

“ The cultivation of trees is
the cultivation of the good,
the beautiful, and the en
nobling in man. ”
—*J. Sterling Morton*

Trees: A Joy Forever

by Virginia Ott and Sue Kneale

An Arbor Day Play

Time: April 22, the present. Arbor Day in Nebraska.

Setting: Arbor Lodge State Historical Park. A statue of a man on a pedestal stands in a clearing among the trees. A boy and girl stand before the statue.

An inscription on the pedestal reads:

**J. STERLING MORTON
1832-1902
AUTHOR OF ARBOR
DAY**

Prologue

Boy — wears school clothes, sweater or jacket

Girl — wears school clothes, sweater or jacket

J. Sterling Morton — wears a dark suit, a vest, visible gold watch and chain, holds a cane in his left hand and a hat in his right hand

CHARACTERS

Statue of J. Sterling Morton

Boy

Girl

Sterling at the age of 15

Caroline at the age of 14

Caroline as a young mother

Sterling at the age of 40

Joy Morton oldest son of J. Sterling and Caroline Morton

Paul Morton second son of J. Sterling and Caroline Morton

Mark Morton third son of J. Sterling and Caroline Morton

Carl Morton youngest son of J. Sterling and Caroline Morton

Man No.1 member of the Horticulture Society

Man No.2 member of the Horticulture Society

Man No.3 member of the Horticulture Society

BOY: "J. Sterling Morton, 1832-1902, Author of Arbor Day." Say, how can anyone be the writer of a day?

GIRL: I don't know. Oh, look at the statue! It moved!

STATUE (*stretching arms and legs*): What are you two children asking about? Arbor Day? I'm just the person to tell you all about that. Now you move back, I'm coming down (*J. Sterling Morton steps down with great dignity. He pulls a watch from his vest pocket and consults it.*) That's better! I've been standing up there since 1905 when President Grover Cleveland himself dedicated this monument. Now, what was your question?

GIRL: Mr. Morton, how could you be the author of Arbor Day?

BOY: Yes, Arbor Day is for planting trees. How can you write a holiday?

J. STERLING MORTON: Well... let me see. It all began a long time ago. (*As he speaks, he ushers the Boy and Girl to the side of the stage. Then all three turn and watch center stage.*) You see, I was going to school in Albion, Michigan, when I met this girl named Caroline. That was in 1847. We were sitting there under a tree eating an apple...

Scene 1

Time: 1847

Setting: A grassy spot under a large shade tree on the campus of Wesleyan Seminary in Albion, Michigan.

Sterling, 15, and Caroline, 14, are sitting under the tree, each eating a large apple. J. Sterling Morton stands with the Boy and Girl watching the scene.

Scene 1 — the actors may sit on the floor or a low bench. The shade tree may be painted on a set or imagined.

Young Sterling — wears a suit, carries books

Young Caroline — wears a long dress and a ribbon in her hair.

CAROLINE: Let's count the seeds in our apple cores! Just for fun?

STERLING: All right, but it's a silly superstition!

CAROLINE: *(breaking the core of her apple and putting the seeds in her hand):* Now. One, I love,... Two, I love... Three, I love, I say. Four, I love with all my heart... And five, I cast away. *(Caroline pauses.)*

STERLING: That can't be all. No apple from my father's orchard ever had just five seeds!

CAROLINE *(smiles and continues counting):* Six, he loves... Seven, she loves... Eight, they both love. Nine, he comes... Ten, he tarries. *(She looks at Sterling.)* That's all!

STERLING: There's no more! I'll take back what I said. This is a delightful old game.

CAROLINE: Sterling, let's promise ourselves that someday we will have our own big apple orchard and that each apple will have just eight seeds! *(The scene dims.)*

J. STERLING MORTON *(from the side of the stage, wipes his eyes with a large white handkerchief):* Well, this is what happened. We did tarry after all. It was seven years before we married. On our wedding day we left for Nebraska Territory to seek our fortune. And there Caroline got her wish. We built the house that would one day be called Arbor Lodge... we planted our orchard and thousands of other trees... we raised our four sons: Joy, Paul, Mark and Carl.

GIRL: Did your boys plant trees, too?

BOY: Is that when Arbor Day started?

J. STERLING MORTON *(smiling):* Not yet, but let me tell you about Carl's orchard. Carl was our youngest son.

Scene 2

Time: 1870

Setting: *The yard of Arbor Lodge. In the background are trees, flowers and bushes. The three older Morton boys are playing catch in the yard. Caroline enters in a white apron worn over a calico dress. J. Sterling Morton and the Boy and Girl stand to the side of the stage, watching the scene.*

Scene 2 — *Carl should have a small bucket, a small shovel and 3 small tree branches.*

Caroline Morton — *wears a long print dress and a white apron*

Joy — *wears dark pants and white cotton shirt*

Paul — *wears dark pants and white cotton shirt*

Mark — *wears dark pants and white cotton shirt*

Carl — *may wear shorter pants, just below knees, and white shirt*

CAROLINE: Boys come and wash for supper. Bring little Carl with you.

JOY: Carl isn't with us, Mother. We haven't seen him.

CAROLINE: What do you mean? Look for him, boys! *(All call for Carl and begin searching for him. There is no answer.)* Oh, I do hope he is all right! Joy, run down to the creek and look all along the bank. Paul, look in the barn. Mark, look around the well in the orchard. I'll look back of the carriage house. I do wish your father were home! *(Everyone scatters to look for Carl. Carl is found kneeling at the back of the stage. He is digging in the ground, setting out a seedling tree. First Caroline and then the older boys enter and gather around Carl.)*

JOY: Carl, why didn't you answer when Mother called?

MARK: Yes, we looked allover for you!

PAUL: What are you doing with those little tiny trees?

CARL: I'm setting out an orchard. See! *(He looks at his mother innocently.)* I was too busy to answer when you called. I'm sorry.

CAROLINE *(smiles and pats Carl on the shoulders):* You've done a good job, Carl, and we hope every tree will grow. Boys, this orchard will be Carl's very own and he can care for it. It's time for supper now. *(They begin to walk off the stage. Caroline pauses.)* Your father can see our new orchard when he returns tomorrow. He will be very proud. *(Caroline and her sons walk offstage together.)*

J. STERLING MORTON: Carl was only five years old when he planted his trees. He set out an apple seedling, a cottonwood twig and a tiny elm tree. They all lived for many years. In fact, there's a big cottonwood tree behind the new carriage house at Arbor Lodge. That might be the very one Carl planted way back in 1870.

BOY: Mr. Morton, now can you tell us about Arbor Day?

GIRL: Yes, Mr. Morton, just how were you the author of Arbor Day?

J. STERLING MORTON: That happened not long after Carl planted his orchard. I wrote many articles

about planting trees in Nebraska, especially fruit trees. So did other newspapermen. Many pioneers were coming to Nebraska every day. The new settlers missed the forests they had known back East. Some of us felt we needed a plan for encouraging tree planting in Nebraska.

One day in 1872, I made a speech. Stand over here and listen to how it happened. (*J. Sterling Morton and the Boy and Girl turn toward the center stage again.*) This is a meeting of the Nebraska Horticulture Society. I was a rather handsome man back then...

Scene 3

Time: 1872

Setting: A meeting of the Nebraska Horticulture Society in an office in Lincoln, Nebraska, the state capital. Three men are seated around a table; J. Sterling Morton has a paper in his hands.

Scene 3 — small table and four chairs.

Sterling at 40 — wears a dark suit

The Three Men — wear dark suits

MAN NO.1: We all agree that Nebraska farmland is better than anyone had hoped, don't we? (*Everyone nods in agreement and says, Yes.*)

MAN NO.2: The settlers are discovering new crops to grow every year. Our Society has been a great help in spreading the news of the farmers' success.

STERLING: Now we have to prove that trees can grow on our barren, rolling plains.

MAN NO.3: I think the idea we've been working on is a good one.

MAN NO.1: Sterling, did you write the resolution about planting trees? The State Board of Agriculture wants to make it official.

STERLING: This is what I have written. (*He reads from the paper in his hand.*) "...the 10th day of April, 1872, shall be set apart and consecrated for tree planting in the State of Nebraska, and the State Board of Agriculture hereby shall name it Arbor Day... and... hereby shall offer a special premium of one hundred dollars to the agricultural society of that county in Nebraska which shall, upon that day, plant properly the largest number of trees..."

MAN NO.2: I like that! Let's take it to the Agriculture Board today!

MAN NO 3: Sterling, you've written yourself a holiday! (*The men all rise and follow Sterling offstage.*)

J. STERLING MORTON: And that's how it all began.

You know, I ordered 800 trees to plant for that first Arbor Day, and they didn't arrive in time for the new holiday. In spite of that, over one million trees were planted in Nebraska that first Arbor Day. It was a real success!

BOY: Now we know how you became the author of a holiday. You really did write it!

GIRL: Our teacher told us that Arbor Day is now celebrated in every state. Doesn't that make you proud?

J. STERLING MORTON: Indeed it does make me proud. As I've always said, trees are a joy forever. *(He looks at his watch.)* Now, I think you should help me back onto the pedestal. Others will be coming into the park soon. Goodbye for now and remember to tell everyone about Arbor Day! *(He shakes hands with each young person. They help him to step up on the pedestal, where he resumes his original pose. The Boy and Girl wave good-bye to the statue and walk off stage.)*