

Big Basin

War for redwoods waged at Big Basin

8-25-85
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THE photographer Andrew P. Hill is the first person who comes to mind as "the man who saved the redwoods." Indeed, his many fine photographs of Big Basin's magnificent Sequoia sempervirens provided the spark that lit the public's imagination, and thus the flames of battle.

Battle it was, for there were those who looked at the giants of the forest and saw only lengths of lumber, pickets, posts and shingles, with the dollars rolling in.

Hill was 46 years old, a San Jose artist and photographer, when he aimed his camera at the San Lorenzo Valley redwood trees in 1899. That memorable incident took place at Welch's Big Trees Grove near Felton. (Today it's Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park.) The Grove was privately owned by Joseph Welch who had developed a thriving business there. Trains brought tourists who paid admission to gape at the trees and patronize the small hotel he had built. Welch didn't take kindly to the photographer who was trying to get pictures of his trees. He ordered Hill off the property.

Hill went. With him he took not only anger at being barred from the Grove, but the idea that these trees were great works of art, one of the natural wonders of the world — and that as such they should be preserved and open to future generations.

Somehow, Hill heard of more and larger trees — up beyond Boulder Creek, hard to reach in those days. There was a bigger stumbling block than mere inaccessibility in Hill's way: much of the acreage with the finest trees belonged to a lumberman, Henry Middleton, who was planning to start cutting soon. However, Hill was determined to get to the trees and take his pictures.

Until 1880, redwood groves grew thick and lush between Aptos and the Santa Clara County line. But 20 years later those more accessible trees were gone, turned into posts and boards at the whining mills that dotted the Santa Cruz Mountains.

In 1899, the mill owners were turning toward the more distant, less accessible groves. The price of lumber was high and fortunes beckoned. Big Basin held rich promise; it was the only forest that had not been cut over.

Lumbering actually started in the 1860s in Santa Cruz County, with more than 20 sawmills in the San Lorenzo Valley alone producing more than 30 million board feet annually.

The earliest settler in the Big Basin area was Tom Maddock, an Irish immigrant who came there with his wife and three children in 1877. He built a cabin and harvested

A glance at history



Duncan McPherson, third from right, was among prominent citizens who rallied to protect the giant redwoods.

tan oak bark for several years until he was able to acquire 160 acres for a filing fee of less than \$10. But the rich stands of redwoods in the Basin remained untouched.

Forestry practices in those days were not the enlightened protective methods of today. Woodsmen moved into an area and leveled the groves to the resounding cry of "Timberrrrr!" — without regard for size, condition or location of the tree they were felling. When the giants were cut and hauled out, shingle makers and millmen came in to cut down the young trees, destroying young saplings and seedlings.

Andrew Hill got to Big Basin and took his pictures, and they did the work he intended. Members of the Sempervirens Club organized and paid Middleton a visit. They persuaded him to sign an agreement to sell 3,800 acres of his Big Basin land to the state for \$200,000.

This amounted to a temporary stay of execution for the giant trees, but more problems lay ahead. Although there were many who wanted to save the trees, there were also powerful enemies of the project. When the bill was introduced into the state Legislature it was greeted with remarks like "What foolishness! Two hundred thousand for a park!"

But Hill's photographs were widely circulated, and a campaign for the park took shape. Mrs. Phoebe A. Hearst donated money, Josephine Clifford McCrackin wrote articles for The Sentinel and for other per-

iodicals, and the University of California and Stanford University gave the project their official support.

Duncan McPherson, owner and editor of The Sentinel, presented a resolution to the California Press Association. The Rev. Robert E. Kenna S.J., president of University of Santa Clara, brought influence to bear, and a group of San Jose men and women joined the ranks.

On May 15, 1900, a committee paid a visit to Big Basin and compiled a report. After 60 days of struggle, the state owned its first state park.

In the summer of 1901, a group of supporters and Sempervirens members camped at Big Basin before it was open to the public. Three state officials visited it that summer: California Governor George C. Pardee, Governor West of Utah, and L.J. Gage, former governor of California. Their stopping place became known as Governors' Camp.

These earliest visitors made the trip from Boulder Creek via horse-drawn wagon or saddle horse over rough or non-existent roads. But by 1904, the Basin was opened to the public, and road improvements began.

In September of that year, a forest fire broke out. Park Warden J.H.B. Pilkington led a 20-day battle with the flames. On Sept. 27, a rain storm put out the fire which had done great damage.

In 1907, another threat loomed over the park when the state park administration changed hands and

the loyal Pilkington was out of his job. He was replaced by Sam H. Rambo who, with State Forester A.B. Lull, decided unwisely that the redwoods damaged by the fire should be removed. Lull entered into a secret agreement with W.M. Elsom who was to cut down "40 or more killed trees."

They were completely ignoring the fact that for hundreds and thousands of years, redwood trees had not only healed themselves of fire damage, but had survived to send out new shoots. After all, the word "sempervirens" means ever-living.

A Santa Cruz County's Grand Jury investigation and the work of the Sempervirens club members eventually put a stop to the cutting, but not until some of the Basin's finest specimens were reduced to grape stakes, posts, pickets and shakes. Since no specific trees had been designated, Elsom had cut just about anything he pleased.

Two years later when a public investigation was conducted, Governor Gillett pleaded ignorance and vetoed a reform bill for state park administration. The reform measure was finally passed in 1910, after Hiram W. Johnson was elected governor. A few months later, Rambo was fired and Big Basin State Park was placed under a state Park Commission.

California Redwood Park, also called Sempervirens Park, eventually became known as Big Basin.