



## Each year,

a few weeks before Christmas, Frank Knight walked through the snow to the giant elm. The old man's back had begun to curve at the top, but he always stood upright as he made the journey. He covered his pale, balding head with a ball cap. The snow sometimes swirled when he circled the tree. And, over the years, his hands grew increasingly unsteady, but that didn't stop him from completing this sacred ritual.

As he wrapped the red velvet bow around the tree's massive trunk, perhaps he thought of the town where this elm had stood for centuries and how much joy and pride it had given its people. Maybe he thought of his late wife and how much she had loved this tree, too, and how much he still loved her. And maybe he thought of his generously long life, and this tree, and this town, and how they were intertwined—like the roots that lay beneath his feet.

Their friendship lasted 50 years. Their legacy will endure for ages.

## The Old Man & the Tree

BY SARAH PERRY

ILLUSTRATION BY JONATHAN BARTLETT

YARMOUTH, MAINE, sits on the banks of the Royal River. In the winter, when the leaves fall from the trees and snow blankets the ground, you can see the waterway stretch for miles. Centuries-old elms line the streets, and strolling down them evokes the idyllic small towns of Hollywood films.

There are no Walmarts here. Strict laws are enforced to protect the town's historic residences, meeting houses, and office buildings—some of which have stood for hundreds of years. The townspeople are taciturn Mainers with sharp

New England accents, who care about preserving a place their ancestors have called home since 1713. But when you ask someone, anyone, about Yarmouth's trees—and about the man who cared for them for more than 50 years—they open up.

For centuries, the people here have depended on spruces, pines, elms, and catalpas for heat, housing, and employment. When settlers first arrived here in the 1600s, expansive forests stretched from the Highlands to Casco Bay. They supported the town as settlers built their first timber-frame homes, supplied lumber for ships used by Union soldiers in the Civil War, and fired the kilns crucial to the Industrial Revolution.

In the middle of the 20th century, when Dutch elm disease invaded Yarmouth's canopy and threatened hundreds of years of history and civic identity, the mayor asked Frank Knight to do whatever it took to save the town's ailing trees. In taking on the job, Frank (as everyone in Yarmouth familiarly called him) would create something enduring and magical—a sense of community that no Hollywood film could ever capture.

**F**RANK WAS BORN in 1908, the year Henry Ford's first Model T rolled off the assembly line. He grew up in Pownal, a town just north of Yarmouth, where he was raised on a farm by his grandmother and aunt. Chopping wood was among Frank's first chores, and he was only 8 when he hauled 12 cords of it on a horse-drawn sled to a pulp mill in a neighboring town. Proudly, he carried home a check for \$144.

Years later, he would earn a forestry degree from the University of Maine, work in a Depression-era conservation camp to help rid trees of devastatingly destructive gypsy moths, and build wooden barges for the Navy during World War II. In every way, trees were his livelihood.

So, in 1956, when Yarmouth's towering beauties began to show signs of illness, it was fitting that the town turned to him for help. He began his work as Yarmouth's tree warden on Main Street, where elms lined the thoroughfare like grand umbrellas. Frank divided the town into four sections and cut down the diseased and dead elms so others could thrive. The blight was so widespread that residents saw imposing piles of ravaged limbs and trunks at the town dump.

"It was in the summertime," Frank would recall of the day in the late 1950s when, at the corner of Yankee and Main, he first noticed problems with Yarmouth's largest elm. "There were leaves on

his limbs that were gray and wilting near the end, and two limbs stretching up that were diseased, saying, 'You can't save me.' But I did. It was a real specimen, like a broccoli top, like a prize elm should be. It was a little bigger than the trees around it, and so *beautifully* shaped."

Frank went right to work. He sprayed the specimen with fungicide and trimmed its burdened limbs. The next spring, it bloomed spectacularly, with no curled leaves or bad bark. It was a routine he'd performed a hundred times before on elms across Yarmouth, but something about this one tree kept Frank coming back to say hello.

Over the next few years, he drove past the elm every day. Frank patted its bark and asked how it was doing. Sometimes, he gave the tree a hug and talked to it about his day. He brought his son, Dick, to play underneath its branches. "I talk to trees, trees talk to me," Frank said, poking at his chest. "They say, 'Oh, thanks for doing that. I know you're trying to take care of me.'"

And as the decades passed, Frank's role grew to be just as expansive as the canopy he cared for. He once convinced Yarmouth's council members to pass an ordinance allowing him to spray and remove diseased trees on private property—even if the property owners didn't want him there. He began praying for lightning, which he said would help trees grow taller and stronger. After years of experimenting, he found a favorite fungicide, and every year he injected the town's elms with it.

During one of these caretaking outings, a young girl named Donna Felker was playing under Yarmouth's tallest tree—the one Frank had grown most fond of. When she saw Frank boring holes into its trunk, she threw herself against the elm and screamed, "Don't hurt Herbie!" And the name stuck.

Generations of townsfolk grew up around Herbie—hugging him, climbing up him, frolicking in his ample shadow, and telling stories about him. Neighbors watched as he grew taller and broader each year—as squirrels chased each other through his branches, and as a Baltimore oriole built a nest that hung over Main Street. A kinship developed between the soaring giant and Yarmouth. In 1987, Herbie entered the state registry as the biggest elm tree in New England. His 110-foot figure graced the pages of photo books and newspapers across Maine.

The town rejoiced each spring when Herbie's leaves sprouted and turned emerald green. For them, he was a symbol of strength and perseverance, as dear to them as the aging man who



pruned his branches. Throngs of visitors posed with Herbie for keepsake photos. Others, like Frank, came by just to say hello.

**F**RANK'S FONDNESS for routine went beyond his half-century of daily treks to his favorite tree. It extended through every part of his life. He liked a beer and a handful of spinach at noon, and a rum and Coke at night. He liked his *chowduh* from Toddy Brook, where the servers slipped him extra pie. "You don't know me, but I know you," a stranger at a nearby table once said to him. "You're Frank Knight, the tree guy."

Frank's commitment to what he adored extended far beyond tending to trees. When his wife, Frances, was alive, the two were nearly

inseparable. A small woman with wavy dark hair, finely arched brows, and penetrating blue eyes, she loved to garden and ministered to a nearly 30-foot row of peonies that ran beside their home. She was a den mother for the Boy Scouts; he formed Yarmouth's first Little League baseball team. Frank called her Frannie, and every year they wrote each other Christmas cards—and birthday cards and anniversary cards—and signed them with initials that weren't their own. Their son, Dick, still has not figured out what the initials stood for. The tradition, he says, carried on until the day she died, after a protracted battle with cancer, in 1994. "Tell me," he says. "What gets any closer than that?"

With Frannie gone, Frank—nearing 90—visited Herbie more and more. Every couple of

months—and always on Arbor Day—he'd bring a group of local schoolchildren to visit his pal, standing to the side and leaning on his cane as the kids patted and talked to Herbie. "We need to give him a big hug to make him feel better," Frank would say, and the children linked their hands until they'd formed a circular embrace of Herbie's trunk—20 feet in circumference. Tilting their heads back, they gazed up through his budding leaves and peered at the bright spring sky.

At one point, Frank ordered a plaque and nailed it to Herbie's side. He wanted visitors to know with certainty they were looking at New England's most magnificent elm—and that someone cared.

**W**HAT IS IT about a thing as seemingly insignificant as a tree that can inspire such devotion? For centuries, people have trekked the woods in search of solace and answers. Henry David Thoreau spent years exploring America's wilderness. "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived," he wrote in his 1854 literary landmark *Walden*.

More than a century after Thoreau, another writer went on a road trip to rediscover America. His first stop: Maine. In *Travels with Charley*, John Steinbeck absorbed the beauty of the state. "Everything stood out separate from everything else, a rock, a rounded lump of sea-polished driftwood on a beach, a roof line. Each pine tree was itself and separate even if it was a part of a forest. Drawing a very long bow of relationships, could I say that the people have the same quality?"

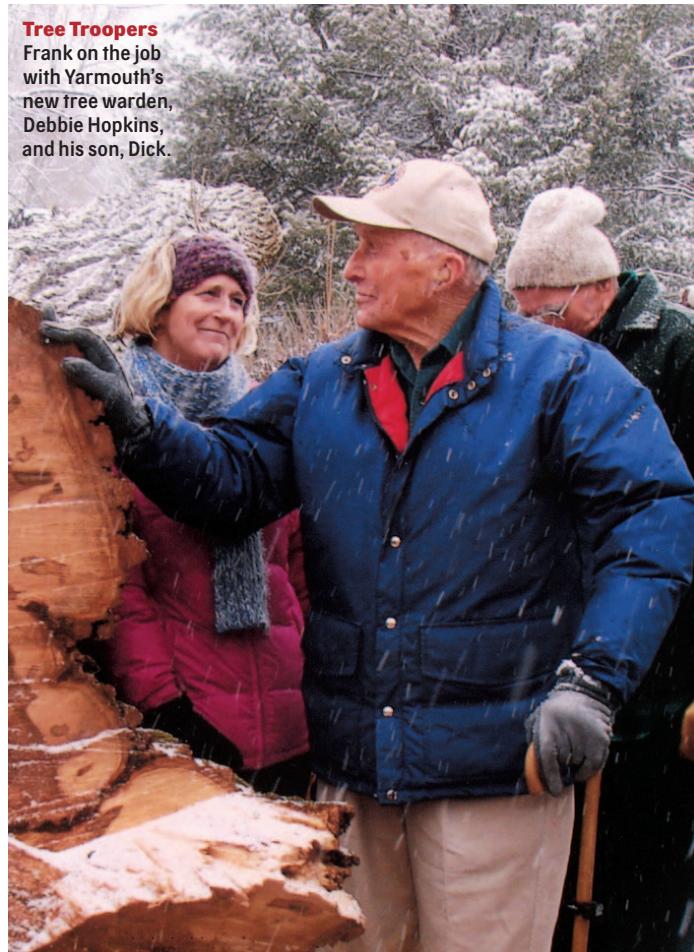
Herbie was just a tree; his caretaker, merely a man. But over their half-century together, the two became a symbol of community and perseverance.

In spring of 2008, Herbie's leaves began to turn a dark yellow and curl unnaturally. By then, Frank, age 100, looked and sounded like a raspy Clint Eastwood. When he laughed, which was frequently, his right eyelid nearly closed and the left corner of his mouth lifted—as if he were winking and smiling at the same time. He was having trouble walking and had handed over the title of tree warden to Debbie Hopkins, a hair dresser who'd grown close to Frank during Frannie's illness and whom Frank knew had the motivation, if not yet the know-how, to be a friend to Yarmouth's trees.

When Debbie first noticed the disease spreading into Herbie's bark, she did exactly what

### Tree Troopers

Frank on the job with Yarmouth's new tree warden, Debbie Hopkins, and his son, Dick.



Frank always did: called the electric company and asked that they cover the power lines so she and Frank could prune the tree. But winter had hung on longer than usual, and prohibitive weather delayed the draping of the lines for three weeks. Once they received the all-clear, Debbie and Frank set about removing diseased limbs and pumping dozens of gallons of fungicide under the bark. Then they waited. A decade earlier, Frank had performed similar emergency work after another Dutch elm disease assault, and Herbie pulled through. It would be a full year before they'd know if this round of tender caretaking had succeeded.

One Sunday at church, Frank worked his way to the front of the congregation with his walker. Standing in front of the pulpit, he took a deep breath and stared at the curious eyes before him. "I hope people aren't offended, but this is serious to me," he said. "I hope it's not too much to ask for prayers for Herbie."

Until spring of 2009, Frank and the people of Yarmouth were certain Herbie was eternal—that their prayers would be answered. But when Frank and Debbie finally returned, they found large streaks in the branches at the top of Herbie's once

lush canopy, a sure sign the disease was killing Frank's friend. They looked at each other, neither one saying a word.

**T**HROUGH THE SNOW and bitter cold on the morning of January 18, 2010, the men worked. They had begun the day before but stopped when strong winds and heavy snow

made it impossible to continue. It was as though the time wasn't quite right.

On this day, they began at 6 a.m., hacking at the branches and sawing away at the centuries-old tree. Hundreds of people—seemingly, the entire town—gathered to watch, sipping hot cocoa and whispering about what was to happen to their prized icon. News-

paper reporters scurried through the crowd. Cameras clicked away.

Around 10 a.m., Frank Knight arrived. Stiff and sore, his 101-year-old body had barely made it out of the house, even with the help of a wheelchair. From the window of an SUV, he watched silently as, limb by limb, the tree fell to the ground. Friends say he cried when the lumbermen sawed through Herbie's trunk. For 50 years, he'd tried to save his pal, and finally he'd failed.

As he sat watching, the townspeople took turns gently rubbing Frank's shoulder, lending their comfort. When the crew made its last cuts into Herbie, his 40,000-pound trunk shook the earth like nothing Yarmouth had ever felt before. Frank climbed from the SUV and shuffled across the snow and ice to say goodbye. The fallen tree towered over his slight frame. Debbie stood behind him, with tears in her eyes. His son, Dick—at 70, in advanced age himself—bowed his head. With gray clouds dimming the sky, Frank stroked Herbie's bark one last time and stared into the distance at the snow-covered trees that stood at attention like proud sentinels.

Then someone began counting Herbie's rings, one for each year he'd anchored the corner of Yankee and Main. First 50, then 100, then 200. The count stopped at 217. Herbie's journey began in 1793, the year George Washington took his oath for a second term as president.

The wind kept blowing as heavy construction equipment strained to lift the tree's trunk onto the bed of a semi. As if they were pallbearers, the townspeople lined each side of the truck. Nearly a year later, one Yarmouth resident would close her eyes, recall that day, and whisper, "It was like a funeral procession."

**F**RANK'S MAILBOX soon filled with letters from people all over the world. Some posts found their way to him marked with no address at all, only vague notations: "Mr. Frank Knight, Tree Warden." Or "Herbie's Keeper." Or "Herbie's Friend."

Despite the extraordinary show of support, Frank couldn't pass by the now-empty corner without

getting upset. "He mourned over that tree," Frank's caretaker, Jean Campobasso, remembered. "He was quieter. When we drove by it was almost like he didn't want to look." She paused. "I thought maybe he'd go with Herbie."

For all that was lost when Yarmouth's favorite elm crashed to the ground that January morning, something was also gained:

The community seemed to grow stronger than ever. Several residents, including tree warden Debbie Hopkins and Donna Felker—the woman who, as a child, had named Herbie—formed a group called The Herbie Project. Their mission was to sculpt Herbie's remains into items that could be sold at auction, and to use the money earned to plant disease-resistant elms in his honor.

After he was felled, Herbie was delivered 10 miles up the road to J.D. Sullivan and Sons Lumber, in New Gloucester. When the truck carrying him stalled as it climbed a hill slick with snow and ice, residents hitched their pickups to the rig and pulled it the rest of the way to Joe Sullivan's mill.

Joe is a matter-of-fact kind of man. He's been working with wood for nearly four decades, and milling Herbie was a tremendous undertaking. He and his crew rendered 6,000 linear feet of lumber from the tree's mass. Over the months of work, groups of curious school children and townspeople dropped by to watch the milling process. Local artisans stopped in to handpick pieces of lumber for their various projects.

The artists were like visionaries, Joe says. One of them etched Frank's likeness into a slab of wood. Others sculpted baseball bats, benches, and bowls. Knife handles, bookmarks, and a guitar were made. By the time the Herbie Project auction rolled around in November 2010, the townspeople had repurposed just about every bit of Herbie. One man even bottled the sawdust and offered it up as "Herbie ashes."

"Frank Knight had put so much effort into this tree, for so many years, people felt they owed the tree something," Joe says. "Had it not been for Frank, the tree wouldn't have made it as long as it did. Now, the tree will never die."

In the months leading up to the auction, Frank insisted he didn't want to attend. "I'll probably be out of town that day," he kept telling friends. A few days before the gathering, he changed his mind. "He couldn't bear not to carry it through to its end," his son says.

Among the items on display that day were the offering plates specially crafted for Frank's

house of worship, The First Parish Congregational Church—the same church where he'd once stood and asked the congregation to pray for Herbie.

Senior pastor Kent Allen says the plates are the most beautiful he has ever seen. They get passed around Frank's church every Sunday morning. "Herbie was a tremendous tree," Allen says.

"He became a spiritual symbol of God's presence and the beauty of His grace."

**O**N MAY 14, 2012, at the age of 103, Frank Knight passed away. A few days later, his funeral took place under clear blue skies and in the warmth of New England's vibrant spring. The hearse drove down Portland Street and made its first stop at Frank's house. The car idled for a moment, then moved on, eventually turning down Main Street. The hearse again paused, this time in front of a large, round, bare landing. Weeds had begun sprouting up from the place where Herbie's stump once stood.

At the cemetery, the oaks and maples had blossomed early and their canopies hung full and bright and beautiful over the graves. When the hearse arrived, Dick placed freshly cut daffodils, lilacs, and pansies from Frannie's gardens onto Frank's coffin. Their sweet scent filled the air, and the fine grain of Frank's custom-built casket gleamed. Debbie Hopkins, Dick Knight, and a few family members and friends stood close by, feeling a cool breeze pass as Frank was lowered into the ground. Inside the casket, lovingly crafted from the wood of his dearest friend, Frank Knight lay with his hands folded over his chest, clutching his favorite shawl, one that depicts the town of Yarmouth in its stitching. Inside the crook of his arm was the blanket's woven image of an unforgettable elm.

And less than a mile away, on the corner of Yankee and Main, a vibrant young tree—a gift of the Herbie Project—was taking root, beginning a journey that could last for centuries.

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