know when it might have been planted. And it turns out there is now a way to determine how old a tree happens to be. Within the last couple years, Mount Allison has hired Colin Laroque, who is one of the Maritimes' only "dendrochronologists" - that's someone who figures out the age of trees. Dr. Laroque

quickly set up a lab, has gathered a team to work with him and is busily figuring out the age of many trees and older buildings in our area. The Campbell Carriage Factory, for example, has been carefully examined by Dr. Laroque's team, and they have determined that the trees from which it was constructed must have been cut down in the early 1840s.

Knowing we had this resource near by, and with the permission of the town, Laroque agreed to check out this Copper Beech. It turns out that it must have been something like 65 to 70 years old. If anything, Laroque explained, it has grown well rounded and perhaps even larger than it might have if it had grown up on a forest. In this open front yard, it has developed vigorously over its seven decades.

Who then planted it? Well we don't know for sure, but we do know that before the Department of Agriculture's Animal Pathology Station which used to occupy this site, it was the Station of the Plant Products Branch. Originally, it was called the Dominion Seed Branch, and there are still a few folks around who once worked there.

No one we've spoken to particularly remembers the planting of a Copper Beech, but then most of these folks only remember back as far as the 1950s. And this tree was planted back in the 1930s. What we do know for sure is that the Seed Branch was established in 1928, and by the 1930s was fully

functioning on this site. People working at the Seed Branch may have had access to such unusual plants back then, because the nurseries of the 1930s would not typically have sold this species.

One story we were told seemed like an interesting clue. Donna Beal, recently retired from the archives at Mount Allison, remembers going to the two-story dwelling that used to house the Seed Branch, and as part of her interview with the manager (quite unexpectedly) was asked if she could identify that special tree to which he pointed outside his office window. She could not begin to identify it, Donna admits, but she got the job anyway! Clearly, there were people at this Station who, already decades ago, thought they had a very distinctive tree. And we think we can guess which one.

On May 19, which is Arbor Day, at 4:30 p.m. there will be a small ceremony to unveil a stone monument to this very special tree.