

“It’s a damn shame”...a Story of one Tree, one Town, one Country

As the Linemen were re-stringing the downed electrical lines near the house...I heard the now-familiar verse to a brand-new #1 i-Tunes song (Rich Men North of Richmond) by Oliver Anthony: “Lord, it’s a damn shame what the world’s gotten to For people like me and people like you Wish I could just wake up and it not be true But it is, oh, it is” The young man 20 feet up, perfectly belted out the tune at the top of his lungs. As he looked down towards me, I smiled. My thought was “People better be listening to this song”. The natives are restless, and good folks are getting pretty fed up with being lied to, and ridiculed. Things change as a normal course of history. You can’t bury history or cancel it. Just learn from it. We’re not doing that learning thing. That led to me thinking about the “Shank’s Oak” on west Main that had fallen right between (miraculously) the Shanks' house, and the Cruise’s. What had this tree seen in its lifetime, and what did it try to teach us? When you consider the tree was a mere sapling when the Mayflower landed in 1620, we realize it saw all of our history...long before there even was a Jonesborough. For sure, the Cherokee people traveled near her. Jacob Brown and Charles Robertson purchased large tracts of land from the Cherokees, and some of those transactions were at the best...dubious. Indeed, allowing free enterprise ultimately led to the Cherokee to be forcibly removed from their beloved NE TN homeland in 1838, during the “Trail of Tears” on their way to Oklahoma. In business, the best deal is one that benefits everyone. It’s called “Win-win, or no deal”. When it’s “Win-lose”... it’s best for the party that’s losing to just walk away. Otherwise, people can get hurt. In 1801, Samuel Jackson came to the area. By this time in history, the shade the Shanks tree provided on a hot summer afternoon must have been inviting. Samuel built his three girls a house...what we call “Sister’s Row” on West Main. His son A.E. Jackson rose to the ranks of Brigadier General of the Confederate States Army. General A.E. Jackson is buried right here in Jonesborough. Why do some people want to “cancel” any reference to the Confederacy? Jonesborough residents struggled to maintain friendships during the Civil War, but we still did. We seem to do that whole thing of “acceptance” pretty well here in TN’s Oldest Town. Did the Shanks Oak practice acceptance? Of course! Its mighty arms embraced all who sought relief. Would it be so hard to think of a weary Confederate soldier resting under the mighty oak one day, and a slave the next...both hoping for “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”. In our modern day, why does it seem that there can be only one definition for everything? Why can’t the word...diversity...also mean freedom of thought? The Presbyterian Church owned the house where the Cruises are today from 1925 to 1984. Probably somewhere during that time, a small rot started to infect the tree. Who knows when, who knows how...but I hear some folks discussing who could have stopped the rot. How sad we have an “Act of God” (big wind) take down a beautiful tree, and what we want to do is place blame? I’m waiting for the climate crazies to

blame us all. Of course, just spend more money and establish more federal government control and everything will be better. Cool...you convince the Chinese to do all of that...first. I digress... The home had three owners, then Gene and Joyce Cox became residents from 2002 to 2013. Avid recorders of Washington County history, they co-published a book on the subject. It was so fitting that local historians with a love for the area got to look out their window and see the mighty Shanks Oak wave at them during a slight breeze. The tree grew broad and high, but the rot in the base kept growing larger. On the surface, all was fine. Some cabling was done, but her leaves were bright and shiny! So, it is with many things...even Empires. We look and see strength, but it's hard to see the rot...until the mighty oak falls. When is the best time to take measures to protect yourself from disaster? The answer is...probably yesterday. When was the last time we heard our leaders pressing for solutions to the funding of Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, how to tame our debt, and the massive cost and societal overreach of a centralized 4th branch of government? When was the last time the mainstream press even asked those questions, or allowed them to be asked? The politician's answer is always the same...wait until you vote me in. And...the rot advances. The Shanks Oak gave shade to all. Maybe this is why it was loved so much. She saw it all...young love, expectant mothers being rushed to the hospital, and old folks giving her one final glance before heading to the hospital...for the last time. Folks like John Sevier walked past her, just as we did. The question might be...did you ask yourself anything about that oak before she fell...or even noticed it as something other than a "big tree". That old oak wasn't a text, post or e-mail that you had to complete as you passed by her...but perhaps that tree was more important than all three. There's where tragedy can bring out the best...or not so "best" in us all. After she fell, there were already plans imagined securing large portions of the tree for some kind of public use. That's great stuff, and it will be fun to see what conversations ensue...this is Jonesborough so comments will be heard! Let's also remember... The Cruise's and Shanks are grieving. They have physical losses, monetary losses, and emotional curve balls ahead of them. That's where the "not so best" comes in. Many people had a connection to this gorgeous old oak and wanted to remember her by bringing a piece of the tree home with them. The circus got so bad, the Jonesborough police had to establish a perimeter. What really was disappointing was the number of treasure hunters that did not even think to knock on the door prior to traipsing all over private property. Not to mention even simply asking the residents if they were "OK". Some people even asked City workers to "grab me a chunk"! I'm so glad that beautiful tree had passed before she saw all of this. Jonesborough makes us better than this...let's show it. I'll leave it up to "Rich Men North of Richmond" singer/songwriter Oliver Anthony to "bring it home". He wrote on Facebook: "I HATE the way the internet has divided all of us. The Internet is a parasite that infects the minds of humans and has their way with them. Hours wasted, goals forgotten, loved ones sitting in houses

with each other distracted all day by technology made by the hands of other poor souls in sweat shops in a foreign land. When is enough, enough? When are we going to fight for what is right again? MILLIONS have died protecting the liberties we have. Freedom of speech is such a precious gift. Never in world history has the world had the freedom it currently has. Don't let them take it away from you. Just like those once wandering in the desert, we have lost our way from God and have let false idols distract and divide us. It's a damn shame. "Maybe there's the lesson of the Shanks Oak. There are no perfect people, just perfect intentions. Here's to making the next tree darn proud of us. In doing so, we bring pride to ourselves.