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FEATURED

## Sycamore Land Trust donation includes old-growth trees

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Abby Henkel | Courtesy photo This panoramic view shows some of the trees in Hoot Woods.

At this time of the year, when more people are attuned to giving, Sycamore Land Trust officials are sharing their excitement about a gift from an Owen County family. The land trust is currently closing on acquisition of the Hoot Woods property, which is 80 acres and includes old-growth trees that have been untouched since at least the 1860s.

"There's so few of these properties left," said Christian Freitag, executive director of the land trust about the land a few miles north of Freedom.

Freitag equated the oldest trees on the property with the stands of old-growth trees at Pioneer Mothers Memorial Forest in Orange County and Donaldson's Woods Nature Preserve near Mitchell, both of which have trees that have been there since the first European settlers came to the area.

The Hoot family who are donating the property, emigrated from Germany, traveling to Indiana to homestead about 160 acres. Of that land, a little more than 60 acres are still heavily wooded in what is considered an old-growth beech-maple forest that's one of the remnants of the original Eastern Deciduous Forest ecosystem that covered much of Indiana's landscape before it was settled.

Some of the trees on Hoot Woods property are thought to be 200 years old, or possibly older. A total of 22 different tree species have been documented in Hoot Woods by Marion Jackson, a retired professor from Indiana State University. Jackson first began taking an inventory of the trees on the property in the 1960s and has done so every 10 years since, documenting the changes in one of Indiana's remaining old-growth forests. In doing so, Jackson and his colleagues have made Hoot Woods one of the most researched areas of beech-maple forest left in Indiana.

"We have a lot of mortality and new growth in the stand," Jackson said of approximately 16 acres he surveys each time. "Nature is never static."

Jackson has documented the death of the largest tree in his study area. The chinquapin oak died in the 1990s but was still standing in 2005 when Jackson and others surveyed the area again. The oak's trunk was more than 48 inches in diameter at breast height (or 4 1/2 feet above the ground), which is where trees are measured. Other species of trees in the study area included ash, tulip poplar, sassafras, red and black oaks, walnut and elm.

In 1973, Hoot Woods was designated as a National Natural Landmark by the National Park Service. The National Park Service lists it as "a relatively undisturbed, isolated beech-maple forest in which near climax conditions prevail." It was about that time that the family granted a conservation easement to The Nature Conservancy for Hoot Woods.

In 1975, Owen County resident Alice Hoot and her siblings formed a trust that included Hoot Woods and their interest in the Owen County State Bank, which they were instrumental in forming, according to Spencer attorney Richard W. Lorenz, trustee for the family. That trust has endured through several generations of the Hoot family and has helped preserve the woods.

"It's one of the few remaining virgin forests in Indiana," Lorenz said. "You can walk back into this woods and see what it looked like generations ago." He added that other than researchers, it's often artists who venture into the woods to draw and paint scenes that include the large trees as well as unique species of flora and fauna only found in deep, wooded areas. Besides donating the woods to the land trust, Lorenz said the family has also given a donation that will help fund necessary maintenance of the 80 acres.

The other portion of the Hoot family farm, more than 130 acres, was sold in 2016 and is being farmed. The only portion that remained was the conservancy portion, which the family donated to the land trust.

"The family deserves most of the credit," Freitag said. "They are the reason this is a natural cathedral."

Although the property may at some point have visitors, it does not have a good access point or parking area. And due to the sensitive natural environment and old-growth trees, land trust officials do not anticipate making the property easily accessible in the near future. The land trust will, however, have guided hikes to the property.

"We hope that people will want to go see it, but we want to be careful with the resource, too," Freitag said, adding that the land trust never allows logging on its properties. "It says something about who we are as a people to keep this for today and tomorrow."

#### About Hoot Woods

Hoot Woods, which is just a little more than 80 acres, is in Owen County a few miles north of Freedom.

Although there may have been a few trees cut in Hoot Woods, most of the trees have been protected by the Hoot family since the 1860s. It's considered part of the original Eastern Deciduous Forest ecosystem that was here before European settlers arrived in Indiana. Beech and maple trees are the dominant species. In the 1960s, beech trees were the dominant species; that has changed, and now maple trees dominate Hoot Woods.

Because of the sensitivity of the site, Sycamore Land Trust does not plan to build a parking area or hiking trail in Hoot Woods. There will be guided hikes to the area. For more, go to the Sycamore Land Trust website, [sycamorelandtrust.org](http://sycamorelandtrust.org).

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Carol Kugler

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