

# A CHURCH WITHOUT WALLS



Deep in the towering trees of the forests of Funks Grove, Illinois, and just a mile from Sugar Grove Nature Center, there resides a chapel hidden within the timber: The Chapel of the Templed Trees. Not to be confused with the nearby Chapel in the Trees, this isn't your typical cathedral.

This is an outdoor sanctuary and a true open-air temple where someone can say their vows and be betrothed to another while also being surrounded by the natural and unblemished world around them. There is a serenity, a peacefulness, here.

The Chapel of the Templed Trees is not a traditional structure, which is to say that it's not a structure at all. It's a cleared area in the middle of dense woods in an 18-acre nature preserve near the Funks Grove Church and Cemetery. Surrounding a roughly 25-foot-long center aisle are logs in place of pews, and at the end of this aisle is a wooden cross and a tree stump that is used as a pulpit — the raised platform where the preacher delivers his sermon. The land that the Chapel rests on belongs to the Funks Grove Cemetery Association, which was formed in 1891 by the Funk and Stubblefield families.

This Chapel itself has been in Funks Grove for nearly 70 years now and was the brainchild of Reverend Loyal Morris Thompson, a Methodist minister with previous experience developing such things. "Loyal Thompson was a friend, as I understand, of Ben Stubblefield, the president of the Funks Grove Cemetery Associations in the '50s," said Eric Funk, Secretary for Funks Grove Cemetery Association. "Dr. Thompson formed another open area chapel up north and was a well-known minister. He suggested that we had a perfect place for an outdoor temple. He convinced Mr. Stubblefield to develop it."

Thompson also came up with the title "Templed Trees," referring to the location as an open-air place of worship, with the shade of the trees acting as the canopy above. The Chapel had its first service on April 26, 1956, and it's believed that at the time, it had 10 logs collected for pews. The number has since gone up to 16. The logs are made of



American red elm, a rare breed due to their susceptibility to Dutch elm fungus, transmitted via elm bark beetles that can kill the trees. However, American red elms make excellent pews because of their resistance to rot. Only a few have been changed twice in the last 35 years.

Since the Chapel's

development, it had initially hosted a sunrise service for Easter Sunday, but for reasons unknown, that has ceased in recent years. But it's found a niche in hosting another particular event: weddings. The location has become increasingly popular for ceremonies year-round thanks to its photogenic scenery.

"We usually hold anywhere from 25 to 45 weddings a year, with the bulk of them being in either June or in September and October," said Kent Swindle, Funks Grove Cemetery Association manager. "October is usually our busiest month with people trying to catch the changing leaves as a backdrop for their ceremony." When the occasion requires it, the aisle is lined with white rock, and the logs are covered with white vinyl plastic. Receptions are then held at the pavilion, within walking distance of the Chapel.

While a popular venue to reserve for weddings, the location is always open to the public for those seeking a quiet place to be alone and get a little more in touch with nature — and perhaps themselves and God. The serene environment and the incredible distance from anything close to resembling a large structure make it an ideal place to be at peace with one's thoughts. A concept that's not lost on those responsible for its upkeep. "It's a wonderful meditation area. There's a sign when you first walk in that says, 'I come here to find myself. It is so easy to get lost in the world.' As a young boy, I would go there with my dog and just sit. It's quiet, and nobody's there except mother nature," offered Funk. "It's a wonderful place to be alone and meditate. It has its own unique silence."

In an ever-changing, hectic world, there is something to be said about a unique region deep in an unspoiled neck of the woods that remains — as it was created — nearly three-quarters of a century ago. Yet another humble destination on Route 66.