



ISSUE #12 APRIL 2020

## Bruce Baker: From Novice to Rootslayer

By Tamara Milostan

Bruce Baker had first noticed an American Larch in a bonsai exhibition at Longwood Gardens in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, and he says, “It grabbed me. It was a beautiful representation of an old larch tree, and I wanted to do that. I think it was actually donated by Nick Lenz.” In the early 1980’s, after years of disasters working on his own, his wife encouraged him to attend a meeting of the Ann Arbor Bonsai Society. He put down roots in the AABS and started developing skills that have made him a well-known bonsai artist.



*“The tree that I donated to Matthaei’s collection was actually in the ground for seven or eight years with no maintenance done on it. It’s really been a credit to Jack Wikle and Cyril Grum, and all the other people who have worked hard on it to keep it alive and bring it back into shape.” Some of the other people involved in the shaping, styling and maintenance of this tree are Bjorn Bjorholm and David DeGroot. Bruce is so grateful to all these people and the many volunteers that work on the Bonsai collection at Matthaei.*  
*Photo by Jay Sinclair.*

At that first meeting, Bruce met Jack Wikle. With Jack's kindness and help, Bruce began his bonsai journey. Bruce believes that first you have to have an interest and then "find a group of like-minded people, preferably a club, and learn from the collective wisdom of the members." With Jack's help, Bruce learned important lessons, for example not to be impatient. "Plan to go for the long haul with your tree and really turn it into something spectacular." Bruce says, "Jack definitely was the first influence and remains one of the most important influences on my bonsai."

Jerry Meislik was another big influence on Bruce, and they became close friends. They started at about the same level, which was ground zero, according to Bruce. Jerry and Bruce did a lot of collecting together and spent a lot of time together doing Bonsai. "We learned things and we had successes and failures together in the backyard and in the garden." Although Bruce and Jerry have taken their trees in different directions, Bruce feels that Jerry, too, has been a longtime inspiration.

In 1984, Bruce's bonsai journey took a turn when Dan Robinson used a chainsaw during an AABS demo. "I was fascinated by Dan. He is a maverick. He practices a type of bonsai that is probably his alone." Bruce feels that "once you see something done, and this is one of the reasons to belong to a club, even if it looks crazy, or like it might hurt the tree, or is beyond your reach; when you see someone do it, it gives you permission to try." After this demo, Bruce felt he had permission to pursue some of his own ideas. "That's what Dan did with me. I saw him work on trees with chain saws. He bent really thick wood. He dug up trees that were bigger than anything that anyone was working on in Ann Arbor." Bruce continues to use chainsaws to carve bonsai. He feels that "a chainsaw is like any other bonsai tool—it has certain purposes. It's good at some things and it's not good at others."

Bruce found inspiration in the work of other bonsai professionals as well. "John Naka was a tremendous inspiration for me. I organized a show in Ann Arbor at the Campus Inn. John demonstrated and taught for the Ann Arbor Bonsai and then also for the Bonsai Association of Michigan. I got to know him a bit as a result, and I actually visited him in California."

Bruce also has great memories of working with another brilliant American bonsai artist, Nick Lenz. "He has a vision that's unique, and I can't say

enough good things about him. He has that sensibility of the very refined bonsai in the Japanese way, but with American materials.”

“Vaughn Banting was also an amazing talent and another American pioneer who worked with bald cypress trees in Louisiana. Vaughn has a pretty important place in the history of bonsai in the U.S.”

After suffering several setbacks with his trees, Bruce credits Dean Bull with re-igniting his “bonsai flame.” Bruce got to know Dean in the late 1980’s when Dean invited himself to see Bruce’s collection. “It was an eye opener for him (Dean), because he had never really seen anybody with so many trees, not to mention doing the kinds of things I was doing.” Bruce considers Dean, who has been caring for Bruce’s trees for the past several years, a great friend.



*(left to right) Louise Newman, Walt Freeman, Bruce doing a demo at our May 22, 2019 meeting, John Fink, Jack Wikle (barely visible), and John Cerovski. Photo by Jay Sinclair.*

When asked to relate a story about the Ann Arbor Bonsai Society, Bruce answered, “What people many not know is that the club probably allowed me to retire in a roundabout way.” Bruce was in the garden tool business, and the sale of his “ground-breaking” shovel, the Root Slayer, a boon to bonsai collectors everywhere, allowed him to retire. For the complete story of the Root Slayer, see: <http://radiusgarden.com/blogs/food-for-thought/the-story-of-the-root-slayer>.

Within 10 years of seeing his first bonsai, Bruce had won many awards for his collected and carved trees, including best of Show at the Mid-America Bonsai Exhibition at the Chicago Botanic Garden. Along the way, he has taught at dozens of bonsai clubs, demonstrated at major bonsai conventions, authored numerous articles as well as a regular column on bonsai. He has served on the boards of the Ann Arbor Bonsai Society, Bonsai Association of Michigan, Bonsai Clubs International, and the World Bonsai Friendship Federation.

Facebook: [Bruce Baker Bonsai](#)

Instagram: [@BruceBakerBonsai](#)

Previous issues of this publication are located in the [History section of the AABS website](#)

### **NEXT WEEK: *Clive Taylor's White Birch Forest***

#### **HOW YOU CAN HELP WITH OUR 50TH CELEBRATION**

1. To help us in this celebration effort, all Ann Arbor Bonsai Society members present and past, and all others wishing to contribute are invited to submit personal statements (60 words or less) to be published in our Yearbook. Each text contributor is also strongly encouraged to submit a favorite photo (with caption) of a bonsai tree or a bonsai activity to accompany his or her personal statement. (We can scan old prints or digitize color slides for anyone needing this help with old pictures.) [Upload Form is here.](#)
2. Let's all Celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the AABS in style with shirts that have our commemorative logo printed on the front. Shirts will be available for purchase for \$20 each at our monthly meetings, at the Annual Club Show August 29-30, and at The Flower Market in Dundee, Michigan.



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