Piece of History Saved by Builder

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The branches of an apple tree at the Old Highlands Park condominium development dates back to before Highlands was founded and are still laden with apples. "That apple tree is so special to me," said Beth Crisp, granddaughter of Louis Edwards, who bought the property in the 1930's. "I grew up under that tree. I had a rope swing when I was a little itty bitty thing."

The tree stands approximately 100 feet tall just off of Fifth Street. Ran Shaffner, archivist of the Highlands Historical Society, said according to a diary of Samuel Kelsey, co-founder of Highlands, an abandoned apple orchard existed prior to the acquisition of the property, long before the town was founded in 1875. Shaffner said the orchard would have to have been planted William Dobson, or his caretaker Huey Gibson, because Dobson owned all the land prior to selling it to Kelsey.

Dobson's father, Joseph Dobson bought the land as a State Land Grant in 1844. The tree's life may have ended if not for special effort by Bill Nellis, owner of Nellis Communities and developer of Old Highlands Park, decided to keep it. It cost Nellis approximately $5,000 to keep the tree standing.

"It's a double trunk, and it was splitting so we had to put bolts in it," said Nellis. "We also put cables tying the branches together so when the branches sway in high winds, they sway together preventing it from splitting further." Cutting it down would have been cheaper and more convenient, but Nellis did not like that idea. "Well, it's historic," he said. "It's the biggest apple tree I've ever seen, and I'm from apple country in upstate New York. It's three times the size of any apple tree I've ever seen, and it's a great piece of history."

Crisp was thrilled that Nellis spared the special tree. "I hoped Bill would save it so badly," said Crisp. "I'm so happy he did, kudos to him. That tree has been through ice storms and everything nature could throw at it. It would have devastated me if he cut it down."

Crisp remembers back in the 1980s a limb was removed and that Louis counted more than 100 rings on it. "Back in the 80s we were trying to fix it," said Crisp. "They cut a limb off and the limb had over 100 rings on it. It's been there forever." She remembers that her great grandmother, Minnie Zoellner Edwards, who was the original owner of Edward's Inn, suffered from glaucoma. After she lost her sight, she used to love sitting under the tree enjoying the shade.

Crisp would hide Easter eggs under the tree, play hideand-go-seek in the tree and swing on the rope swing. When the tree blossomed, the pink flowers were absolutely gorgeous, she said. "The blossoms were a sea of pink," she said. "When you opened the windows the smell was everywhere, and when the blossoms fell it was like snowfall."

Of course, the most important part of the tree were the apples it yielded. "My grandmother used to make jams and jellies for her shop (The Condiment Shop)," said Crisp. "It makes fabulous apple sauce and apple pies, the apples are so good.