

## Faces in the Trees *by Jane Keown*

When I was a child, I used to lay on my back in the front yard of our house....usually with my sister and brother....and find animals and objects from daily life in the clouds. The reason you like to do this with others is so that you can compare notes; see if they see what you see and vice versa. Elephants were a common shape, but we also saw tea kettles with steam coming out of the spouts, lions, race cars, and scores of other things. It was a fun way to *wile away* the hours on a hot summer day.

When I sit at my ham radio station, I look out the window of the house towards the woods north of the house. I see the top of the driveway, the remnants of my old herb garden, trees both deciduous and coniferous, ferns and other woodland plants, and the occasional animal inserting itself into the landscape. As I listen to KB5YQ in Texas calling for check-ins to the Early Morning Warm Up of the YL System, I gaze into the woods and look for faces in the trees. Sometimes I spot Mardi Gras masks, sometimes I see little cherubs, and I have seen Abe Lincoln in several different spots. If a breeze stirs the leaves, the faces are gone in an instant, but sometimes I can spot the same face a few minutes later when everything has calmed down and the leaves have resumed their normal positions. When it is my turn to call for check-ins, I lose track of the faces, and there are days when no faces emerge at all. But I like to spot those faces in the trees, even though they are really in my imagination.

Throughout my youth, however, the faces in the leaves at the farm were real faces of real people. We had a large orchard of large, standard apple trees, and in the fifties, we had pickers who used 32' ladders to get to the top of these horticultural giants. I remember one season in the early 1960s when my Dad made the decision to use nothing taller than a 26' ladder. The trees would have to be pruned into compliance with this new dictum. Now, of course, the tall trees are mostly history, and most all of the trees on the farm can be picked from the ground or with a 10' stepladder. I approve of this situation, although there was some romance in seeing the pickers carefully placing their ladders into a tree and scurrying up it to pick the topmost fruit. I used to love to wander through the picking lot and calling up to the pickers, have them turn and wave and say "hi", maybe even tossing an apple down to me on the ground. I personally don't like heights much, although I was known to climb a tall ladder right to the top, then wait until my father would come along to rescue me....I never could accomplish a descent on my own! I was kind of partial to stepladders, as you could get to the top and sit down, turned out to the rest of the orchard and high as a robin or blue jay. I wasn't afraid of climbing down a stepladder, either, as the flat steps were more like a staircase than the rungs of the big ladders.

When I was a kid, the faces in the trees were from greater Worcester and the Blackstone Valley, many appearing only on weekends or during the two weeks in the summer when the shops they worked for were shut down to re-tool. Apple picking is hard work but actually one where a good picker could earn a pretty decent wage on piece work. If you come into the farm stand in Sutton, the picking tickets are right behind the check out counter, numbered 1 to 60. Number 60 was Papa Black's number. He was our foreman

and told the pickers which trees they were to pick and could accurately predict how many bushels they would get off the tree. When he wasn't assigning trees, he would pick a few boxes himself, just to show he remembered how. His were always picked flawlessly with no bruises.

In the 1960's, local help became more difficult to obtain and we hired men from Nova Scotia to come down and pick the fruit. In the early 1970's, we turned to the H2A program and began hiring Jamaican workers to pick our fruit. Today, most of our farm workers are men who come from Jamaica, although we have had workers who come from Puerto Rico, Sweden, England and Africa. We still have a number of local people who work the stand, the farmer's markets and in the fields. The work always gets done, although the days can be long and a rainy day is sometimes as welcome to the workers as it is to the trees.

With all the interest in the fate of Worcester's trees due to the discovery of the Chinese Long-Horned Beetle in North Worcester, I have been appreciating all the trees we have on our farm. I would be devastated due to some natural disaster that they would have to be cut down and burned. This year they are carrying a wonderful crop of fruit, and I'm sure a few will not survive that burden. But they are hard-working trees upon which we rest our hopes and dreams. And in my daydreams, I think of all the faces I have seen in all the trees I have examined, and I am grateful for the memories.