

American Beech:

Nature's Historic Drawing Board

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American Beech trees . . . they have a story to tell. Their canvas tells stories of love, secret messages, trail paths, and recordings of important events. These stories were told through arborglyphs, also known as tree writing, by carving words or pictures into the bark of a tree.

The American Beech is also known as the 'Witness Tree' so marked for establishing property boundary corners and was described by the famous American poet Robert Frost as "truth's established and borne out, though circumstanced with dark and doubt" in his poem "Beech" in 1942.

Fagus grandifolia, the American Beech, typically grows to heights of 65-120 feet, stands tall and straight preferring shady areas with rich, moist soil. Its leaves are oval, 3-4 inches long, pointed at the apex and coarsely toothed. Beech trees produce a fruit known as beechnuts that are favored by wildlife such as squirrels and turkeys but can also be eaten by people. The nuts are known to be quite tasty once the husk and inner shell is peeled back, but it can take up to 40 years for the tree to produce them. The bark is light colored and thin, and the tree retains some leaves during winter which turn a paper ivory color as the season progresses.

There are many uses of beech wood which include flooring, furniture, veneer plywood, and ties. The beech is also favored as

fuel wood because of its high density and good burning qualities. Beech leaves were also used as an alternative to tobacco by the German army in World War I.

A discovery was made deep in the Bankhead National Forest around 1992. The journey leading to this find began on a Forest Service road and followed a worn path until it disappeared into the brush. Trekking down into a steep canyon across streams, through the hemlock groves and beautiful green ferns, just beyond a massive 70-foot waterfall stood the 'Indian Bird Man,' carved into the smooth greyish-colored canvas of a beech tree. An odd carving it is . . . a bird-like stick man figure. This particular arborglyph has been found throughout the South, carved into rocks and trees with other American Indian markings. Yet nobody seems to know what this carving means. The Native Americans had no language or alphabet for many years so they relied on signs and symbols for communication.

In 2011 when a storm came through the area, another tree fell on and damaged the Bird Man tree. Through efforts by the Bankhead National Forest and a group of local volunteers who wanted to save the Bird Man carving, the tree was allowed to be cut. The Bird Man was preserved and is now on display at the Indian Oakville Mound Museum in Lawrence County for everyone to see and enjoy. 🌲

Damaged during a 2011 storm, the historic 'Bird Man' beech tree was cut so that the carving could be preserved



