

Hemingway feared for High Park's great trees | The Star

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In 1923, before he became a novelist of great acclaim, Ernest Hemingway toiled among the ink-stained wretches of the old cliché at the Toronto Daily Star. On one assignment in the fall of that year, writing under the pseudonym Peter Jackson (a ruse, it's said, to earn some extra cash), he wrote of the malady then attacking the fabled oaks of High Park, blaming not only fungus but the oil-laden air of the traffic-choked city – thus proving that in Toronto, the story never really changes. Only the name in the byline.

A chill, cold wind blows over High Park. There is snow in the air.

Other trees sway with the wind. The pines seem to enjoy it.

But the oaks are sullen and rigid. Stripped of their leaves by the wind, they stand stiff and despairing looking against the sky. For the oaks are dying.

They are dying because they cannot stand the city. And the city comes nearer and nearer all the time.

Other trees are built to make compromises with the city. They have special defenses against the attacks the city launches against them. But the oak is not built for compromises. It is like some animal of prehistoric times, built only for a certain environment. And when that environment is changed it dies.

Motor cars kill oak trees, declares Dr. C. D. Howe, dean of forestry at the University.

"The dust constantly stirred up by the automobiles settles on the oak leaves and forms a film," Dr. Howe stated. "It is exceedingly fine and often contains oil. The film on the leaves stops the breathing pores and the trees suffocate. They must have air to breathe just as an animal must."

It is because the oak leaf is smooth and offers a perfect surface for the film of dust and the city smoke that the sturdiest of trees succumbs to the city, where the elm and the maple survive, according to Dr. Howe.

Toronto's oaks are dying in Queen's Park as well as in High Park. According to authorities, one reason they are unable to resist the steady smothering of the dust film is because of the weakness of old age.

Most of Toronto's oak trees are close to one hundred years old. At seventy-five to a hundred years an oak tree begins to weaken. In good, rich soil in Canada an oak should live to be 250 or 300 years if it were not exposed to the dust, smoke and gases of the city. When the oak has been weakened by the smothering caused by the shutting off of its respiratory organs, the fungus attacks it. The particular type of fungus that kills Toronto's oaks starts in at the roots. It spreads from the roots and gradually rots out the heart. The oak lives on for a time as a shell, its sap mounting in the spring and its leaves struggling against the city's dust assaults, and then dies.

Young trees with the vitality to resist the city's attacks are the one solution if Toronto is to have oaks, according to Dr. Howe.

"I believe I could successfully propagate red and black oaks in Queen's Park," Dr. Howe said. "But they would need adequate protection against the children. Children playing thoughtlessly grab a tree and either hurt the bark or shake the roots. They would need to be fenced around while they were growing."

Pines are even more sensitive to civilization than oaks. All over southern Ontario the pines are sickening from some unknown cause. They, too, like the oaks, breathe through their needles. Like the oak, too, their needles have a flat surface where the dust from the oiled highways can lie in a close, tight, deadly film. Perhaps the pines also are victims of the motor car.