

*Writing this little explication turned into one of the nicest experiences of my writing career. I really had been thinking about Beech for many years and one night, sitting up late in my little basement office of the time, it occurred to me that all my cogitation added up to something. So I wrote it down in what seemed like one long breath, typing as fast as I could, just getting down the words. When I finished, I realized that it was as done as it was going to get, so I attached it to an email and zapped it off to Marc Cheves, who at the time was editor of Professional Surveyor. He must have been sitting up late too, because a few minutes later I received a reply from Marc, something like, ‘...well, I like it, I guess we’ll take a chance on it...’ and that was it. The whole process, from conception to acceptance, took less than an hour. Well, several years and an hour.*

*I walked on air for a couple of days, and had a little hit of air-walking after publication as well. I got a lot of nice response, including a fax from one surveyor who described it as, “Magnificent, just magnificent!”*

## **Beech**

**Where my imaginary line  
Bends square in woods an iron spine  
And pile of real rocks have been founded.  
And off this corner in the wild,  
Where these are driven in and piled,  
One tree, by being deeply wounded,  
Has been impressed as Witness Tree  
And made commit to memory  
My proof of being not unbounded.  
Thus truth's established and borne out,  
Though circumstanced with dark and doubt-  
Though by a world of doubt surrounded.**

**- Robert Frost**

Robert Frost's brilliant poem has lived in me for many years; I memorized it early in my survey career and I have been mulling it over ever since. Whenever I set a corner, find a corner, contemplate the telltale scar of a witness tree, indeed, whenever I -

attempt to define  
the beginning or end of a boundary line...

I often muse upon "Beech", trying to find more meaning in these simple lines - and it repays such contemplation. The poetry of Frost - like all great poetry - is exceptionally dense, each word carefully chosen and arranged, for meaning and for euphony. Like good old wine, or a fine painting, it offers up more when considered deliberately, over time:

### **Where my imaginary line**

Frost starts off at the uneasy heart of our profession - our attempts to make the imaginary real. Though we take note of monuments, fences, mow lines and field divisions; though we descry the line in old maps or in the copperplate notes of those who precede us; though we assign the line a place on this earth, precise to a hundredth of a foot; though we preserve the line on paper, like a pinned butterfly; all these merely point to the line, they are not the line itself. The line is an abstraction, definable but not tangible, as much dependent on law and culture, on the apparatus of a stable civilization, as it is on our efforts. We spend our lives on these lines, go to court over them, depend on them to feed our families - and yet, when the day is done, they don't exist. They are imaginary.

**Bends square in woods an iron spine  
And pile of real rocks have been founded.  
And off this corner in the wild,  
Where these are driven in and piled,**

And so, to make the imaginary visible, we gather up the things of man and the things of God, and we

drive them and we pile them, and where before the woods were featureless, unfenced and perhaps unvisited, we found - not merely set - a monument, defined as:

*"A structure, such as a building or sculpture, erected as a memorial."*

*"An inscribed marker placed at a grave; a tombstone."*

*"Something venerated for its enduring historic significance or association with a notable past person or thing."*

*"An outstanding, enduring achievement."*

*"An object, such as a post or stone, fixed in the ground so as to mark a boundary or position."*

And we hope, do we not, that "our" monuments - our "enduring achievements" - will last forever, or longer than ourselves at any rate, so that in the end, *our* end, they become a memorial, a marker inscribed with our name and number, our tombstones...

**One tree, by being deeply wounded,  
Has been impressed as Witness Tree  
And made commit to memory**

And in this effort to memorialize the bounds of man, we do damage. The surveyor is ever on the heels of the discoverer, preceding and making possible the settlers and the developers, who tame and change

and destroy the "wild". We affix civilization's grid firmly on the planet and often, in token of the violence to come, we call upon a nearby tree to witness our acts, because trees are less subject to whim and corruption than are the acts of men. We impale them perhaps, with railroad spikes, or scar them deliberately, or remove them all together, letting their very absence serve as witness to our lines, as in the perfectly straight swath cut by Mason and Dixon to divide the free and the enslaved. And our proxy violence may lead to yet more violence - the violence of a day in court, of a tussle between neighbors, of a civil war dividing son from father.

**My proof of being not unbounded.**

Our work is not whimsical, it is deeply serious, we seek to establish the spatial bounds within which men live and every line we draw is one that can be crossed. These bounds, seemingly simple, come to stand for the more complex divisions of race, class, nationality, of the quick and the dead; the lines drawn between neighbors and the four kilometer killing zone that divides the Koreas differ only in scale, not in kind, for men have been killed for crossing both, for being the wrong men in the wrong place.

**Thus truth's established and borne out,  
Though circumstanced with dark and doubt-  
Though by a world of doubt surrounded.**

Because it is serious, our work is honorable. The most ancient texts - the Bible, Hammurabi's Code,

the picture writing of the Egyptians - discuss our trade, and trace it forward from a time when men felt small on the Earth, doubted the surrounding wild, and drew lines to keep it out; to today, when we make a show of straddling the world, the seas, even space, like Titans, and yet doubt our neighbors, seeing the dark wild, potentially, in each other and draw lines between ourselves which we dare not cross.

And so, when we take a hammer and pin in hand, to establish a monument, hoping to do more good than harm, we also grasp good and evil, and are setting not just a corner, but the end of two lines, the beginning of one man's world and the end of another's. Let us never do so lightly.