

**REPORT ON THE BIG TREES OF
CALIFORNIA; 56TH
CONGRESS, DOCUMENT
NO.393. [WASHINGTON-1900]**

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Israel C. Russell

REPORT

ON THE

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SUMMARY OF FACTS ABOUT THE BIG TREE.

1. The dimensions of the Big Tree are unequaled.
2. The age of the Big Tree makes it the oldest living thing.
3. The majestic beauty of the Big Tree is unique and world-renowned.
4. It now exists only in ten isolated groves on the west slope of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and nowhere else in the world.
5. The Mariposa Grove is to-day the only one of consequence which is completely protected.
6. Most of the scattered groves of Big Trees are privately owned, and therefore in danger of destruction.
7. Lumbering is rapidly sweeping them off; 40 mills and logging companies are now at work wholly or in part upon Big Tree timber.
8. The southern groves show some reproduction, through which there is hope of perpetuating these groves; in the northern groves the species hardly holds its own.
9. The species represents a surviving prehistoric genus of trees once growing widely over the globe.

BIG TREES OF CALIFORNIA.

INTRODUCTION.

Before the glacial period the genus of big trees called *Sequoia* flourished widely in the temperate zones of three continents. There were many species, and Europe, Asia, and America had each its share. But when the ice fields moved down out of the north the luxuriant vegetation of the age declined, and with it these multitudes of trees. One after another the different kinds gave way, their remains became buried, and when the ice receded just two species, the Big Tree and Redwood, survived. Both grew in California, each separate from the other, and each occupying, in comparison with its former territory, a mere island of space. As we know them now, the Redwood (*Sequoia sempervirens*) lives only in a narrow strip of the coast ranges 10 to 30 miles wide, extending from just within the southern border of Oregon to the bay of Monterey, while the Big Tree (*Sequoia washingtoniana*) is found only in small groves scattered along the west slope of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, from the middle fork of the American River to the head of Deer Creek, a distance of 260 miles. The utmost search reveals but ten main groups, and the total number of sizable trees in these groups must be limited to figures in the thousands. It is, moreover, the plain truth that all the specimens which are remarkable for their size do not exceed 500.

The Big Trees are unique in the world—the grandest, the largest, the oldest, the most majestically graceful of trees—and if it were not enough to be all this, they are among the scarcest of known tree species and have the extreme scientific value of being the best living representatives of a former geologic age. It is a tree which has come down to us through the vicissitudes of many centuries solely because of its superb qualifications. Its bark is often 2 feet thick and almost non-combustible. The oldest specimens felled are still sound at the heart, and fungus is an enemy unknown to it. Yet with all these means of maintenance the Big Trees have apparently not increased their range since the glacial epoch. They have only just managed to hold their own on the little strip of country where the climate is locally favorable.

At the present time the only grove thoroughly safe from destruction is the Mariposa, and this is far from being the most interesting. Most of the other groves are either in process of, or in danger of, being logged. The very finest of all, the Calaveras Grove, with the biggest and tallest trees, the most uncontaminated surroundings, and practically all the literary and scientific associations of the species connected with it, has been purchased recently by a lumberman who came

into full possession on the 1st of April, 1900. The Sequoia and General Grant National parks, which are supposed to embrace and give security to a large part of the remaining Big Trees, are eaten into by a sawmill each, and by private timber claims amounting to a total of 1,172.87 acres. The rest of the scanty patches of Big Trees are in a fair way to disappear—in Calaveras, Tuolumne, Fresno, and Tulare counties, they are now disappearing—by the ax. In brief, the majority of the Big Trees of California, certainly the best of them, are owned by people who have every right, and in many cases every intention, to cut them into lumber.

GENERAL FACTS.

FIRST GROVE DISCOVERED.

The Calaveras Grove was the first one discovered, having been found in 1841 by John Bidwell, afterward candidate for member of Congress from California. But for some reason this discovery seems to have been generally credited to another person, as shown by the following story quoted from "In the Heart of the Sierras," by J. M. Hutchings:

In the spring of 1852, Mr. A. T. Dowd, a hunter, was employed by the Union Water Company, of Murphy's, Calaveras County, to supply the workmen engaged in the construction of their canal with fresh meat, from the large quantities of game running wild on the upper portion of their works. While engaged in this calling, having wounded a grizzly bear, and while industriously pursuing him, he suddenly came upon one of those immense trees. * * *

Returning to camp, he there related the wonders he had seen, when his companions laughed at him, and even questioned his veracity. * * *

For a day or two he allowed the matter to rest; submitting, with chuckling satisfaction, to their occasional jocular allusions to "his big tree yarn," but continued hunting as formerly. On the Sunday morning ensuing, he went out early as usual, but soon returned * * * when he exclaimed, "Boys, I have killed the largest grizzly bear that I ever saw in my life. While I am getting a little something to eat, you make every preparation for bringing him in; all had better go that can be spared, as their assistance will certainly be needed."

Nothing loath, they were soon ready for the start. * * * On, on they hurried, with Dowd as their guide, through thickets and pine groves; crossing bridges and canyons, flats, and ravines, each relating in turn the adventures experienced, or heard of from companions, with grizzly bears, and other formidable tenants of the mountains, until their leader came to a halt at the foot of the immense tree he had seen, and to them had represented the approximate size. Pointing to its extraordinary diameter and lofty height, he exultingly exclaimed, "Now, boys, do you believe my big tree story? That is the large grizzly I wanted you to see. Do you now think it a yarn?"

DISCOVERY OF OTHER GROVES.

Just how and when the other groves of Big Trees were found is difficult to determine. As early as 1864 Professor Brewer, of Yale, and a party from the California Geological Survey visited the Calaveras and Mariposa groves and also several tracts in the region of Kings River, and by 1870 the majority of Big Trees had been located.

The following account of the different groves, which is in the main accurate and complete, is taken from J. D. Whitney's "Yosemite Guide-Book" (1870):

GENERAL DESCRIPTION AND LOCATION OF BIG TREE GROVES.

The Big Tree occurs exclusively in "groves" or scattered over limited areas, never forming groups by themselves, but always disseminated among a much larger number of trees of other kinds. These patches on which the Big Trees stand do not equal in