

PHOTOGRAPHING THE BIG TREES: A STUDY IN CONTRASTS

By GARY F. KURUTZ

Acquisition of historical material for library collections is constantly filled with surprises especially when the addition is unsolicited. One of the most bizarre and happy such gifts occurred late this spring. Its arrival caused much anxiety. A package left on one of the granite benches outside the Library and Courts Building looked suspicious. In this era of bomb threats in state buildings, a parcel held together by shipping tape and

without any apparent owner invited a call to the State Police and bomb squad. Fortunately for history, officials determined that the package was harmless, chose not to blow it up, and turned it into the State Librarian's office since it was marked "a gift" for the California State Library. Its contents consisted of a Portola Festival program from 1913, a worn copy of an Ernest Peixotto portfolio of San Francisco Chinatown drawings, a San Francisco magazine from 1906, and the *pièce de résistance*, a photograph album with a gilt title, *Photo-*

Mr. Kurutz is Director of Special Collections, California State Library.



Redwood Inn at Governor's Camp. The cottage took on this name as it was first occupied by Governor Henry T. Cage and then by Governor George C. Pardee.

pated in Republican politics. His even-handed treatment of the Civil War and the controversial Working Man's Party warranted special notice. The *San Francisco Call* commended the trustees of the State Library for their "enterprise" and for placing "within the reach of the younger generation of Californians a succinct story of the events which have shaped the political history of the Golden State." The Redlands *Citrograph* said that every politician in California should have a copy handy for reference.

One of Davis' great strengths was as a compiler of information. His fondness for recording references led to an even more enduring contribution to the State Library and future researchers. For a period extending nearly three decades, this serious amateur historian, in his spare time, recorded in octavo-size ledger books references to people, places, and events in California history drawn from newspapers, magazines, and county histories. It covered the periods August 15, 1846 (the publication date of California's first newspaper) to January 1, 1889 and January 1894 to March 1905. By the time of his death in 1909, his index contained 60,000 entries. His devotion and stamina must have dazzled those who knew him.

Because of his close relationship to the State Library, one would assume that this incredible "database" would have been turned over to the Library. It was not that simple. According to a report of the Library's board of trustees, dated October 2, 1909, Davis' widow placed his book collection and newspaper index on the market. While the books duplicated its existing holdings, the Library anxiously wanted to

secure the index for the benefit for public research. That same decade, the Library established its California Department and initiated its own index known today as the California Information File. Davis' index of 60,000 entries represented a potentially substantial addition. The following month, the trustees opened negotiations with Mrs. Davis to copy the entries on to index cards. The Library offered a penny per card and Mrs. Davis countered with one and a quarter cents per card. Trustees negotiated hard and Mrs. Davis agreed to the Library's price.

Interestingly, Library officials did not want the actual index as it was in "manuscript form and its subject headings did not conform to those in the library index." Rather, the Library gained from Mrs. Davis "the privilege of going through the volumes, changing the subject headings to conform with those already made and eliminating entries from files already indexed." Equally as interesting, Mrs. Davis herself undertook the task of copying her late husband's entries to cards. She started in December 1909 and, after eight long months of pounding away at a typewriter, completed the job in August 1910. All told, she typed 34,440 cards and received \$344.40 in compensation.

With this unbelievable typing job completed, the California Department filed the new cards and boasted an index of over 150,000 cards. Thus, by 1910, the California Information File, one of the most important historical reference tools ever created by any library, was well under way thanks in large part to Winfield J. Davis and his devoted wife.



Boulder Creek Road on the Rim of the Big Basin, Santa Cruz.

graphs of California Redwood Park.

This anonymous donation and the acquisition of a related photograph album on the big trees provide important visual documentation on how Californians of the past handled their natural wonders. Both show an awesome respect for the coast and Sierra Nevada redwoods, but there the similarity ends. One records a pioneer effort to save these verdant giants; the other depicts how these monarchs of the forest were stripped, dismembered, and cut down for display in the eastern United States.

The California Redwood Park album, in addition to its visual documentation, has value as an artifact. According to its front cover, an early conservation group, the Sempervirens Club of California presented the album to Governor Hiram W. Johnson in April 1913. The inside cover is inscribed: "Photographs by | Andrew P. Hill | San Jose | Calif." An investigation into these front cover clues quickly reveals the importance of this particular album.

Andrew P. Hill, a San Jose artist and pho-

tographer of some acclaim, launched a crusade to save for California the sublime redwoods or *Sequoia sempervirens* that grace the "Big Basin" region of the Santa Cruz Mountains. It all started, in 1899, when Hill hauled his camera equipment to these coastal big trees to take photographs for a magazine article. The owner of the Santa Cruz Big Tree Grove, a J.W. Welsh, learned of the photographs and demanded that Hill turn over the negatives stating that he had no right to photograph his trees. Hill refused and Welsh's possessive attitude angered and galvanized him into action. The photographer also learned that Welsh was harvesting the forest for railroad ties. Upon leaving the grove he said to himself: "I will start a campaign immediately to make a public park of this place."

Inspired by the size and antiquity of this natural wonder, and fearful of heavy lumbering, Hill waged a vigorous campaign to save the forest. Although a man of limited economic means, his evangelism succeeded in gaining the support of the local press, the

presidents of Stanford and Santa Clara universities, and other influential Californians. To help spearhead this effort, Hill founded the Sempervirens Clubs (named for the *Sequoia sempervirens* or "ever-living"). This pioneer group of conservationists, after conducting a carefully crafted public relations effort, succeeded in getting an enabling bill through the State Legislature. Governor Henry Gage signed their bill on May 18, 1900, and by May 20, 1902, 3,800 acres of primeval forest at a cost of a quarter of a million dollars was deeded over to the state. This law that created California Redwood Park established California's first Sacramento-legislated state park. Today, this spectacular forest is known as Big Basin Redwoods State Park.

The efforts of A.P. Hill and his Sempervirens Club did not end with this victory. Throughout the decade, the Club fought off attempts by lumber companies to log in the area. Another Sempervirens Club project was its advocacy for a road into Big Basin from

the Santa Clara Valley and thereby making the big trees accessible to the population centers. Hill firmly believed that everyone should have access to this magnificent forest and a decent road would make that possible. Once again, the Club went into action and in July 1913, Governor Hiram Johnson signed a bill appropriating \$70,000 to build an automobile and carriage road from the Saratoga summit to the California Redwood Park.

The photograph album, now in possession of the Library, was presented to Governor Johnson in April 1913, perhaps in an effort to impress upon him the beauty of the forest and the potential public good of the road. The images, mounted on black paper pages, typical of albums from that era, deliver several messages. Naturally, the power and majesty of the Santa Cruz big trees dominates. Several photographs show visits by the Sempervirens Club and politicians. Other photographs made from dry plate negatives record logging and are supplemented with captions expressing anger over



A fallen monarch in the Sierra Nevada big tree grove.



Down comes the Mark Twain Tree in Tulare County after an earthly sojourn of 1,273?? years.



"Summer home of photographer near Big Tree." The photographer was C.C. Curtis.

the loss of these trees. A final segment pictorially demonstrates the route of the potential road and approaches to the big trees via Saratoga. One is struck by the open rural spaces that made Santa Clara County such a garden spot.

Californian's fascination with the big trees led to another approach in the 19th century. Their immense size and age could not be believed. Verbal descriptions, paintings, and even photographs failed to convince the incredulous of their majestic proportions. Beginning in the early 1850s, promoters treated the giant redwood as a freak of nature and saw a moneymaking opportunity by literally taking the trees to the population centers in the eastern United States. Trees that stood on the face of the earth since Biblical times were cut down, sawed into sections, hollowed out, and shipped to New York, Chicago, and Washington, D.C., and even to London. Back in California, the carcasses of the big trees were converted into dance floors, bowling alleys, and general tourist attractions.



Segments of the General Noble tree being boxed up for shipment to the Chicago World's Fair in 1892.

A dramatic example of this martyrdom for the sake of impressing eastern and European audiences was recorded by photographer C.C. Curtis in a photograph album he entitled *California Big Trees*. Most of the images date from the early 1890s and focus on the Mark Twain and General Noble trees located near the General Grant Grove of the Sierra Nevada. These trees, classed as the *Sequoiadendron giganteum*, were cousins of the coastal redwoods saved by Andrew Hill. In 1891 Curtis turned his camera on the felling of the Mark Twain Tree, aged 1,341 years. Well-intentioned scientists shipped portions of the great writer's namesake to New York for inclusion in that city's American Museum of Natural History and to the British Museum in London. Its stump remains at what is now Kings Canyon National Park. A brochure distributed by the New York museum told onlookers that the Mark Twain Tree was alive when the barbarians overran Europe and, like a tombstone, included its dates, 550—1891 A.D.

The General Noble Tree stood for centuries in Converse Basin but, in 1893, the na-

tion celebrated the 400th anniversary of Columbus' voyage with a world's fair in Chicago. To embellish the World's Columbian Exposition, the government let a contract to fell this giant sequoia. Woodman cut down the tree at a height of 50 feet and proceeded to hollow out the trunk. That trunk was carefully packed up and reconfigured in Chicago in the rotunda of the U.S. Government Building in a section 23 feet high and 30 feet in diameter. To prove that the General Noble really did exist in nature, Curtis' photographs of its demise accompanied the exhibit. After the Columbian Exhibition, the General Noble exhibit was sent to Washington, D.C. for display by the Smithsonian Institution on the mall.

By today's standards, Curtis' photographs record a shocking chapter in California history. But the sacrifice of the Mark Twain and General Noble trees no doubt stirred the emotions of men like Andrew Hill and John Muir and ultimately led to the preservation of one of California's and the world's natural wonders.