Categorizing Indian Marker Trees

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Introduction

For over a decade all of us who have pursued the identification and documentation of Indigenous Trees have done so without a commonly understood or agreed upon nomenclature. It has been difficult to adequately describe the variety of configurations that have been encountered nationally. Perhaps it is time to gather the researchers together to come to terms with regard to naming conventions.

Early Efforts

Some of the writings about the trees by authors in the early 1900’s used pictures to describe the trees. In January 1955, the Willmette, IL (Chicago area) newspaper published a major article entitled Indian Trail Markers. The article included pictures of Indian trees located throughout Willmette. The pictures helped show the variations encountered as a means for documenting and categorizing the tree types.

Forest Wade from Forsyth and Cherokee Counties, GA published his book, Cry of the Eagle in 1969. Forest, of Cherokee heritage, spent years researching the area around his part of Georgia where the Redbank Cherokees lived. He documented the shapes of the Indian trees he found as well as the symbols found on smooth skin trees which are known as “Witness Trees.”

Then in the 1970’s, Laura Hubler, who was leading the effort nationally to learn and document the Indian Trees, drew her diagram of a typical Indian Trail & Thong Trees based on what she had learned from several tribal elders. The U.S.D.A. Forest Service Southern Region published a report in the late 1970’s which included on the front cover line drawings of some of the trees Laura had located. Laura categorized her trees by giving them names such as the Scoop, the Old Buffalo, the Rhino and others. We had the opportunity to inspect Laura’s research documentation in an archive in AR where we found hundreds of pictures of Indian trees but no location data or other means of categorizing the trees she had found.

Not much happened about advancing the knowledge of the trees after Laura died until 1997 when Elaine Jordan wrote her little book, Indian Trail Trees. In her book, Elaine used pictures to show some of the different Trail Trees she had discovered in North GA. We met with Elaine in 2003 to learn more about her research. However, without GPS coordinates, Elaine was unable to remember the exact locations of many of the 400 trees she had found. At that time, she was suffering from crippling arthritis and was...
unable to ride with us to show us where many of the trees were. However, using her descriptions we were able to document a few of her trees.

**Trail Tree Project Starts**

With the encouragement of Elaine Jordan and the joining together of fellow researchers from four other states, a meeting was held at Hobbs State Park in NW Arkansas in March 2007 to share findings and learn the national extent of the Indian trees. The Trail Tree Project was begun as a result of this meeting and the Mountain Stewards took the management lead in developing a national database of the Indian trees. By 2010, we had collected a lot of data on Indian trees throughout the nation. To help others learn how to recognize and document the trees, we wrote our first manual on the trees entitled, *A Manual for Locating and Identifying Indian Trail Trees*. The contents of that manual became part of Chapter 4 of our book *Mystery of the Trees* published in late 2011. The tree types were shown using pictures to describe the various configuration but no nomenclature was offered.

**The Categorization Begins**

The Indigenous trees found throughout the United States and Canada, for the most part, follow a somewhat standardized configuration. These trees have been called Indian Trees, Marker Trees, Signal Trees, Ghost Trees, Yoke Trees and many other names. Collectively, they can probably be grouped under the common terminology of Culturally Modified Trees (CMT). Although, there is some standardization of the bent trees, there are some tribes whose CMT’s are very different and need a separate categorization. These tribes include the Ute and the Comanche.

Fellow author and colleague, John Wesley Anderson, in his first book published in 2016, *Ute Indian Prayer Trees of the Pikes Pike Region* began defining with nomenclature the typical Ute trees found throughout Colorado. He categorized the Ute trees as Trailmaker/Directional, Medicine/Pealed Bark/Utility, Burial, Story and Prophesy/Ceremonial. In his 2018 book, *Native American Prayer Trees of Colorado* he went on to offer a chart diagram on how to recognize the signs in order to identify these Indigenous trees.

Fellow authors and colleagues, Steve Houser, Linda Pelon and Jimmy W. Arterberry in 2016 published their book, *Comanche Marker Trees of Texas*. In their book, Jimmy Arterberry, Comanche Tribal Preservation Officer, provided in Chapter 4 a Comanche Tree Taxonomy wherein he described in detail the numerous types of Comanche Marker Trees to be found in Texas. These categories are: Turning, Burial, Ceremonial, Medicine, Treaty/Council trees. Some of those trees are now being found in Colorado where the Comanche traveled in their cultural history.

What follows is our attempt to begin to categorize the many configurations and their variations of the Indigenous trees. Our categorization is based on evaluating the over 2,450 trees from 44 states in the Trail Tree Project database. We receive weekly through our web site 2-5 trees for consideration. To be added to the Trail Tree Project data base, each tree has to go through a thorough vetting using a standardization criterion and evaluation of many factors before it is added to the database. For those of great importance, we try and visit the tree or have one of our colleagues visit the tree to confirm it as an authentic Indigenous tree. We are not wedded to the categorization categories we have chosen but merely offer them as a start to developing a common nomenclature for identifying the Indigenous trees.
Categorically, we can separate our trees into the following groups: Directional, Burial, the “4”, the Specialty, Goal-Post, Grafted, Spirit, Story, Treaty/Council and Solstice/Equinox trees. Each of those groups are broken down into sub-categories.

The Directional trees serve many purposes including marking trails, water sources. safe stream crossings, shelter, ceremonial/sacred sites and more. The Burial trees serve as a sentinel marking the graves of Indians many of whom may have been buried without proper ceremonies. During the removal period and before, many that died had to be buried hastily or not at all. Thus, their spirit remains waiting for a proper ceremony by their descendants so that the spirit can go to the afterlife. Unfortunately for most, knowledge of where these graves are located has been lost so the sentinel marker trees remain in the forest and along the byways awaiting the arrival of someone who will care for the deceased.

There are a few tribes that have a singular category tree of importance to the tribe. The First Nations tribes in Canada have an annual ceremony of the Ribbon Tree. The ribbon prints are deeply personal and represent the prayers, hopes and aspirations of participants. Different colored cloths represent the four cardinal directions as well as earth elements: water, sun, wind, rain, thunder and lightning. After the ceremony it is customary to leave these cloth prints tied to a tree due east of the ceremonial site to weather and eventually disintegrate as the energy from the prints is sent to the Creator.

Some of the NW tribes have a sacred tree which is very important to their culture and which they visit annually for ceremonies. The Salish Indians have a tree in Idaho that they visit regularly. It is not bent or distinguishable from other trees in the vicinity, but it is still sacred to them. The tree has now died but they still visit it.
Marker Tree Configuration Categories

Marker Trees are bent into various shapes which are common among the tribes throughout the nation. Each shape usually has a common purpose so tribal members could recognize the meaning of the tree. Very few Indigenous people today know about the trees and their purposes. Sadly, this part of Indigenous culture has almost been lost. Using a form of Native Science some of the tree purposes are being rediscovered.

1. **The Standard** – This shape is commonly found in the Marker Trees. The tree is bent from the vertical trunk to a horizontal section and then bent back to vertical using 90-degree angles. The tree will have a small nose at the bent section back to vertical. The length of the horizontal section is short. This is the typical tree shown in Laura’s diagram.

2. **The Standard with Variable Nose** – The Standard shape Marker Tree can be found with a variety of nose shapes. We believe the nose shape is telling more about the story of the tree. However, without knowledge of the person bending the tree, it is difficult to understand the meaning of the various nose shapes.
3. **The Standard at 45 Degrees** – The elders have told us that if the tree was not bent horizontally, then it would have a 45-degree upward or 45-degree downward bend. There does not seem to be a difference in purpose but that is hard to tell. Many of these are directional trees.

4. **Standard Extended** – Another variation of the standard shape Marker tree is when the horizontal arm extends outward from the trunk by several feet. This length can vary from about 6 feet to ten feet. The length may have a hidden purpose but it is not obvious.
5. **Standard with Long Extension** – Sometimes the extended horizontal arm can be quite long reaching a point that the tree could topple over. Some of these type configurations have in fact bent over to reach the ground because the heavy weight of the horizontal arm. Note also that the tree has filled in the area between the horizontal arm and the trunk to reduce the stresses on the tree. In engineering terms, it is like adding a gusset plate to reduce stresses in the members.

6. **Standard with Two Verticals** – On occasion, there will be two or more verticals at the end of the horizontal arm. Generally, when there are a number of verticals, the tree is being used to mark graves. The number of verticals equal the number of graves it is honoring.

7. **Standard with Deep Bend** – Some of the Standard Marker Trees are bent down at an angle sharper than the customary 45-degrees and then bent back up with a seemingly impossible 135 or greater degree bend. These trees are usually marking a single grave. Note the appurtenance on the top of the bent section. This is often a sign of the number of graves marked.
8. **Standard with a Bump** – Some marker Trees have an added appurtenance on the hip part of the tree seemingly connected with the nose. This may be a more prominent way of signifying the tree is marking a single grave and the importance of the person buried there.

9. **Standard Trail Marker Tree** – This tree usually marks a trail. It points out the direction to follow. On occasion, the tree is bent into multiple directions to show a trail junction. Each bent section shows which way to go along a particular trail. Sometimes, one of the bent sections may be pointing to a water source as knowing where to find water was critical along the Indian trails.

10. **The Ascension - Portal Tree** – On rare occasions, the tree is bent into a “U” shape with one or two verticals. This tree shape is usually related to Ceremonial Burial sites. The upside down “U” is like a portal to the afterlife. We have been told that you should only enter the portal from the western side.
11. **The “4” Tree** – The “4” tree is a variation of the Standard wherein the trunk serves as the principal vertical and a branch is then bent horizontal and the second vertical is at the end of the horizontal member. This type of tree is often found marking water sources. Various tribes seem to have used different nose shapes. This tree shape may also have been used to mark Indian trails. The horizontal member may have been grafted onto the tree to form the “4”.

12. **The Fat “4” Tree** – Some tree benders seem to have girdled the tree above the horizontal member so that the bottom section is fatter than the section above the horizontal member. It creates a distinctive shape that has been seen a number of times across the country bent by various tribes. Also, note that this tree bender has added a special nose to the tree for added significance. This tree was determined to be marking a single grave in VA.

13. **The Extended “4” Tree** – Many “4” trees have an extended horizontal arm that can vary from about 5 feet to as much as 20 feet. The length of the horizontal arm seems to be related to the significance of what is being honored by the tree. Many of these trees are used to mark graves and the two verticals represent two graves. Note that for this tree, the trunk vertical is straight. Other versions of this tree shape have the trunk vertical offset.
14. Extended “4” with Trunk Offset – In the case of this tree shape, the whole tree seems to have been shifted over so that the trunk is no longer vertical. On some of these trees, the trunk vertical can be offset several feet or the first vertical may even be 4-5 feet along the horizontal arm and then the second vertical will be further out.

15. Special Purpose Extended “4” Tree – When this shape tree is being used to mark the grave of a very special person such as a Chief of the tribe, the horizontal arm extends out a long distance to show importance of the person and the trunk may be manipulated to show more honor. In the case of this tree, the truck has been split into three separate trunks to possibly signify three feathers which is an honor for very special tribal members.

16. Super Long Extended “4” Tree – This tree version defies explanation in that the horizontal arm of the tree is 19 feet long. It is so long that it had to be grafted to another tree for support. This version of the “4” tree also has an offset trunk vertical. The importance of this tree is that it is marking a large number of graves, thus the extended arm to show importance.
17. **The “4” with a 45-Degree Bend** – It is not often that we find a “4” tree bent with a 45-degree bend added to the tree as it certainly added more difficulty to the bender to create such a tree. This one is located in Wisconsin and is believed to be marking an Indian trail. It may also have other purposes based on its configuration.

18. **The Specialty Shop “4” Trees** – Like customizing a “hotrod,” there were probably some trained tree benders who had the gift of customizing the tree for special meanings or just for show. The first tree appears to have had two verticals grafted onto a large trunk and then bent downward to mark something of significance. For the second tree, the designer seems to have stretched the trunk of the tree in order to separate the two verticals and then added a crown appurtenance in the middle of the horizontal section. There are so many of these specialty versions it would be hard to include them all in this report. What is important to note here is that the designer of the Marker Tree had cart blanc authority to create a shaped tree for what they thought was important and to mark the site for whatever purpose was needed by the person hiring the bender.
19. **Goal-Post Tree** – These configuration trees initially were thought to mark boundaries between tribes. The second tree located in AL however is believed to mark a battle site and may point to the graves from the battle between the Creeks and the Chickasaw’s.

![Goal-Post Tree – Single Trunk](image1)

![Goal-Post Tree – Two Trunks](image2)

20. **Burial Trees** – Burial trees can be a single pointer tree or a tree with multiple verticals each one representing a single grave. So, a two vertical tree marks two graves and a three vertical tree marks three graves.

![Burial Tree – 2 Graves](image3)
21. Burial Tree – 4 Pointer – The grave-pointer trees for 4 graves have a distinctive characteristic of having one vertical representing 2 graves located directly in front of the pointer and a second vertical bent out 45-degrees from the horizontal member representing 2 graves located perpendicular to the tree primary pointer.

The second Burial Tree for marking 4 graves has an added marker on the backside of the tree. This has been found on occasion wherein another family member of a younger generation wishes to be buried with their relatives so a marker is added to the tree to signify the burial.
22. Burial Tree – Multiple Burials – The tree to the right has 7 verticals indicating 7 burials associated with the tree. When the number of graves get to be too many for the bender to create enough verticals, they resort to used appurtenances or bumps on the tree to signify the number of burials. The tree can serve as a marker for a large number of burials that occurred at one time or it can serve as a marker for people whom were buried at different times. Each knob on the tree presents one grave marked.

23. Pine Marker Tree – For years, we did not believe one could bend a pine without destroying the tree. However, some benders knew how to create a marker tree with a pine. All of the marker pines have a distinctive sharp bend greater than 90 degrees before the tree is bent back to vertical. The horizontal arm normally curves slightly because of the deeper bent section.
24. **Special Purpose Trees – Grafted Trees** – On rare occasions, two trees have been found grafted together for a special purpose. Some of these sites have been found to have upwelling energy and the tree is being used for a healing site. Most often when energy exists at the site, the node of energy is centered directly in the center of the horizontal arm.

Sometimes a single tree is used to signify some special purpose which has another member grafted to the single tree. The member almost appears as if it was grafted through the tree.
25. Spirit Trees – Spirit trees defy explanations on how a person could have bent the tree into that shape and how long it must have taken to create that configuration. These trees probably served as a marker for a spiritual ceremonial site and probably represent the prayers being sent to the Creator. One elder shared with us that when the Indians smoked the pipe, the smoke would swirl upwards to the Creator taking the prayer or request upwards for it to be heard.

The trees on the next page may or may not be a spirit tree but its characteristic bend is so different from the normal bent trees it is added to this grouping.
26. **Story-Telling Tree** – Many bent trees have a story to tell that the bender of the tree wishes us to know. The tree on the right located in Mentone, AL is marking the grave of a Chickasaw warrior. The warrior stole from a group of traders and was hung for his crime. The downward bent section of the tree is made to look like a noose to represent how the warrior died.

27. **Treaty-Council Tree** – Many tribes have a Treaty-Council tree which is one of the largest and oldest trees in their area. This tree would serve as place to meet to sign a treaty or for tribal groups to meet to discuss an issue. The tree to the right is in Tulsa, OK and is the Council Tree of the Creek Nation. When the Creek Indians were removed from AL, they arrived at this location and relit their council fires at their new home.
28. **Solstice-Equinox Trees** – For observation of Solstice-Equinox ceremonies, the Indians would often bend a tree into a “Y” formation aligned to the azimuth of the solar event and then create a pointer tree for the alignment of the azimuth related to that latitude. The trees to the right are at a site in SC used for solar event ceremonies.