

Prairie du Chien's Black Hawk Tree

Anyone familiar with Prairie du Chien knows the most famous local tree there was the old cottonwood called the Black Hawk Tree. Generations of residents have believed the legend that Black Hawk, the renegade Sauk Indian leader, once hid in this tree—perhaps sometime in the 1790s—to evade capture by soldiers of the Fort Crawford military post.

For many years the “middle-of-the-road” tree served as a unique and popular landmark. Even after a windstorm took it down almost 75 years ago, a marker showing its location was imbedded in the surface of the highway where it had stood. That street is now the main east-west business street of Prairie du Chien and is named, appropriately enough, Black Hawk Avenue.

Many historians believe Black Hawk was in Prairie du Chien only once: after his surrender at Wisconsin Dells to the Ho-Chunk, following the Battle of Bad Axe, 40 miles north of Prairie du Chien, which ended the 1832 Black Hawk War. He could not have hidden in the tree then because he was already in custody.

He was held briefly at Fort Crawford by General Street, and then a detail headed by Jefferson Davis took him, encumbered by ball and chain, to St. Louis. His imprisonment was short, and he made a triumphal tour of eastern cities, lionized by ladies, and became in fact, in the words of Anthony F. C. Wallace in his introduction to *The Black Hawk War*, published by the Illinois State Historical Library, “the prototype of the noble redman, defending the honor of a dying race.”

At any rate, whether the Black Hawk Tree served as the noble redman's hiding place or not, it was a rarity in a town that had both few trees and a sizable population using wood for fuel. There is no question that the Black Hawk Tree was the best-known tree in the area, a part of the lore of the town, and as such, is deserving of recognition.

Sources: Jack Holzhueter, Madison
Crawford Thayer, Fort Atkinson
Griff Williams, Prairie du Chien



Prairie du Chien's Black Hawk Tree

Wisconsin Historical Society, WHi(X313)2623 (c. 1905)