

Of Politics and Poplars

Darlene M. Phillips

THE LOMBARDY POPLARS ARE ALMOST GONE NOW. This shouldn't nag at me, but it does. They used to be everywhere in Utah, lining the edges of farms, marking a town's boundaries, or marching down long lanes toward old two-story homes whose polygamous owners preferred not to live in a house at the side of the road. The trees were most noticeable on what we called "town turns" — those bold attempts to strait-lace even the topography into an orderly Mormon corset.

I remember those unexpected right angles from the days before freeways, when all roads were obligated to pass through the center of the closest town. My father would be driving the Willys south down Highway 89, the preferred scenic route, and the road would suddenly veer right around some farmer's field, pointing us in a new direction toward a cluster of green.

"Town turn," my father would announce as the tires squealed westward. And then another town turn, this time to go south. Not generally south, or mostly south, but directly south. Pioneer towns were laid out as square and true as the people who built them. The idea of cul-de-sacs, winding drives, and dead-end streets was as foreign to these people as the notion of a highway purposely built to avoid a city.

Once poplars were the hallmark of every Mormon village. I rather liked the way they stood then, lined up at attention on either side of the main thoroughfare as we passed by. And I remember their bars of narrow shade upon my face whenever my father stopped to chat with gas station attendants at the round-headed pumps. He had owned a gas station once, and so conversations about octane readings and new pumps were as mandatory as town turns.

The poplars are dying now. Most of them were taken down as public hazards when Utah's streets began to need sidewalks. The trees were in the way. Still, I do see a long line of them from time to time. Half dead, their

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skeletal branches stretching grayly above a faint gasp of green, they are still willing to guard some farmer's field.

My husband and I argue sometimes about why they are dying, though we both know the poplar is short-lived, botanically speaking. The old ones die, and no one plants new ones. I have heard that there are some towns where it is even against the law to plant a poplar. They grow too tall, tangle overhead wires, have shallow roots, are subject to windfall. Mortal sins, all.

Still, on long drives, my husband and I enjoy fantasizing about the retreat of the pioneer trees. "They are allergic to asphalt," he speculates on one trip. I counter that the freeway is strangling them. "No," he says, "they are addicted to carbon monoxide. They are perishing from withdrawal since the traffic has deserted them for other realms." That brings me to mourn the loss of irrigation ditches, since I am old enough to remember when the gutters on either side of Main Street in Salt Lake City were channels for farming water. Today, most cities, following the state capitol's example, have diverted their irrigation water into underground culverts.

Pity then, the poor Lombardy. A form of willow, it perishes without a steady source of moisture. The mystery to me is that when it dies, it is seldom replaced, even by another shade tree. This devaluation of shade in such a hot climate is a perpetual sorrow to me. The pioneer, who came here from leafier climes, planted trees almost before he unpacked his wagon. I think he would puzzle at his descendants as much as I do. Their homes bake in the westward glance of the sun, the swamp coolers whirring double time in the absence of any shade on their roofs.

"Trees shed pollen and seed pods and leaves that have to be raked in the fall," my neighbor says.

"Humus for the garden," the pioneer in me answers.

She responds, "Trees break in the wind, ruin sidewalks, roofs, and houses. They don't last."

"Neither do mortals," I reply.

"Trees with surface roots spoil the lawns," the suburbanite reminds me.

And the farmer in me echoes, "Man does not live by neat lawns alone." And so the argument goes. The tree-haters of the West have lost sight of their history. Time and progress have left me behind.

After all, what can you say to Utahns who accept the California gull as their state bird and the Colorado blue spruce as their state tree? Only the state flower, the sego lily, seems truly to belong here.

And like the Lombardy poplar, it is almost extinct. Suddenly, I understand why. Most Mormon of all trees, the poplar does not thrive alone. It does best in a crowd. It needs to stand with its fellows in long windrows to the north of farm homes, or in parallel lines on either side of a lane. Rows of such trees are at their best when they can stand with roots entwined along some ditch-bank, trunk to trunk, so to speak, their heart-shaped leaves whispering secrets back and forth in the night wind.

It is loneliness which kills the poplar. The solitary oak stretching its limbs wide over a field is a handsome sight, a refuge for cattle and horses, for girls

with tree-climbing instincts, and for boys with sling shots. A poplar in the same position looks sad. It hugs its limbs to its trunk, hunching them as if being jostled by a crowd. Only there is no crowd. The tree that looks like a guardian of moral rectitude when bolstered by its fellows is revealed for what it is.

It is a timid tree, unable to breathe free, unstamped by individuality, unable to bend. And yet, in a state dominated by one religion, one political party, one frame of mind, the poplar is vanishing. The pioneers who planted poplars were not at all like them, or they would never have come here. They were some of the most radical nonconformists ever born. And for that I respect them, though I have come to fear the woody sentinels they left behind.

It is as if the spirit of the poplar has not been given over to death after all, but has seeped from its tangled roots into the irrigation ditches that run along the fields and water the crops in Utah. Stalks of winter wheat suck the leached essence into their roots, revive it, and learn to bend together, as they have seen the Lombardies do. The farmer who sets the plow, the boy chasing seagulls behind him, the wife who grinds the wheat, the young girl kneading bread; all seem to learn the ways of the poplar by osmosis. They nod in unison, raise their hands with one opinion, crimp the edges of my life like a pie crust circled in one pan.

It is for them that even history has been recast, seizing by the throat those rugged men and women of the 1840s, poplar planters all. Sculpting their ordinary lives to statuesque proportions for the sake of one perfect story. And so, when I see a row of Lombardies still standing, however feebly, I cannot help myself. I offer my salute.

They have been victorious, after all.