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## LARSON: Some folks find deeper meaning for Earth Day

This Earth Day column is about being “really into” the Earth, with its message being grounded in a special tree. This tree, deeply rooted in Gwinnett County history, shades the Interstate 85 entrance ramp at Pleasant Hill Road. Experts estimate its age between 160 to 200 years old. Standing 80 feet tall with a diameter of eight feet, this tree claims fame as the largest southern red oak in North Georgia.



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This tree, known as the Legacy Oak, was already shading the farmland Carl and Fannie Kilgore bought in the early 1900s. Greg Studdard, a local attorney and grandson of the Kilgores loves passing along memories about the old red oak.

"The family tells of a shotgun wedding held before WWII, down the road from the red oak tree. Seems that a neighbor's young daughter wound up pregnant and unmarried and her father insisted that her boyfriend do the honorable thing and marry her," Studdard said. "The 'ceremony' was held with the local deputy sheriff bringing along his shotgun in case the groom had second thoughts," Studdard said.

But Studdard has personal memories as well.

"My cousins and I played under that tree in the days before Nintendo, DVDs and even colored television," he said.

His cousin, Sandra Underwood Gibson, said, "I have fond memories of attempting as a child, with the help of my cousin Greg, to plant a corn patch under the old red oak. I'm afraid our soil preparation techniques left a lot to be desired, and our corn crop never even sprouted."

And so the tree and the stories about it grew over the decades on the land that eventually became White Chapel Cemetery. Then, in February 2006 it was scheduled to be cut down.

Mark Hinson, cemetery manager, remembers it well.

"I looked out the window one morning and saw a group of trucks and men with chain saws clearing away the easement. Then I called Dave Rosselle of the Gwinnett Place CID."

Coincidentally, Rosselle had already written a final plea to Russell McMurry, Georgia Department of Transportation District Engineer, to save the tree. At the last minute, McMurry issued a stay of execution and the tree lived on to generate even more memories.

"We had a yellow ribbon on it that got pretty tattered so we took it off. Then a lady came in asking if she could put a red white and blue ribbon on it to honor all troops," Hinson said. "She never told us her name. She just put up the ribbon."

The Kilgore clan continues to have family reunions there and families of veterans laid to rest under the tree often come to visit.

"People who loved gardening and the outdoors were buried here by their loved ones," Hinson said.

And for anyone who's really into the personal sort of "Earth Day" element of this story, and would like to be really grounded in local history, I'm told that under the shade of this old red oak, there's still room available.