

The Big Basin

By Eloise J. Roorbach

Our forest reserves are becoming more and more appreciated—not only because of their invaluable usefulness, but for their unsurpassed beauty. The scientific foresters are pointing out to us their manifold uses in other ways than merely the yielding of a good lumber crop. They place great value upon them as protectors of our water sources, as modifiers of our climate, as regulators of rainfall, as preservers of our wild animal kin.

They give them value as increasing our love for out-door life and encourage the establishing of parks that are sometimes in the heart of the city, so that all may have easy access to forest beauty. Sometimes in such distant and inaccessible places that it takes a summer's vacation to reach and enjoy.

There is something about a forest that compels introspection, and I would add this as one of their most valuable uses. We hurry through life, hastily dipping our cup into its various experiences, now quaffing nectar, now gall. The forests, serene and stately, turn us to search our own minds with the same zest we gave to the exploration of our outside world. In their presence we experience the ecstasy of contemplation; we drink from the inexhaustible fountain of our own minds, and the more we drink the richer we become.



Postcard from Big Basin, postmarked 1917

Our far-seeing Uncle Sam is setting aside many thousands of acres yearly for parks and reservations, and we cannot now fully comprehend the great good that will come from this protection of one of our choicest heritages - the forests. In California we have quite a number of these reservations. Some famous ones in the high Sierras and some less famous but very lovely ones along the coast, and through the south of the State.

Most of these reserves are patrolled, partly to prevent fires and partly to protect game. One of California's State forests lies within easy reach of travelers who visit this coast. This one is called the Big Basin, and one can easily drive there and back from Santa Cruz in a day. One

morning in the latter part of April we drove to this State park, starting from a little place called Brookdale.

For a driver we had one whose life had been lived for the most part in these Santa Cruz Mountains. His face was full of the wrinkles that come from much laughing and squinting at the sun, and battles with the wind. His voice was deep and kindly, and he knew every man, woman, child, bird, tree, flower, canyon, on the whole varied drive.

We drove about one and one-half miles to Boulder Creek, a lumber town whose main street is full of quaint lodging houses, that no doubt used to be lively places, but that are now resting from past labors. Following the main road out of Boulder Creek, we pass pleasant little homes; many brooks, a deep canyon with unreachable maidenhair ferns in tantalizing view; children trudging their miles to school; a three yoke ox team dragging lazily along. The hills were blue with masses of wild lilac; they were like smoke from a huge fire, only no touch of relentless flame was in sight.

Before we come to the Big Divide, we notice the sad effects of the fire that burned its way through this region three even so cheaply as \$2 a shining head. acres of living things, it could not destroy life itself. [this inconsistency appears in the original text] Triumphant life had already covered the black scars with a mantle of living green. Even the branchless trunks of the redwoods had put on a short, green coat of new leaves. The road turns and twists in the usual fashion of mountain roads, rounding and doubling on itself, but gaining steadily towards the summit.

Part way up the divide, we come to a howling, roaring, fire-belching monster that was rapidly eating up grand old trees. This awful mill has wrought much havoc with the beauty of the forest. But since so many people prefer their trees in the form of clapboard houses, it is no more than fair that they have their choice. But it did seem a pity to see all these magnificent trees lying piled up like kindling wood, waiting to be thrust into the jaws of that mill. It was the only thing that saddened us that day, but it seems as if sadness must needs come.

With every turn and every inch gained in height, fresh beauties were revealed. A vast country was unveiled, a large, lovely world, dressed in soft blues and violets, mauves and grays. A hawk soared high overhead, resting on strong wings, motionless in the heavens. He seemed enjoying the pure heights, but instead, his every sense was open in search of the carrion below.

The road over the ridge is a masterpiece, a proof of man's ability to get over mountains if he happens to want to. We paused for awhile, admiring the wide stretch of beautiful world at our feet. An abrupt turn shut out that panorama, with the ocean a blue line in the distance, but it revealed another almost as fine, into which we began a rapid descent.

From Boulder Creek to the east line of the Big Basin is nine miles. To the Governor's camp is three miles more, and these last three miles are through a grand forest, not awe-inspiring or solemn, but just a superb commingling of majestic trees and dainty flowers and shrubs. Imagine three miles of such a forest, with the road bending and winding wherever there was room to go without cutting down a tree. I was newly grateful to those wise people who made the victorious fight to preserve this particular forest from destruction.

There are thirty-eight hundred acres in this State park, with timber of great money value if felled, but of still greater value if allowed to remain as a great conservator of moisture. The trees are mostly redwoods (*sempervirens*), pines, tan-oaks, alders and madrones.

I cannot say much for the beauty of the Governor's camp, where the Guardian lives during the summer. Neither can I say enough for the beauty of the location of it. It is on the banks of a lovely stream of water called Waddell's Creek. Watery mirrors reflect the restful green of surrounding trees, and the redwoods make a rich, red path across the surface.

Moss embossed rocks, soft, leafy curtains, dainty flowers, graceful ferns, combine to form one of those alluring spots people travel far to see, and after seeing are satisfied. The driver, who loves every inch of the place, took us down a little trail and led us across the creek by means of a fallen pine. We knew he had something fine in store for us, so we were hushed into expectant silence until we came to a gnarled, huge redwood that has been named the "Giant."

It did not add to my admiration of that monarch of trees to be told it was two hundred and fifteen feet high. But I had to listen to the figures, so I have a fancy to intrude them upon you. Perhaps they may, interest you more than they did me. The *wonder* of things does not appeal to me so much as the *beauty* of things; and it was the charm of strength and endurance of that grand old tree that called forth my love. I love any kind of strength whether of animal, tree or man; whether physical, mental or moral.

So I love that fine, patriarchal tree, and would have liked to stay all day and listen to its chant. But this was to be a one-day visit, and time flogged me relentlessly on. The driver was disappearing down the trail, so we followed until he stopped and searched our faces that he might enjoy our pleasure at sight of the "Father of the Forest," that the next turn of the trail would disclose.

This tree is greater in height than the "Giant," it being two hundred and thirty-seven feet high. It is not so gnarled or twisted as the "Giant," nor does it seem so old; but it is more shapely, and the name, "Father of the Forest," is eminently suitable.

It seems natural to liken venerable trees to grand old men. It is something to have lived through storms that try one so terribly, but only succeed in giving greater powers. Even the scars of a tree add dignity, and the loss here and there of a limb only makes for more character, makes it different from the vast gathering of symmetrical trees all around that have not yet been tested in individual strength.

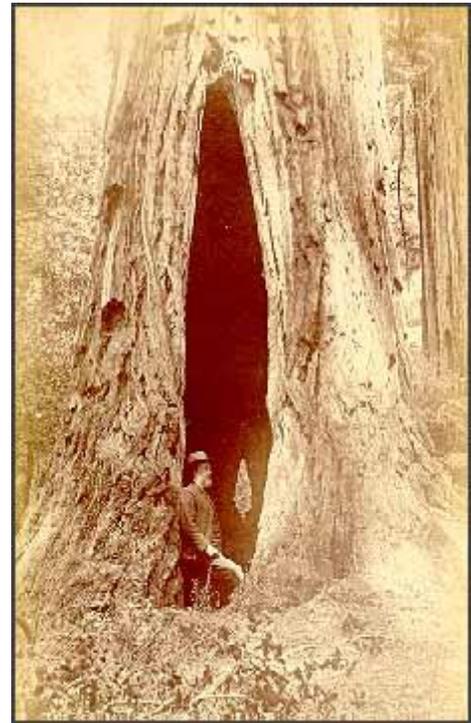
The "Mother of the Forest," only a short distance away, towers above all the others, and no one can look directly into her eyes except the near-by "Father," unless, perhaps, she lowers them to notice the multitude of giant children clustered around her. Most motherly this beautiful tree looks, calm and full of queenly majesty; wise in the world's way, and full of infinite charity for the weak who are unable to resist the stress of life. She is wonderful and beautiful, and hovers over the entire forest with watchful care. She is not so broad-shouldered as the "Father," but is taller, being two hundred and ninety feet in height.

There is a peculiar old tree close by that has been topped by the storms and blackened and hollowed out by fires. Standing within the base of it, one can look up a straight, black shaft and see the blue sky as through a telescope. It is named the "Chimney." There are many trees all through this tract, that seem absolutely perfect in symmetry, but they are not so large as these four just mentioned.

They are worthy of admiration, but cannot be compared in my mind to the rude, rugged beauty of the older trees. It is impossible to get satisfactory pictures of these trees, for one cannot get an uninterrupted view of them. We can get at the stocky, swelling, base, and part of the noble shaft, or a good view of the crown of leaves swaying above all else. They defy camera or artist, who desire full length portraits. Smaller trees can be drawn into pictures more easily. They lend themselves as parts of a whole, or form a straight, aspiring line that is a fine complement to the curve of the oaks that generally keep close by them.

Natural openings occur frequently, so that one can see almost to the top at least. Redwoods are like columns, beautiful in color and symmetry, and a redwood forest is a wonder-wood, full of resinous fragrance and with a thousand varied forms of leaf and branch. The Big Basin is a perfect example of a Coast Range forest. There are the sequoias of first interest; warm, reddish-brown shafts so stately with delicate, feathery green plumes to soften the branches and make the noble crown.

Then the oaks, so curving, with mosses to cover rude twists; fine examples of the power of bending and yielding to life, but not breaking. And delicate grey alders, so feminine in grace. The distinguished madrone, with red, copper-colored or burnt sienna branches, and polished, shapely leaves. And there are tangles of graceful hazels and decorative huckleberry, a wealth of brilliant lilies, dainty myriads of flowers, delicate masses of ferns, carpets of mosses and lichens, oxalis, ginger, salal, yerba buena, bed-straw, violets. Many springs, brooks, and rills singing and ringing, sparkling and shining, tumbling headlong or loitering leisurely.



Mother of the Forest," undated.

And for every hour of the day and every day of the year, a wondrous change of mood. Soft night, with mysterious shadows, a robe of stars and gentle wind whispers, noonday with brilliant whistle and song of birds, and glitter of pine needles.

And there is the grey of an incoming fog that shuts out some groups and reveals others more clearly, the grey of a rainy day and the grey of an early morn, all making pictures too lovely and evanescent to catch with mere brush and pigment. One day's wandering along the trails and brooks of this Big Basin gave me such endless subjects for pictures that I longed to stay for an indefinite time. So, consulting Mr. Pilkington, the fact was revealed that arrangements were being made for a few guests who could choose between tightly boarded cabins, tents, or an outside mossy bed, canopied with stars.

The Sempervirens Club has a five acre grant, and they do much towards making it possible for people to revel in the beauties of this State park. Every season a camp is set up and members pitch their tents around a central dining room. In the evening all gather round a huge camp fire and impromptu talks are often given on forestry, dendrology, botany, arboriculture, mountain climbing, art, etc., by members of the club, many of whom are prominent in the literary and scientific world.

They plan new trails and roads, talk over methods of fire protection for timber reserves, and plot for new State forests in different parts of California. Famous guests from many parts of the world have admired this big forest, and encouraged the club in its efforts to extend forest reserves.

Too much cannot be said of the usefulness of this reserve on the side of just beauty—for beauty is useful beyond belief. We need these "beauty reserves" in our lives, our State, our country. Beautiful forms and colors awaken the best that is in us, quiets the worst that is in us. Beauty makes us appreciate the majesty of our national hymn, so that our song starts from our hearts and goes singing round the world and encircles the universe.

*"I love thy rocks and rills,
Thy woods and templed hills,
....
Let music swell the breeze
And ring from all the trees."*

Sources

- *This article was published in Overland Monthly, October, 1907, pp.301--308.*
- *Post cards from the Library's collection.*

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