



Roots & Branches

The Origins and Directions of the Ann Arbor Bonsai Society

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Jack Wikle, Cultivating Trees and Artists for Over 50 Years (Part 1)

By Diane Faust, Conservatory Manager, Hidden Lake Gardens

Jack Wikle, has been a preacher of the bonsai gospel, a friend and a mentor to many in the bonsai community. Many people have begun their bonsai journey, whether it has been a few years, or going on a lifetime, because of Jack's encouragement, knowledge and support. As a very early member of the Ann Arbor Bonsai Society, he had a platform to pursue his own bonsai habit and encourage others to learn from their trees, but more than that to learn about ourselves through our trees.

Jack's early up-bringing and education started in a one room schoolhouse in northwest Ohio. The water pump and the outhouses were in the school yard and the coal and wood to keep the fire going were kept in an outside shed. His family lived on a 40-acre farm. This home also had no indoor plumbing. Then, in 1941, during the Second World War, his parents bought a bigger farm in southern Hillsdale County, Michigan, 80 acres with a river running through it, but no indoor plumbing, or electricity. So, for five years the family lived with kerosene lamps. This was well into Jack's high school years.

Jack would have been in the Korean War had he not been enrolled in Michigan State University. He had good enough grades and was therefore exempt from the draft until he graduated.

Shortly after graduating from college with a biology degree, Jack found himself in the military and on his way to Japan courtesy of Uncle Sam. He had little desire to see that part of the world because he had not seen much of the

United States. He was staring out the back end of a military truck leaving Yokohama and crossing Tokyo when he realized, "What a fool I've been! This trip is going to be the experience of a lifetime." And it was. He was fascinated by Japanese culture, by the ornamental gardens and the interesting and compelling combinations that could be made in gardening in very small spaces. He did see a few bonsai, but realized immediately he could never do that because there must be some Japanese family secrets to create such trees.



Jack (second from left) enjoying the Japanese countryside with fellow GIs and local friends sampling some Japanese beer in June, 1956. Jack took this photo with the self-timer on his camera mounted on a tripod.

Leaving Japan after 17 months, Jack's thoughts were on how he could make his way back to Japan someday. As his life worked out, Jack would return to Japan seven times after that.

After returning from Japan, Jack went back to Michigan State University to work on his Master's degree in ornamental horticulture. Early in the 1960's, someone had suggested to him visiting an interesting garden center in Grand Ledge, just outside of Lansing. He and his wife, Jeannine, went out there on a Sunday afternoon and met Bob Maxson, the owner, who was one of Michigan's bonsai pioneers. Bob had taken some bonsai classes at the

Brooklyn Botanical Garden, came back and was growing some entry level bonsai of his own. As Jack shared some of his experiences of Japan, he was thinking to himself, “Hey, this guy is not Japanese.” Bob showed Jack some early books on bonsai and by the time Jack left that garden center he knew he wanted to experiment, to try his own hand at bonsai. This was the start of a hobby and long career for Jack practicing the art of bonsai.



Jack's July, 1956 photo of a small bonsai and suiseki display in Hibiya Park near the heart of Tokyo, the first bonsai he remembers seeing in Japan. Examining these trees, Jack realized immediately he could never do that because he would have to be heir to some Japanese family secrets to create such trees.

If you ask Jack if there was one person who inspired him in developing his own bonsai, his story starts with joining the Cleveland Bonsai Club while he worked for Davey Tree in the Cleveland-Akron area. There was one member, Molly Abbott whose trees seemed to Jack to show strong artistic sense. Shortly after joining, Jack took with him, to a club meeting, a little hawthorn he had dug up in his early enthusiasm. He wanted to show people what he had been doing with his bonsai and ask opinions on the next steps for his tree. This hawthorn had an interesting, sweeping trunk line that appeared as if a cow had stepped on it. But, at the top, there was a turkey foot arrangement of branches going in three directions. It also had a “sucker-like” branch just about halfway down the trunk that shot up like an arrow toward the sky. Jack knew (well, he was pretty sure) that sucker did not fit with the

composition. So he asked the members their opinions, "Should I keep it or chop it off?" Some said "Yes, " chop the sucker off, but when the tree came to Molly she pushed the branch end down saying. "This is where that branch belongs." This was not just enlightening but it opened Jack's world to the possibilities of redirecting branches in designing bonsai.

Jack continued experimenting and soon realized sharing and consulting with others in bonsai clubs could be an avenue to learn and grow both personally and in his bonsai endeavors. After moving back to Michigan in 1968, to work at Michigan State University's Hidden Lake Gardens as its first education specialist, he joined the Lansing area Bonsai Society of Michigan (first bonsai club in Michigan).

Jack had been working at Hidden Lake Gardens for a few years, when John Naka, from the Los Angeles area, came as the invited speaker to a Bonsai Society of Michigan meeting in the horticulture building on the MSU campus. John was one of the first real outside bonsai presenters for that club. Jack was familiar with John by his reputation as a well respected bonsai artist and super communicator. As John was asking questions to learn more about Michigan and its weather, Jack told him that in early April it could be 80 degrees and then, in a day or two, down to freezing. Then, he suggested casually, "Since you are from Los Angeles, growing bonsai has to be more difficult for us than for you since you don't have our weather extremes." John looked away and then looked up and said to Jack, "You people have lots of excuse." That was Jack's first lesson from John. A lot of what we do is about attitude. John Naka continued to be a great influence on Jack and there are a number of very good Naka quotes he shares whenever appropriate. Such as, "Now you all know too much is too much and (a pause) not enough is not enough and (pause) just right is just right". Jack learned from that quote that bonsai culture is about balance and that quote says it all.

Some other highly regarded mentors for Jack have been David De Groot, Nick Lenz and Marion Gyllenswan, but he is quick to add that there have been many other people who have inspired him. Also there have been many people that he has taught and shared his bonsai knowledge with, who have taught him much in return.



Jack demonstrating for the public at Ann Arbor Bonsai Society event at Briarwood Mall during the 1970s.

When asked about Jack's long history with the art of Bonsai and what compels him to stay in this hobby he replied, "This is not a hobby or activity you can ever master." He went on to explain that it is a way for him of self-expression. It is a means to communicate something about himself to other people and actually grow his own understanding of himself. It is mental and emotional therapy to work with the trees. "The trees are always growing and changing," they are never static, and that is the challenge in this art form." Jack first became involved with the Ann Arbor Bonsai society in 1974. He was already a member of the Bonsai Society of Michigan when that group was invited by the, then new, Ann Arbor club to help put a show on at The University of Michigan's Matthaei Botanical Gardens. Not long after this show, Jack joined the closer-to-home Ann Arbor Bonsai Society and soon after he was on the board as their program chairman. His involvement with this club has been described by him as, "A great association with many interesting, enthusiastic people that I never would have met without that interaction." He has described further that the people involved helped him a lot and taught him a lot. The group to him is as changeable as the trees with people coming

and going. The different levels of involvement that each individual contributes makes the club always a work in progress, never finished.

When asked if his first bonsai, the Hawthorn that looked like a cow stepped on it, was still alive, Jack confessed that it wasn't and described its demise. He was working at Hidden Lake Gardens and the weather was beautiful, in the mid-seventies, in early April. He had all his trees out and was feeling great about the upcoming growing season. Then, one day while he was at work, the temperature dropped quickly to 18 degrees. By the time he got home everything was frozen solid and super cold. Many of his trees had come out of dormancy and were starting to grow a bit earlier than normal. That hawthorn was one of many of his bonsai which did not survive. He commented, "It was like a slap in the face". Jack went on with the trees he had left. This became another lesson to share with others.

If you have missed any of the previous issues of this publication they are located in the [History section of the AABS website](#).

NEXT WEEK: *Jack Wikle, Cultivating Trees and Artists for Over 50 Years (Part 2)*

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.



Ann Arbor Bonsai Society
aabonsaisociety@gmail.com
<http://www.annarborbonsaisociety.org>