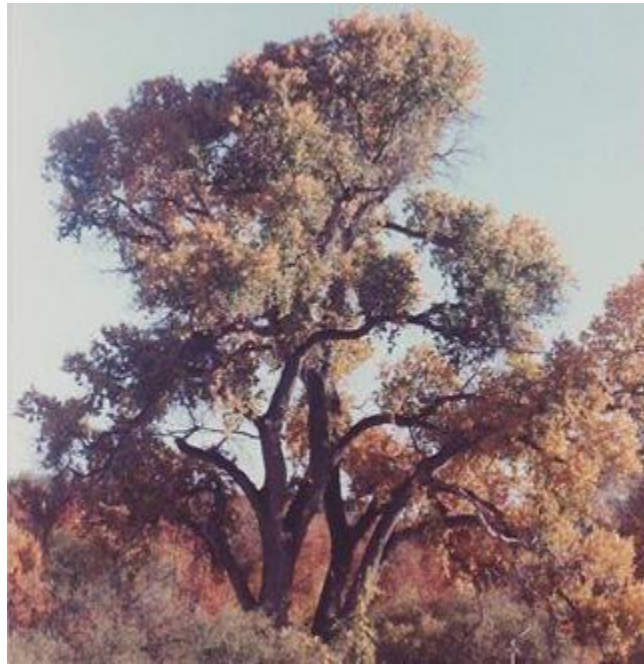


1875 sees beginning of 'Old Tree' meeting tradition in Verde Valley

Glenda Farley Oct 3, 2023



The original "Old Tree" was damaged by heavy snow that broke off limbs. Before 1919, the tree caught fire and burned, leaving most of the branches dead. Only a few green shoots were struggling to live by 1919. On the first Sunday of October meetings continued to be held under nearby large cottonwood trees. (Glenda Farley photo)

Wagon trains brought many settlers to the Verde Valley during 1875. Their first Sunday meeting was held in the shade of the largest cottonwood tree near the home of Parson James Clawson Bristow on Oct. 3, 1875.

Each year on the first Sunday of October, Parson Bristow called his congregation together and blessed them again and thanked God that they were still left and showed the way for them to follow in the bad times that came. After a few years, the annual ceremony became a tradition and people came from all over the valley to participate.

Part of the tradition was that "after the sermon was finished there were good eats, good old country eats, fried chicken, home bread, and all the good things one gets at the homes along the Verde." (Jerome Sun; Oct. 15, 1917.)

1919: "Just 44 years from when he delivered his first sermon in the Verde Valley, Reverend James C. Bristow, 84 years old, preached at Middle Verde. Times have changed." Of the 400 friends and neighbors who attended, only seven had attended the first "Old Tree" meeting, and several of them were too young to remember the occasion. Ed Dickinson was only 2 years old, his brother Frank was 9, and their sister, now Mrs. William Back, was a "little girl. The 2 tiny daughters of the minister were there; they are now Mrs. John Halstron and Mrs. James Wingfield. The oldest person in attendance, who had" attended in "1875, was George Hance, a Camp Verde Pioneer. Lined up under the nearby cottonwood trees were

nearly 30 modern automobiles. ...Shortly after noon a basket dinner was spread beneath the trees. It was such a picnic dinner as is set only by the good wives and cooks of the Verde Valley." (Verde Copper News; Oct. 6, 1919.)

James C. Bristow "was ordained to the ministry in 1882 at Middle Verde. There, with the help of Rev. R. A. Windes, he organized a Sunday school and church where he was pastor until August 1905. His last sermon was preached at the 'Old Tree' on October 3, 1920." (Pioneer Stories of Arizona's Verde Valley; 1933, 1954; p. 58.) Rev. Bristow died at his home Jan. 29, 1921; however, the yearly "Old Tree" meetings continued.

1953: The "Old Tree" meeting was at the Bethany Indian Baptist Church. "As in 1875, the program will be held under an 'Old Tree' --- a giant cottonwood on the Middle Verde Reservation." (Verde Independent; Oct. 8, 1953.)

1955: The 80th anniversary of the first "Old Tree" meeting was "celebrated at Middle Verde Bethany Indian Baptist Church. A full day of activities was planned with Sunday school at 9:45 a.m., an 11 a.m. service, potluck lunch at 12:30, and a speaker at 2 p.m. (Verde Independent; Oct. 6, 1955.)

The tradition of the "Old Tree" meetings continued to be celebrated for many years.