

Virgin redwoods in Big Basin are like old friends

Third in a series

By JOAN RAYMOND
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BIG BASIN — Walking through the redwoods at Big Basin State Park is like visiting old friends for Roy and Mabelle Fulmer.

Some would say the Fulmers are old — they are both 82 — but their age is young compared to the virgin redwoods of the *Sequoia sempervirens* species at Big Basin believed to be thousands of years old.

Like parents who know the special traits of each of their children, the Fulmers know the peculiarities of individual trees along the redwood trail across from the park headquarters.

They know the names of the trees without having to consult the posted signs — the Chimney Tree, the Animal Tree, the Father Tree the Santa Clara Tree and others.

They know the coast redwoods of Big Basin are more prized for lumber than the more brittle wood of another kind of redwood found in the Sierra Nevada mountain range, the *Sequoia gigantea* or "Big Tree of the Sierras."

They know the sizes of the tree "craters" indicate the forest at Big Basin is probably one of the oldest in the world. The so-called Crater Tree is a circle of trees growing from the roots of prehistoric giants which have decayed and disappeared or been burned.

They know the Daughter Tree is in almost perfect health with no burn marks or burls.

They know the Mother Tree is the tallest tree in the park, being protected from high winds by the surrounding mountains.

They know the Santa Clara Tree may contain more lumber than any tree of its kind in the state — enough to produce thirty four-room cottages. And the Animal Tree may be the largest example of burl.

A burl is a bumpy growth on the redwood. "Some trees have it and some trees don't," said Fulmer, who in the 1920s and 1930s manufactured burl novelties and souvenirs sold at the park gift shop and throughout California and Tijuana.

They know all this because the Fulmers have walked the redwood trail thousands of times during their 30-year romance with the forest of Big Basin.

Fulmer was the park postmaster from 1922-43. He was the official park photographer and operator of the concessions, which he handed down to his children in 1947.

Through the years, the concessions, restaurant, lodge and grocery store have disappeared as the park took on a less commercial flavor.

It was Fulmer who petitioned the federal Post Office Department to officially change the name of the park from "Redwood Park" to "Big Basin." The change was accomplished in the early 1930s, said Fulmer. The change was necessary, said Fulmer, because there were so many other spots in Northern California with the word "redwood" in their names, such as redwood campground, redwood resort or redwood shop. Mail addressed to the "Redwood Park" was often mistakenly sent to one of these places. Besides that, said Fulmer, few tourists referred to the park as "Redwood Park."

"Everybody knew it as Big Basin," he said.

The Fulmers talk about the trees as if they were old friends.

"I always liked the Father Tree. It is so beautiful," said Fulmer recently as he paused at the base of the 250-foot high redwood with a circumference of 66 feet. "It's the largest *sempervirens* I know of," added Fulmer.

Then he noticed the "curly redwood" — "the best curly redwood I've seen."

Mrs. Fulmer could not pass by the Chimney Tree without going inside its hollow where the tree had been burned out some 300 years previously. On the outside, the 150-foot tree is still perfectly normal and growing, but you can step inside it, look up and see the sky.

"I can't come here without looking through once," said Mrs. Fulmer.

They came to the Mother Tree. "You see the hole in the back?" asked Fulmer, pointing to an opening in the tree, which had been completely burned out leaving a room inside it 12 feet across.

"I climbed through that hole in 1915" Fulmer remembered. He was 15 years old at the time.

Through the years the tree has grown enough to close up the hole to the point a young man could not fit through it today.

The Fulmers notice how other trees have grown. "I used to be able to wrap my arms around that tree," said Fulmer, indicating a thick-trunked redwood.

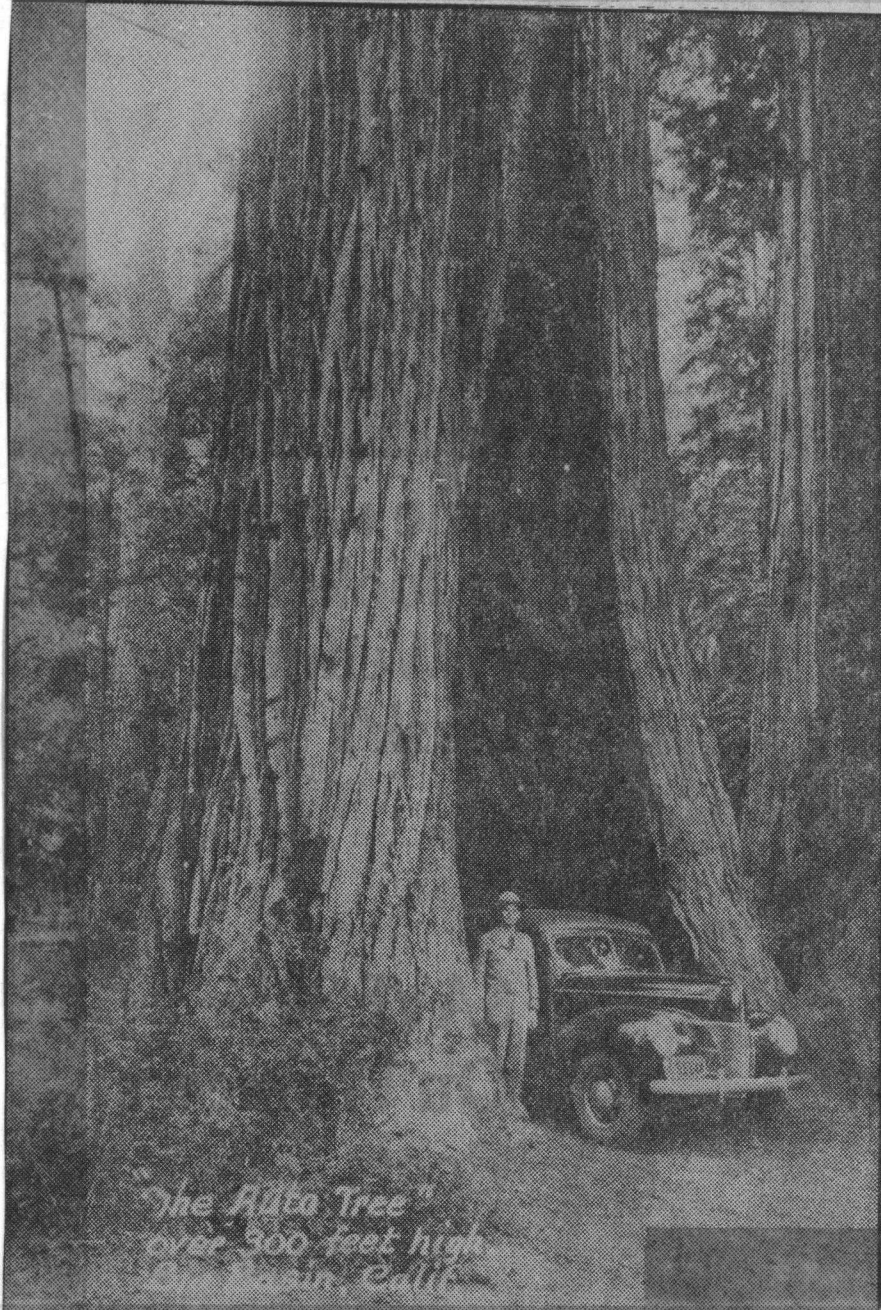
The Fulmers see other changes. The trail itself does not take the same turns it used to.

"You wouldn't think you were in the same park ... there's no lodge anymore. No cabins. The rhododendrons are all down. There's so much undergrowth you can't take pictures in here the way you used to," said Fulmer.

"But it's beautifully kept up," added Mrs. Fulmer.

"To look at the river today," continued her husband, "you never would have thought we had boats, but we did."

Mrs. Fulmer remembered the day a squirrel fell out of a madrone and killed itself.



"The Alito Tree"
over 300 feet high
Big Basin, Calif.

Roy Fulmer made this photograph during the 1930s, and it was widely circulated on a postcard.

Mention of that incident triggered Fulmer's memory about the time the squirrels "got so thick they got a disease and every one died."

They recall the day George Eastman, the founder of the Eastman Kodak Company, visited Big Basin. Fulmer

remembered Eastman as a "small, delicate, elderly man who could produce a hearty laugh."

The Fulmers invited Eastman to join them for dinner. They ate cabbage stuffed with beef on a rustic table beneath the redwoods.

"He insisted it was the best meal he had ever eaten," said Fulmer.

The Fulmers remembered how the ranger would use a megaphone to call the deer into a grove in the evenings for a feeding.

"Come, Babe, C-o-o-o-o-o-m-e Babe," the ranger would call. At first, said Fulmer, the deer were very shy and it was difficult to take their pictures, considering the slow film used in those days. Fulmer would spend hours and hours with his camera poised at the ready just to get one good shot for a postcard.

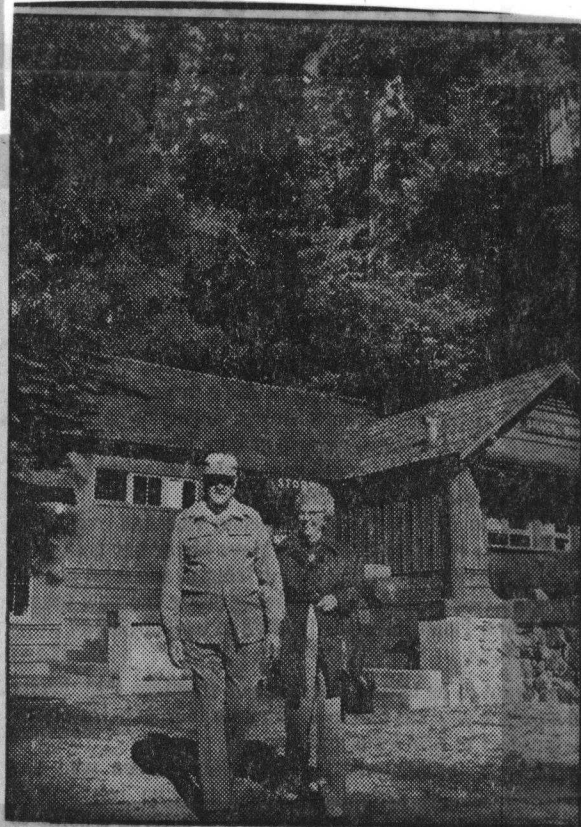
It is now against park rules for tourists to feed the deer. The deer were getting so much junk food their digestive tracts were upset, said today's supervising ranger Ken Morris.

The Fulmers were slightly surprised when they came across a tree now named the Santa Cruz Tree.

"It was never called that before," said Fulmer.

But Mrs. Fulmer said she knew trees whose names had been changed four times. "There was no reason for it," she said.

One tree used to be called the Taft Tree. "It had a fat stomach," said Fulmer. "Now they call it the Washington Tree."



Pete Amos/Sentinel

Roy and Mabelle Fulmer at Big Basin.