BIG TREES I KNEW
DURING THE LAST SEVENTY YEARS
1995

Big Trees, sometimes spelled Bigtrees, were well named by the early settlers of California. Botanists first named them Sequoia gigantia, although they were renamed Sequoia washingtonia and later Sequoiadendron giganteum. Also called Redwoods, the Sierra Nevada Big Trees are unique botanical relics that have survived centuries and continue to thrive today. They can compete as the oldest and largest living organisms on earth. Big Trees occur from 5000 to 8000 feet in elevation along the western side of the Sierra Nevada Range. They occur in isolated groups of varying sizes from Placer County to the southern side of Tulare County.

I was raised on the Sequoia National Forest, which contained over half of the Big Trees in the original Forest Reserve of the 1890's. My first visit to a Big Tree was in 1923, when I was eight years old. It was about twelve feet in diameter, surrounded by a large family of ten to twenty foot tall youngsters. They grew about two hundred yards below the Old Sequoia Fire Guard Station. Glen Cecil, future Fire Control Officer, Hayfork District of the Shasta-Trinity National Forest, packed mules and guided tourists for his father from their seasonal pack station below the Sequoia Fire Station. A few times, I rode my horse past those Bigtrees down to a nearby creek, where I watched Glenn and his brothers enjoying a swim upon returning from pack trips. Unsupervised swimming holes were off limits for me.

The Sequoia National Forest was formed in part in 1908, from the portion of the Sierra National Forest lying south of the Kings River. My dad, Ray Stevenson was a carpenter in the early 1900's, when he answered a Fresno newspaper advertisement for "Forest Rangers." He was hired to patrol the lower Kern River campgrounds in the Sequoia National Forest, riding his motorcycle up river over the narrow, dirt road to Democrat Hot Springs. In 1916, Dad was promoted to Forest Ranger on the Breckenridge District, with headquarters at Havilah, California. He fixed up an old house, which had "done time" as a jail in the late 1800's--when the town was flourishing. Dad was also busy surveying homestead- national forest boundaries, counting cattle and assigning range allotments. In 1919, he was transferred to the Cannel Meadow District, where,

among his usual duties, he built the office and residence from lumber he obtained from an old house and sheds on the administrative site a mile north of Isabella, California. Still, he was not through pounding nails.

In 1923, Dad was transferred to the Kings River District. Headquarters and residences for the district had not yet been established. Dad set up his headquarters in the living room of a house he rented in Dunlap, California. In the summer, we used the old residence and cabin at the Sequoia Fire Guard Station. The former owner, named Evans, had homesteaded the site. Mr. Evans was reputed to have been one of the Sontag-Evans gang of outlaws that roamed the eastern part of Fresno County in the early 1900's. After a year or so, Dad cleared the Pinehurst site and built the residence, office and barn with lumber salvaged from old buildings on the Greeley and Redstone administrative sites.

Big Trees were being cut and sawed on private land on Redwood Mountain in back of the Evan's place. The operator of this small sawmill had livestock to move logs and old, hard rubber tire trucks to haul his lumber over a dusty, rough and winding road through Badger down to the San Joaquin Valley. He never failed to tell anyone who asked, especially women, why the stumps were so high. "You know," he would confide, "these Big Trees are heavy; and when we fell 'em, the stumps jump up right out of the ground as soon as the load is off 'em."

Big Trees are gigantic, some over thirty feet in diameter, depending on how close to the base the measurement is taken. The bark where the base flares out can be over a foot thick. Try to pull a twenty-four to thirty foot felling saw through such an enormous tree! This accounts for the high stumps. In most cases, fellers would use platforms or spring boards to rise above the flare; and they often chopped side notches to reduce the saw cut length. A spring board is still commonly used. A hole is chopped into the stump. Then a six or eight inch wide board, with a horseshoe shaped, steel anchor bolted on the end, is inserted into the hole. Fellers stand on the board to chop or saw, displaying excellent balance as they work.

A note here about Forest Service Big Trees: Green ones were not being sold or cut. There was one unique exception in a

group of Big Trees on Redwood Mountain, south of the Sequoia Guard Station.

About 1925, the top of one of these twenty foot diameter trees was hit by lightening, and the tree burned for several months. People were hired to put a fire line around it and to stand by to extinguish sparks and burning coals that dropped. It was several miles to walk to the tree; and all attempts to extinguish the fire (which was over a hundred feet above the ground) failed, including rain. The decision to fell the tree seemed the only solution, but how to do it was the question. There were none of the old, long saws around anymore, and chopping was not practical with hot coals falling on fellers (pun intended). Dad hired a couple of men to drill holes for blasting an undercut and to back-cut. This procedure was used in the early days of Big Tree logging operations to fell and split the large ten to twenty foot diameter logs.

On one of the trips to the burning tree, Dad took me along. One of the routes was over a slab of Big Tree that had fallen from natural causes over a couple of downed trees. We walked on it for about a hundred feet. It was about six feet wide and about sixteen inches thick and formed a bridge over the two downed trees. Walking along the "plank" produced a bounce and made walking excitingly tricky. (I think this part of Redwood Mountain is now in Sequoia National Park.) Anyway, they ran out of dynamite for the burning tree; and while Dad and I were gone after more, it fell.

I believe it was in 1924 or 1925 when Converse Basin, which had been logged about thirty years earlier, was burned over. This basin contained one of the largest stands of Big Trees. One of the largest trees, thought at that time by some to be the third largest Big Tree in the world, still stands. It was named for Frank Boole, general manager of the Sanger Lumber Company.

Although youngsters like me enjoyed joining the fire crews, carrying water and lunches where needed day or night, the Converse Fire was considered too big for young locals; and many bus loads of fire fighters were brought up from the San Joaquin Valley to fight the fire. Dad was gone for several weeks,

without me. However, several months later the broken logs and limbs were still smoking. Dad took me to operate the portable pump in a nearby stream, while he shot water into holes in Bigtree chunks larger than automobiles.

This may be a good place to back up in time a little to review the history of commercial harvesting of Big Trees, before talking about some of the acquisitions of Big Trees the Forest Service made in the early 1930's, 1940's and 1950's.

Because of the Big Tree's size and the rugged mountains in which it grows, relatively small sawmills were built until about 1889. In the late 1880's, hundreds of land and timber claims were filed on timber lands in eastern Fresno County and eastern Tulare County under the early laws passed to settle the west. A large part of the area containing the largest stands of Big Trees was included in these filings. Efforts by the Interior Department to stop fraudulent claims were unsuccessful.

Hiram Smith and Austin Moore, San Francisco lumber merchants, formed the Kings River Lumber Company in 1888, to establish a railroad up the south fork of the Kings River and to set up two sawmills. The railroad up the river was dropped as impractical, and a flume was planned. The upper mill at Mill Flat was operating by 1889 and furnished lumber to build the flume. The flume terminated about twenty-five miles downstream, in Sanger, California. It was constructed from both ends and crossed the General Grant Park road near Centerville. It was great fun for kids in touring cars (the model of most cars in those days) to drive under the flume, because of the leaks! More later about the flume.

During 1889 and 1890, most of the lumber was used in the flume. In 1891, the Company produced twenty million board feet of pine, fir and incense cedar lumber. In 1892, the Company extended its operation toward the Big Trees on the "claimed" land west and north of the six and a half sections that formed General Grant National Park. The Park had been set aside in 1890. The proclamation of 1893 formed the Sierra Forest Reserve that surrounded the Grant Park area, including land on both sides of the Kings River. In 1907, the Forest

Reserves became National Forests, and the Kings River became the dividing line between the Sierra National Forest and the newly established Sequoia National Forest south of the river.

The Kings River Lumber Company's move into the Big Tree stands would have been a major accomplishment even in modern times. There were no suitable roads to haul logs or lumber the fifty plus miles to market, and logs from five to twenty-eight feet in diameter made on-the-ground milling a must. By 1894, the Company was reorganized as the Sanger Lumber Company. However, by 1895, creditors took over the firm with Smith as manager. He was convinced that reaching Converse Basin, containing about five thousand acres of the biggest and best stand of Big Trees, was the best "gamble" for sustaining the Company. Railroads, steam engines, steam hoists, steam donkeys and steam sawmills provided power enough for harvesting Big Trees.

Railroads and skidways were built to haul and slide logs from several landings in Converse Basin and in adjacent Indian Basin and over Hoist and Rob Roy Ridges, with steam hoists up and down the slopes, to Converse Mill and Abbott Mill. Except for the lumber used for flume and buildings, all lumber was floated down the flume to market at Sanger lumber yard.

The Boole Tree, now considered by some either one of the largest or the very largest Bigtree, is still standing in Converse Basin. Some of the old timers said that it remained standing because Frank Boole felt the tree was too large and expensive to fell for the lumber it would produce. Many people traveled to see it and have had their pictures taken with it, including my Grandmother Stevenson. I think the public interest in it saved the Boole Tree.

There was a ready market for lumber in the San Joaquin Valley, but the expense of manufacturing and marketing it was proving a losing proposition. The 1905 creditors of the Sanger Lumber Company forced it to sell all of the mills, twenty thousand acres of land containing an estimated one-half billion board feet of timber, and the equipment to Thomas Hume, a Michigan lumber man who formed the Hume-Bennett Lumber Company. This company finished logging the Converse-Indian basin area and

moved into the Mill Creek area. The company established a mill and mill pond, later called Hume Mill and Hume Lake.

Incidentally, the sixty foot high dam was designed and built by John Eastwood, an engineer from Fresno who incorporated a number of concrete arches into its structure. From the top looking downstream, the dam looked like a series of connected, open ended horse shoes. The seven hundred foot long dam also supported the railroad, which could then reach timber to the east and south. Hume Lake was filled with water the first season, and in later years it became a favorite recreation area.

The mill and buildings and the seventeen mile extension on the flume, over very steep and rocky terrain, were finished by 1910. Around this time, Thomas Hume removed Bennett as manager and installed George Hume, his son. By 1912, the mill was producing nearly twenty-seven million board feet of mixed species of lumber annually, including Big Trees, which were delivered by flume to the Sanger lumber yard. In 1917, the Hume-Bennett Lumber Company was renamed the Sanger Lumber Company. Entry of the United States into World War I created a manpower shortage for the Company. The mill and dry kiln burned that fall, and the cause was never discovered. George Hume tried to reactivate the Company by moving the small Abbott circular mill to Hume Lake. He resolutely maintained the flume and remaining equipment. However, with the death of his father in 1920, he returned to Michigan to assume control of the family businesses. Several futile attempts were made to sell the Hume operations and property to other lumber companies and conservation agencies.

I went with my dad several times when he met with George Hume to discuss Forest Service purchase of the Big Tree land. On one trip, the Company was milling lumber either two or four inches thick, twelve inches wide and generally sixteen feet in length. I was able to see bundles of those boards being released down the flume. Iron clamps about fourteen inches long were used to make the bundles. They had sharp, hooked ends and were pounded closed to bind the bundles together. Once released into the flume, the bundles would sometimes bind on steep pitches and sharp turns. When this occurred, flume tenders stationed along the flume had to alert the mill over the

telephone to hault the shipping. A spill would lose many boards down the steep slopes.

Years later, in 1937, George Harlan and I saw the remains of one spill a hundred yards or more below the flume, when we were returning from a down-river search for a lost fisherman. We had followed the Kings River for several miles and decided it would be easier to climb up to the flume, rather than climb over or swim around cliffs we had passed on our way down. Some of the high trestles were too hazardous to cross, but we were able to walk a large part of the flume and passed several of the small shacks and the telephone line used by tenders. There had not been water in the flume by that time for ten years.

Mr. E. M. Prescott, a San Joaquin Valley lumber dealer, arranged with George Hume to take over the remaining lumbering operation in 1929. When Dad and I were on a trip there, Mr. Prescott was using the small mill to saw up the "sinkers" in the lake. East of the dam, he had found one of the abandoned Shay steam engines. He brought it back across the dam to a shed he had built. Soon after, the road and tracks across the dam were removed. I do not know whatever happened to that Shay engine.

The Forest Service was able to complete a sale from George Hume for the Hume land, including Hume Lake, Converse Basin and the remaining Big Trees and other timber on over twenty thousand acres. The purchase price was three hundred and twenty thousand dollars in 1935. This contained one of the larger additions of Big Trees to the Sequoia National Forest.

The interest in a planned harvest of Forest Service timber in the Johnsondale area, in exchange for land and Big Trees west of the north fork of the Kern River, encouraged a number of people to raise Big Trees in their backyard gardens. I know of three couples of retired Sequoia National Forest employees (Ray and Irma Stevenson, Wes and Evelyn Snyder and Bob and Neva McGee) who gathered Big Tree cones, extracted the very small seeds of such large trees and planted the seeds in their backyards. Bob and Neva McGee transplanted hundreds of the small four to six inch seedlings they raised into ice cream cups.

They sold some and provided Forest Supervisor J. E. Elliott with seedlings for use as table place settings for the many meetings he attended, purposefully creating interest in saving the Big Trees.

In 1938, I became the Fire Protective Assistant on the Pinehurst District under Ralph Brown. Soon I had one of the four California Conservation Corps. (C.C.C.) boys from the main camp trained to answer the telephone and run the switchboard so I could go to fires, type correspondence and attend to other duties. We made quite a number of split product sales of the Big Tree wood from downed, burned, broken logs and chunks in Converse Basin to the valley farmers for grape stakes, posts and a few shakes. The large chunks and broken logs had few knots and were clear, even grain.

In the early 1930's Bob Dasmann, later the Forest Supervisor of the Mendocino National Forest, made a feasibility report on harvesting pine, fir and incense cedar along the east side of the divide between the Tule River and Nobe Young-South Creek drainages. This area, in the Sequoia National Forest, contained six groves of Big Trees on private land owned by two women, named Dwyer and Rucker. The preliminary report showed the area was isolated and that the most feasible exit was down the north fork of the Kern River. Forest Supervisor J. B. Elliott encouraged Kern and Tulare Counties, Isabella and Kernville Chambers of Commerce, and the local C.C.C. to form a cooperative agreement with the Forest Service to build a road from Roads End to the most likely mill site on South Creek, later called Johnsondale. In the meantime, Oscar Evans, Forest Service cruiser, and his crew had provided the timber volume data and an excellent map. Mr. Solinsky, a timber agent in San Francisco representing the Dwyer-Rucker ladies; Mr. Walter Johnson, for whom Johnsondale is named; Mr. William Arblaster, a lumber merchant from Los Angeles; and other investors developed a financing plan for a mill and a land exchange. The Dwyer-Rucker Exchange of 1936 not only saved Big Trees but provided employment and lumber for thirty years.

Bernard (Barney) Sweatt was assigned in 1937 to get the Forest Service administration started on the ground, as the mill was about finished, and the road was nearly ready for use. By the

fall of 1938, the first lumber was ready for shipment. I was appointed in 1939 as the exchange officer and was able to help in execution of the exchange agreement for five years. The Packsaddle Grove on the north side of Speas Ridge is a wonderful example of a Big Tree stand. This exchange was completed years ahead of the planned cutting due to the increased production of lumber and box shook needed during World War II.

The Stanislaus National Forest has a Bigtree National Forest within its borders. In 1909, during the continuing rush of land sales and hundreds of land claims, an acquisition was authorized by Congress for about four hundred acres of Bigtrees, to be named the Calaveras Bigtree National Forest.

During this period, a predecessor to the Pickering Lumber Company acquired land containing the proposed Calaveras Big Tree National Forest. Years later, the Pickering Lumber Company wanted to exchange their Big Tree land for Stanislaus National Forest timber that included sugar pine. At that time, the Company was supplying clear sugar pine lumber to manufacturers who were using wooden casting molds, due to the ease of carving this specie of wood and its stability. As I understand the politics of that time, President Truman urged that we proceed as expediently as possible to exchange National Forest timber for the Pickering Big Tree land. By 1950, the Pickering Big Tree area and the available Stanislaus National Forest timber had been cruised.

I was transferred to the Stanislaus National Forest as the timber management officer succeeding Harold Cooms, who was also promoted and transferred. We immediately began organizing equipment, tents, food, etc. John Berry, of the regional office, helped organize a crew of timber cruisers from other Sierra Nevada National Forests and lent us Harold Wise, who was a big help. District Ranger Ralph Brown, Calaveras District, brought his timber officer, and our crew was complete.

Pickering Lumber Company's President, Mr. Rassenfos, agreed to haul the crew, two pickup trucks, tents, food and equipment on two flat cars seventy miles into the area, since the roads were snowed over. The trip took thirteen hours. During one

stop, I walked forward to investigate the cause of the delay; and I passed a coyote laying along the tracks, dead from a face full of porcupine quills. An omen? We also found a tub of quills and hair in an old cabin nearby our camp. We encountered live poachers as well. A couple of bears visited our garbage dump every evening. During one evening supper, Scollay Parker, assistant ranger at the time, tried to sneak upon a bear rummaging in the pit head first. With each few steps, the bear would hear Scollay and back out. Scollay respectfully backed up too, in spite of the "charge ahead" advice he received from the crew!

We recruised the Pickering timber and cruised and marked for cutting the national forest timber in spite of rain, snow, bears and long walks. After several months of negotiations, I think Forest Service timber experts Rus McRorey and Bernie Payne were also thankful that "the rush was over," when Pickering Lumber Company agreed with the Forest Service that the values were equal; and the exchange was made. Forest Service funds and timber had saved another grove of Big Trees and finally completed the 1909 authorization that was named the Calaveras Big Tree National Forest.

I believe that the Forest Service National Forests should be given full credit for saving Big Trees! Even if it sometimes takes awhile, we're persistent.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I appreciate the help and encouragement received from Joe Elliott.

I must also give credit to the following:

Historical Highlights of Public Land Management, Dept. of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, 1962.

Forest Service maps of the Sequoia National Forest, 1924 and 1938.

Forest Service map of the Stanislaus National Forest, 1984

Ray Stevenson, District Ranger, Sequoia National Forest

Forest Service Organizational Directories.

A Chronologic Record, U.S.F.S., 1891-1968

Flowering Plants of California, W. L. Jepson, University of California, 1925.

They Felled the Redwoods, Hank Johnson, 1966.

Charline Stevenson, who has helped me during the last 58 years.

Janet Stevenson Dutton, editor and teacher.

Postscript: Since writing about Big Trees, the Calaveras Big Tree National Forest has gained some praises it richly deserves. I think Retired Forester Joe Elliott recently expressed it best when he wrote to Forester Everett Jensen "It is the only one [National Forest] that is 100 percent National Forest Land; it has the highest volume per acre; the highest value per acre and it is the only one on which there were three 100 percent cruises".

[Retired] Stanley Stevenson
United States Forest Service