

Under the Great Oak

10 Questions with

Director and Producer Michael Reynolds

1. What was the Basking Ridge Great Oak?

The Basking Ridge Great Oak was the oldest living white oak tree in America. Estimated to be over 600 years old. *Quercus alba* is the scientific name for the white oak.

2. What was significant about the Great Oak?

The Basking Ridge Great Oak started life around 1417, when humanity believed that Earth was the center of the solar system and Joan of Arc was burned at the stake. The Native American Lenni Lenape tribe were gathering the tree's acorns long before Christopher Columbus arrived on the shores of what would become America and was in middle age when Scotch Presbyterian settlers founded their church next to the majestic oak.

3. What is your connection to this tree?

I was able to see the tree from my home and visited it frequently. It was a powerful experience to touch a living organism that had been alive since Joan of Arc was burned at the stake.

4. Why make a film about the tree?

I could not let a unique example of nature's beauty pass away without creating a document for future reference, for future generations to share. It would be similar to allowing a beloved elderly relative pass away without a funeral or a memorial.

5. How did the document of the tree evolve into a feature-length documentary?

As we were shooting more and more themes developed: is modern society disconnected from history, can we have a sense of belonging as we are more transient, can towns develop but maintain a balance with nature, and maybe most significantly how do we process mortality?

6. How are these themes explored?

The themes are developed through the answers of over 40 interview subjects: residents, church members, historians, artists, arborists. There is no omniscient third-person narration, because I wanted the people connected to the tree to speak for themselves, without my thoughts and feelings to interfere.

7. Does the film rely on talking head interviews to address themes?

The film started life as a visual document of a one-of-a-kind natural wonder, so the foundation remains: the powerful images of the Great Oak – in historic photos and postcards, recent footage before the takedown, and extensive shooting of the takedown. The shape of the tree itself speaks volumes of how it grew and the forces shaping it.

8. What was the budget and size of the production?

This film is completely independently financed by my wife and I, as a labor of love, and all those that worked on the film – from DP to Editor to Composer to everyone who helped in any way – did so because they felt connected to the material, connected to the tree, and wanted to be a part of the film. We worked with a tight team, about four or five crew on shoot days, two cameras, and grabbing footage.

9. What are your hopes for the film?

I'd love to get exposure at the larger film festivals – of course and win for best documentary feature! I believe there is an audience for a thoughtful film, more philosophical and spiritual than political, about our relationship with nature. We are working on putting together a "road show" including the musicians, artists, and poets involved with the film. The tree inspired a lot of creativity and I would love for that inspiration to continue with and for all who see the film.

10. What did you learn from making this film?

Do not take anything in life for granted. There is so much beauty around us all the time, but we ignore most of it, as we stare at phones or give attention to things we forget about in a matter of minutes.

Take time to figure out what is important to you, then spend your time engaged with what you truly value.