

Forests of the Lower Wabash Bottomlands During The Period 1870-1890

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Shortly after the passing of Charles C. Deam in 1953 it was my good fortune to receive from Mrs. Ortenburger (Deam's daughter) a few items from Deam's collections. Among them was an envelope on which Deam had typed, "This set is very valuable, photos by Robert Ridgeway, with key in his own handwriting." In the envelope were photographs taken in Indiana and a letter describing the forests of the Lower Wabash Bottomlands.

In response to an invitation to visit Knox County, Indiana which was extended to Robert Ridgeway by Charles C. Deam, Ridgeway replied with a letter dated August 2, 1919 and postmarked Olney, Illinois.

The letter and photographs describing the forests of Knox and Gibson counties as Ridgeway knew them during the period 1870-1890, as far as I have been able to determine, have not previously been published.

Ridgeway's letter is in part as follows:

"I wish it were possible for me to join you in Knox County. Unfortunately my time is not my own, and as I have long ago used up my annual leave I am able to make short trips to the woods, hereabouts only on Sundays, of evenings or holidays.

"Yes, although I have not been in Indiana on foot since 1890, I know that my old 'stamping grounds' have been completely transformed. In truth, it was knowledge of this fact, more than anything else, which induced me to establish my home here rather than at Mt. Carmel where I was born. The transformation is indeed more radical than could possibly be realized by anyone not familiar with the forests of the Wabash bottom as I knew them in the "seventies" Then there was scarcely a break (only here and there a farm hewn out of the forest, or, more rarely, a small settlement), from a little below Vincennes to near New Harmony, an exceedingly heavy virgin forest, some of the heaviest hardwood forest I have ever seen—as I have twice visited the Tropics (Central America)—covering almost the entire flood plain of the Wabash on the Indiana side. I am sending you some photographs, taken as late as 1888, showing the continuous character of those forests, though at the time the photographs were taken there had been considerable 'culling' of the best trees.

"I am perfectly well aware that I have been accused of MUNCHAUSENISM in the matter of measurements of trees which I have published, but was always ready to take up a challenge when proof was possible. You are probably aware that exceedingly few people are able to guess with even approximate accuracy the height of a given tree. On a certain occasion I asked estimates of the height of a tree from several timber cutters, and their estimates ranged from 80 to 'nigh onto 200 feet.' When I measured the big sycamore of which I send

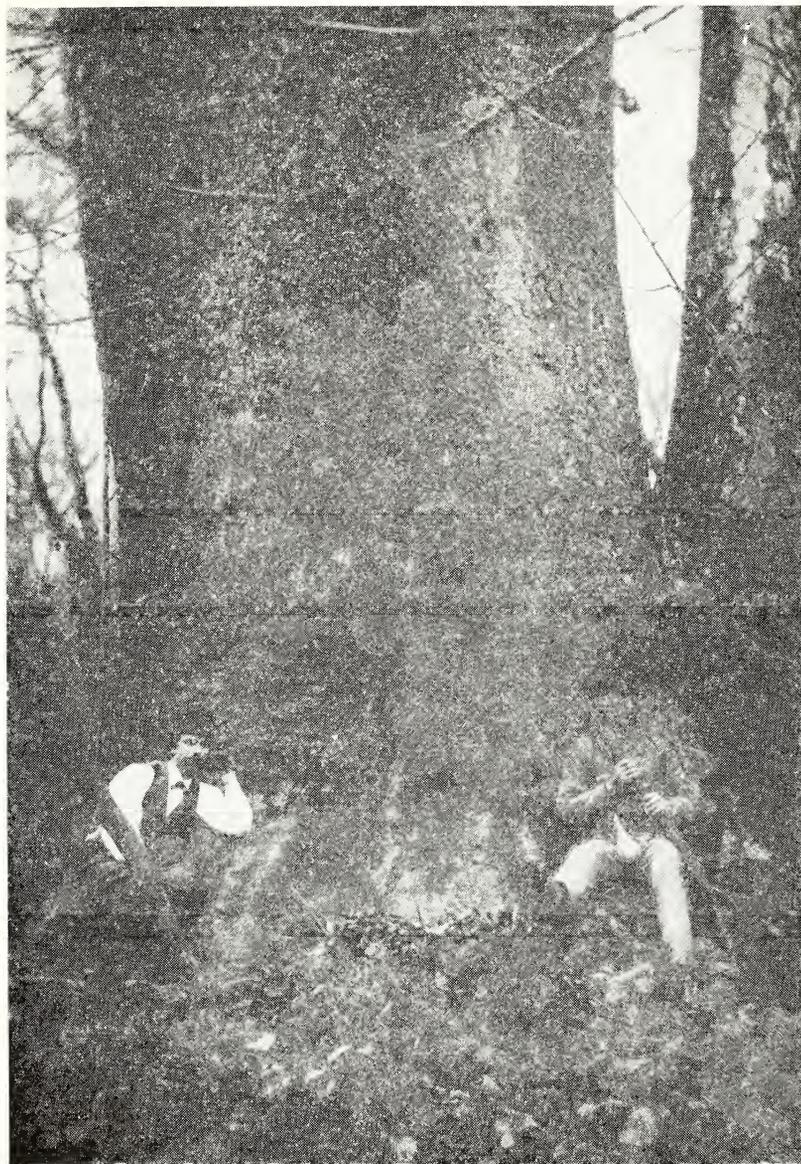


Figure 1.

you a photograph, it then stood near the middle of an immense cornfield. A man plowing at the farthest corner observed my antics. At first he was content to halt his horse and leaning on the plow handle observe my movements, but at last he could retain his curiosity no longer, and, hitching his horse, sauntered across the field to where I was at work and, good-naturedly, asked what I was doing. I told him that I was

measuring the height of probably the tallest tree east of California. He looked both surprised and incredulous; then squinting up toward the top of the tree remarked, 'It is a purty good chunk of a tree, ain't it?' Evidently its size had never impressed him before.

"Big Sycamore in Gibson Co. nearly opposite Mt. Carmel, Ill. Diameter 15 ft. at 10 ft. Height as determined by dendrometer. Tri-



Figure 2.

angulation and measuring shadow at noon—average of these—160 feet, spread of top 134 x 112 feet. This tree stood in a partially cleared portion of the heaviest hardwood forest I have ever seen—the Tropics not excepted. On the same half mile square (approximated—the area may have been much less and certainly was not greater) I measured on this same day, twelve sycamores which averaged near 8 feet (average girth 23½ feet) in diameter and 127 feet spread of top. This especially heavy forest stretched from a short distance below the mouth of Patoka River to Coffee Bayou and in it the only buckeye trees I ever saw in the Wabash bottom. I think the species must have been *Aesculus octandra*, as the trees were too large for *Aesculus glabra*, according to descriptions, being 70 or 80 feet high and 2 feet or more in diameter.”

“When it is considered that in the bottomland of the Lower Wabash all the conditions existed—deep, fertile, well drained soils, with constant moisture, for the very best development of tree growth and that the stand (in the original forest) was so thick that the trees *had* to grow upward toward the sunlight, it is no wonder that many species grew to a height that seems improbable to some people. My estimate was that the ‘tree top line of the virgin forest along the Lower Wabash was not less than 100 feet and it may have been as much as 120 feet. It was remarkably uniform, forming a practically straight, level line, with only here and there the dome-shaped top of some species which grew larger than most others, usually a sycamore, pecan, a Schneck’s Oak, or tulip tree, lifted a little above the general level. One hundred feet high seems a marvelous height to many people; yet it is a fact that it doesn’t take very much of a tree to reach that height in a crowded forest.”

A discussion of species characteristics follows and then Ridgway returns to the forests of the Lower Wabash.

“Reverting to the subject of profound changes in Knox County, I came near forgetting Monteur’s Pond and vicinity. When my parents lived on a farm near there it was a wooded swamp, about 9 miles in length and 1 mile in average width. The greater part was densely wooded, the prevailing trees being tall willows (*S. nigra*), red maples, swamp cottonwood, black ash (the only place, by the way, where I ever saw the last growing). About 1889 or 1890 it was drained and now, judging by appearances from the train in crossing through, it would be difficult to find a stick as big as a broom handle on the entire area! Among the photographs which I send are two showing the character of this swamp as it was in 1885. I hope sometime to get the chance to revisit the locality and take other photographs from the same points. One could not imagine a more profound change. (As late as 1885, practically the whole region about Monteur’s Pond was heavily wooded except where farms etc., had been cleared. Yet in 1910, when A. H. Howell, of the Biological Survey, passed through on his way from Washington to Olney, he entered in his notebook ‘a prairie-like country.’!!!”

Robert Ridgeway, a well known Ornithologist was born at Mt. Carmel, Illinois on July 2, 1850 and died on March 25, 1929. For a few

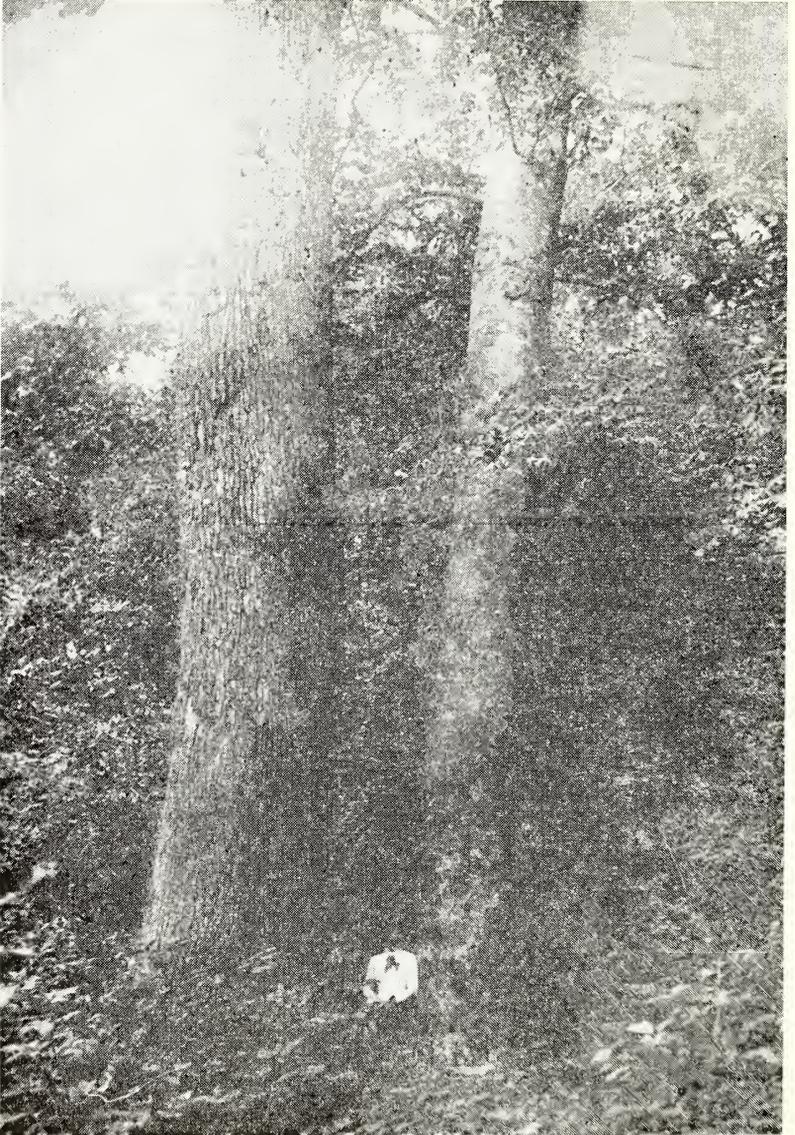


Figure 3.

years he lived near Wheatland, Indiana and during his early years he spent much of his time in the Lower Wabash Bottomlands studying birds and the vegetation.