INDIAN TRAIL TREES
JOURNEY THROUGH TIME

Building Memories - One Step at a Time
Indian Trail Trees

Introduction

My wife, began to notice bent trees along our hiking trails and became interested in their design and meaning. So together we researched these trees and have come to enjoy their presence on our hikes and walks through the forests. Interestingly, as we follow the man made metal signs nailed to trees marking the hiking trails that looped past waterfalls and beautiful streams, we have seen Indian Trail or Bent Trees nearby the trails pointing the way to the very water sources we were searching for to visit and photograph.

These historical tree markers left behind from Native Indians were called Trail Trees, Bents Trees or Signal Trees and seem to have journeyed through time to serve as a guide and guest along our path to gently mark our way.

Many of them were carefully crafted from young oak samplings with native techniques to tie trunks and cut limbs in a special way to allow the tree to patiently grow to form the tree in a special way to mark trails, water, shelter, villages, boundaries and many other trails left for the Native Indian Tribes to
follow. They were living signs marking the essentials for the life of Native Indians.

I never knew that when my wife and I would begin our journey in search of beautiful places to photograph that these Bent Trees would lead us to our final destination to enjoy. These trees add more enjoyment to our hikes through the forest. Now we know we are walking the same paths to the natural beauties that the Natives Indians saw hundreds of years ago. So today, we not only photograph the waterfalls, creeks, rivers, shelters, caves, and natural bridges, but the Bent Trees that led us there. As these Bent Trees continue to exist they will serve as a permanent reference of their existence, purpose, and remembrance of the Native Indians that first settled in Arkansas and others that journeyed through on the Trail of Tears.

We hope that by providing knowledge to others on Indian Trail Trees and other types of Indian markings that you will enjoy their presence; find them useful in your journeys and survival in the woods; help preserve them for future generations; and make others aware of their existence and historical significance to our Nation. So the next time you journey through the forest take time to notice the beauty of God’s creation and the markings left by the Native Indians marking this beauty and natural resources essential to survival.

The Methods Used By Native Indians to Form Bent Trees

There is not a single source of information describing how these trees were formed as they varied by Indian Tribes and much of the information was closely held by the Indian Tribal Elders. Many have analyzed the trees and determined how they were made while others researched by interviewing Indian Tribal Elders. Many of these trees were created over a hundred years ago. Most of the trees were created prior to and during the Indian Removal Period known as the
Trail of Tears. As we explored the information available and viewed Bent Trees in the forest ourselves we share the following findings on how they were made and how to authenticate a tree. Certainly this information will give you an even greater appreciation for the amount of time and skill used to create these Living Markers for you to use and to enjoy.

Most research has indicated that Indians would take a young Oak Sapling or hardwood sapling and bend horizontal to the ground in the direction of the trail. This process of bending, shaping and trimming the trees took many years. The tree was most often secured to other trees, stakes, or rocks, with rawhide, vines or birch bark to hold the tree in place giving it time to shape in position. A limb on the tree facing upward would be chosen to become the main trunk of the tree to continue upward. In other cases limbs were cut away close to the bark. This was a process that took place over time as many believed to be as much as ten years.

Sometimes the trimming process would simply occur naturally as the other limbs would simply atrophy or decay away leaving one or two primary limbs to become the primary trunk growing vertically. Our analysis has indicated that a tree that was bent and left to trim its own limbs through atrophy would result in shallow round holes in the tree base on top or along the bend of the tree.

A “Y” shaped stick would be used on many trees to hold the trunk away from the ground as it was drawn tight by the rawhide or other material. Many would refer to the “Y” shaped stick as a Thong thus the trees were sometimes called Thong Trees. Sometimes a “Y” shaped stick would be driven upside down into the ground with a stone axe to hold the tree into shape instead of using rawhide, vines, rocks, or birch bark to tie it down. (See Example Sketch Above)

The nose shaped feature on many Bent Indian Trees was produced by using a large knife to slice into the bend and would place a piece of charred bark inside causing a knot to grow on the tree. Sometimes, many knots were produces for a nose, eyes, and other features. Some trees have a bear, elk or other animal like faces created from the knobs on the tree.
Determining The Age and Authenticity of an Indian Tree

An Indian Trail Tree can be authenticated by thong or raw-hide scars in the bark under the hip bend and on top of the second bend. This is the only positive way to identify them. The tree should be clearly shaped as a Bent Tree as noted in the referenced pictures. Many of the trees will have a nose on the front and other knobs making eyes and some bear like features. Some trees will have knobs on the back hip of the tree. The tree may have one or two vertical limbs rising near the front of the tree.

Most of the Indian Bent Trees that I have found clearly point in the direction of a trail or creek leading to a nearby water source, waterfall, spring, or shelter.

My wife found a Bent Indian tree on the War Eagle Trail at Withrow Springs State Park, so we took time to determine if it was a tree created by storm damage or by a Native Indian. The tree bend was higher than the most common 3 to 5 feet bent trees indicating it is a later generation tree made during the time when Native Indians began using horse back as the tree could be seen better from horseback than walking the trail by foot. Indeed analysis of the tree indicated that it had the markings of a tree that had been created by the skills and practices of a Native Indians.

A wooden “Y” shaped stick had been used to support the tree as it was bent while it was a sapling as noted by the scars and outlined by note 1 on the tree photograph. A raw-hide or bark strap was used to pull the tree to the ground to hold it in placed until it formed the bend. These markings can be seen in photograph above as indicated by note 2. The front of the tree has been trimmed and shows the scars where it had been cut and embedded with burnt material to ensure the formation would remain as indicated in note 3.
One cannot determine the age of an Indian Signal (Bent) Tree by the diameter alone as water source, soil, density of trees, sunlight and other factors that would stunt growth along with the tree being bent by the process of making a trail tree. There are clearly identified Indian Trail (Bent) Trees with a diameter of 12” or 37” in circumference or greater. In excellent environmental conditions a 100 year old Bent Tree can be 55” in circumference when measured halfway between the ground and lower bend. Several hundred year old trees may be over 100” in circumference.

I was able to determine some Indian Signal (Bent Trees) authenticity by many of the factors mentioned and the fact that there were a cluster of three trees. The Native Indians had hoped the trees would survive over time and crafted several in the same area to ensure their survival.

Trees shaped from storms can be easily recognized by their lack of detail and poor shaping and do not appear clearly as a Trail Trail Tree. Additional, it would only be by chance it would even point clearly in the correct direction.

We found bent tree pointing to a 90’ with a beautiful flowing stream.

We found this bent tree pointing opposite to the hiking trail and to a cliff trail to a lake.