

Alabama's Famous and Historic Trees

"Service Oak"

Historic Significance

The small town of Eldridge, in the Northwestern corner of Walker County, is the oldest community in the county. Originally known as Camp Springs, according to a document from the Alabama Department of Archives and History, the site was named from the fact that Andrew Jackson's army camped at its springs on its way to and from the Battle of New Orleans in 1814. The document also states that in 1819 John Byler was commissioned to build the first toll road in the state which gave settlers a route to and from the Tennessee Valley to Tuscaloosa. Eldridge received its name from Byler's son-in-law whose name was Eldridge Mallard. (1)

History has proven that that this small community has pulled together many times to offer support for its residents. Although that support started long before World War II, it was memorialized on a Friday afternoon; April 23, 1943 when the women left behind by men going to war planted a tree in honor of those men.

The "Service Oak" celebrated its 64th birthday this past April, but despite its age, the majestic tree is still standing tall in memory of those who did not return from World War II.

Ozema Kelley remembers the day the giant oak was planted. She along with several members of the community were at the ceremony.

"It was a beautiful day," she said. "The mothers, sisters, daughters and wives of the men who had gone to war were there to celebrate the tree planting. It was a way of honoring those men who were fighting in the war."

Those same women would gather once a month in the local library, which was in a room of the private home of one of the ladies, and was next door to the tree. They would meet to offer support to each other and discuss the war.

"It was a time of great fellowship," Ms. Kelley said. "We would discuss other matters besides the war, but we were what some would call today, a support group for each other.

Living in a small town meant that every woman who attended the meeting knew all the soldiers who had gone to war.

"I would be just as interested in your story as my own because I would know the person you were talking about," she said.

Different speakers from Montgomery or from the community would occasionally join the women at their monthly meetings, which consisted of a program of prayer, discussions, and planning for upcoming events.

The women also gathered once a week to roll bandages for the war effort. “It was a practical way of helping,” Ms. Kelley said. “There were two groups of women- a day group and a group at night. Each woman gathered when she could to help.” Over 180 men from the Eldridge community joined the war effort, a large number considering the small town’s population.

The majority of the young boys who left from the Eldridge community to fight in World War II were just barley into their 20s. They returned, however as young men aware of their responsibilities and the importance of life! (2)

Reference in Literature

- Daily Mountain Eagle. Jasper, Alabama
 - (1) Eldridge is oldest town by: Justin Hart p.B11 Saturday, January 1, 2000
 - (2) Service and life on a limb by: Chandra Rice p.B1 Sunday, March 30, 2003
- Proud Heritage (the story of Eldridge, Alabama 1819-1983) written by Emily McGowen Hicks pp.144-145



(Picture of Service Oak Ceremony)

