



Girl Scouts frolic in Big Basin park during the 1930s.

Big Basin State Park's salad days

Second in a series

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Big changes started to take place in Big Basin in 1930 — 28 years after it was founded as California's first state park.

By that time, the park had become popular not only with families and hikers, but with governors, senators, Congressmen, foreign heads of state, the heads of large national and international corporations and other influential persons.

Roy Fulmer, the park's photographer at the time, made his living taking pictures of visitors against the majestic backdrop of the redwoods, then selling the photographs. Fulmer's photographs were also reprinted and sold by the millions as postcards.

Fulmer recalled: "Unfortunately, it never occurred to me that hundreds of the negatives I made would ever have any historical value. I photographed many notables, printed their pictures and was paid the going rate at the time...I didn't think about history. I was just making a living. I threw them away."

One of Fulmer's best and most lucrative picture-taking spots was the "auto tree" — a redwood more than 300-feet high which had its interior burned out by fire. The hollow of the tree was large enough to encase the back end of a car.

At Fulmer's direction, tourists backed their cars inside the tree, then proudly posed next to their vehicles while Fulmer snapped their pictures.

"I've taken thousands of pictures of this tree," said Fulmer, 82, as he stood before the towering auto tree on a recent visit to Big Basin.

One of Fulmer's best customers was an Indian raja, who arrived one year in a Cadillac "filled with beautiful blondes and brunettes."

"He had a cane, but he didn't use it to walk with," recalled Fulmer.

The raja bought redwood burl souvenirs from Fulmer's park gift shop by the dozens. Fulmer said he responded by giving a musical cigar-box to an attendant to give to the raja.

The attendant presented the box to the waiting raja, then returned shortly to Fulmer, saying: "He wants a dozen of them."

"The raja returned the next year and did the same thing," said Fulmer.

Fulmer said he charged dignitaries the same fees as regular tourists to take their pictures.

"Nobody was too important to me," said Fulmer, who served two terms as the mayor of Santa Cruz during the World War II years.

One dignitary who Fulmer did not charge was former President Herbert Hoover.

"I never took any pictures of Hoover and asked him to pay for it, but he never asked me to take any. I asked him," said Fulmer.

Mrs. Hoover, as honorary head of the Girl Scouts, was a frequent visitor to Big Basin. One of the largest scout camps in the country, called "Camp Chaparral" was located at Big Basin.

In its more robust days, Big Basin included a lodge and restaurant, dozens of cottages and gala events at the park amphitheater. There was swimming and boating on Opal Creek, and tennis courts.

The amusements were gradually phased out as park rules became more strict to deal with more tourists.

In the early days, Fulmer has written, "many people placed their tents and camping equipment, including beds, cookware and other items used during the summer in a burned-out tree, then nailed up boards to protect them until the following spring

when they would return and set up camp. Many people had the same camp for years. Everything free."

New rules set the fee for camping at 50-cents per night and \$4 per month.

Later, stricter rules banned equipment in trees. Wood gathering and nails in the trees were not allowed.

Fulmer wrote: "There was a tremendous outburst of indignation from the public, especially those who had camped there for so many years."

Eventually camping fees were increased even more and campers were limited in their length of stay. An entrance fee was charged to use the park during the day.

About 1933 A California Conservation Corp camp was established at Big Basin. The CC crew made new campsites and trails. Lavatories, fire hydrants and garbage cans appeared at the campsites.

Fences were built around the larger trees and parts of the trail so people could not wander around the trees at will, said Fulmer. A post was placed in front of the auto tree so that cars could not be backed into it.

The nightly campfire gatherings became less entertaining and more intellectual, with rangers giving lectures about the park.

Rangers appeared in uniforms. In the early days, all park employees wore civilian clothes. And the rangers were called "wardens."

Huckleberry-picking was banned and trout disappeared from the streams.

Fulmer recalled: "For years in the early days I could go down to Opal Creek any morning and be back in thirty minutes with twelve or fifteen trout. Then we would have hot cakes and trout..."

"For several years now it is unlawful to pick huckleberries in Big Basin and the trout are long gone."