

Preferred Parking Among the Giants

**Big Basin's Auto Tree,
a century old attraction**

By Frank Perry

Some present-day visitors to Big Basin do not notice it. It is not on the popular Redwood Loop Trail. It has no sign, yet for many years it was the most photographed redwood tree in the park.

Known as the "Auto Tree," it was Big Basin's ambassador through much of the 20th century. Thousands of people posed next to it for photos, and thousands more bought postcards of the tree to mail to friends and relatives, near and far. It was even in an early travel film, "California Picture Book," distributed in 1931.

So what's so special about the Auto Tree and why was it a Big Basin icon? A full history of the tree would probably reach back a thousand years or more, but that history, recorded by its growth rings, was erased long ago by fires that hollowed out its interior. It is this hollowed-out feature, however, that made the tree so popular. From roughly 1910 to 1940, visitors would back cars into the tree and pose for photos. The autos helped dramatize the tree's massive girth, nearly 75 feet in circumference at ground level.

(Above) A Ranger stands beside a 1940s Ford parked inside the Auto Tree.

Photo: © Andrew P. Hill (Collection of Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History)



(Above) In May of 1900, members of the Sempervirens Club posed for photographer Andrew P. Hill in Big Basin.

Roy Fulmer, who had a photo studio in the park during the 1920s and 1930s, regularly suggested this particular tree to people who wanted their picture taken. Not only was the tree gargantuan, it also was only a short distance from Fulmer's studio and darkroom.

"I've taken thousands of pictures of this tree," recalled Fulmer in a 1982 interview and visit to the site. Sadly, Fulmer didn't save his negatives, not realizing they would someday be historic. But no doubt many of the prints are still out there, tucked away in aged family photo albums, from California to Maine. Today, such vintage photos are a delight for old car buffs, showcasing everything from LaSalles to Whippets. In many cases, the year on the license plate is legible, which along with the make and model, provide clues as to when the picture was taken. One photo, showing

a 1940 Ford and a solemn park ranger, was especially popular on postcards.

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— Scott Peden.

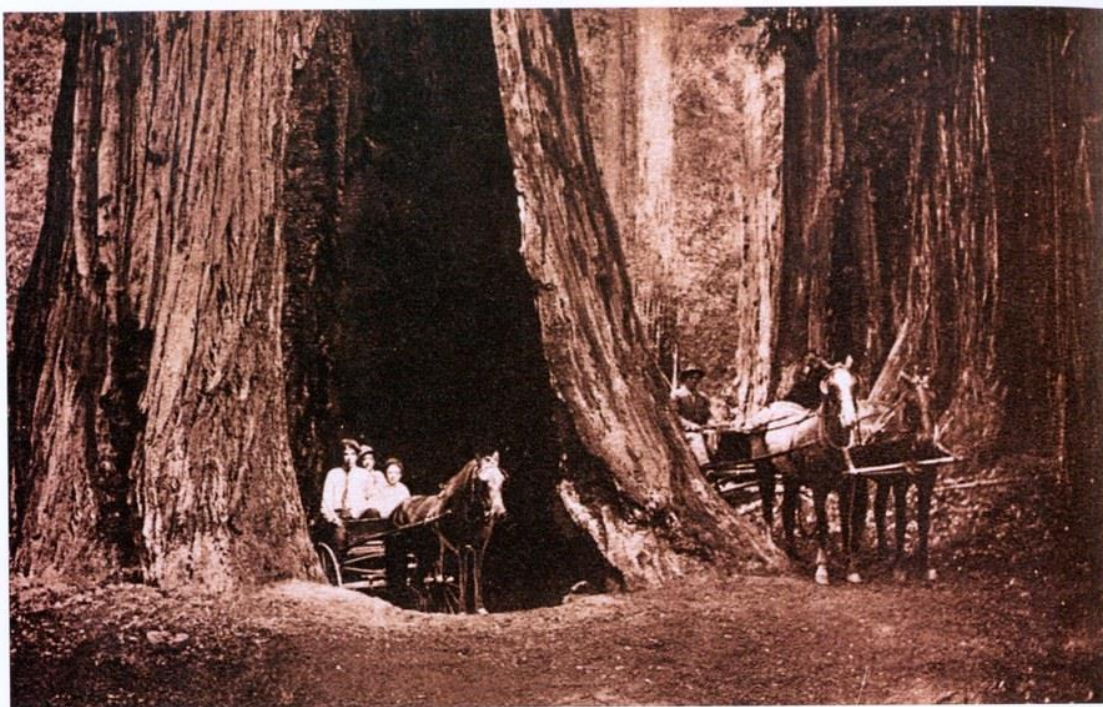
Some of the earliest photos show horses and wagons in the tree.

"Long before the first automobiles made it to this part of the Santa Cruz Mountains, it was just 'A Burned Giant' or a 'Burned Hollow Tree,'" said Scott Peden, long time park docent. Peden has made of study of early photographs of the park, tracking down many rare, little-known images. "Other trees were photographed... but the earliest ones

are all what we now refer to as the Auto Tree," he said. The oldest photograph Peden has found thus far was probably taken in the late 1880s.

Being one of the first giant redwood trees ever photographed, the Auto Tree played an important role in selling the idea of a state park to the California Legislature. In May of 1900 a group of concerned citizens hiked into the basin to see firsthand if the trees were as impressive as they had been told. The group decided to call itself the Sempervirens Club, and posed in the Auto Tree for a photograph by Andrew P. Hill. That and other photos by Hill aided in the lobbying effort to get the park established.

Just a year later, the California Legislature passed the bill to protect this beautiful forest of old-growth redwoods from the logger's ax. Since then, the park



Postcards: Frank Perry Collection

(Above) An image from a vintage postcard featured a horse drawn wagon posed inside Big Basin's famous tree.

has racked up over a century of human history. The Big Basin of today differs from the early years, when there was an inn and restaurant, a swimming pool, tennis courts, and even a gas station. Back then, some families would stay the entire summer. Amenities and park rules have changed, but the giant redwoods look exactly as they did when the park was founded.

One of the more interesting footnotes to the Auto Tree's history is something that did not happen. In 1911 it was suggested that the tree be tunneled so that people could drive from one side to the other. Both the Mariposa and Calaveras Big Trees had drive-through trees, cut through in the 1880s, and these were popular tourist attractions. Fortunately, wiser heads prevailed and the Auto Tree was preserved in its natural state. You could say it became a "garage tree." This important distinction escaped at least one manufacturer of Big Basin souvenirs. A 1953 felt pennant says in giant letters, "Big Basin," yet has a picture of a car

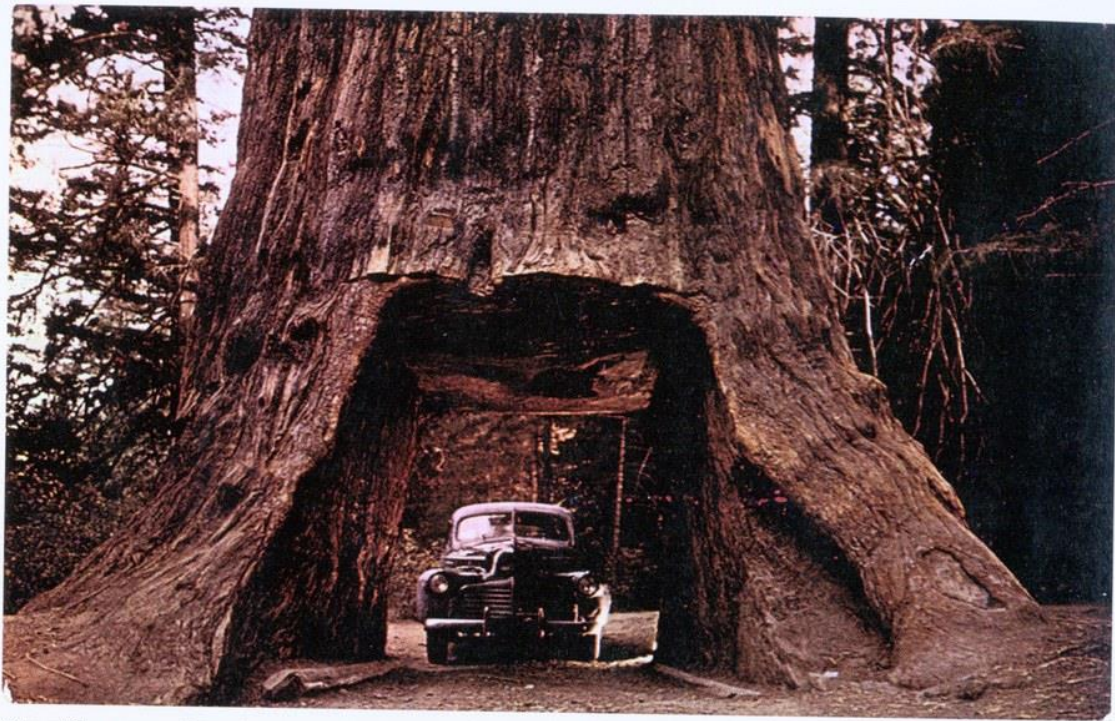


driving through a tree.

The Auto Tree has some interesting natural features as well. According to researcher Zane Moore, it is 282 feet tall.

"Its height makes it one of the taller trees in the park. It's 7 feet in diameter at 200 feet, and 4.5 feet at 250 feet," he reported enthusiastically. "Those are the widest di-

ameters at those heights in the Santa Cruz Mountains." Moore has calculated that the main trunk contains around 400 tons of wood. Comparing it with the largest animal on earth—the blue whale—the Auto Tree is about three times the length and twice the weight. ■



(Above) The passage through the Chandelier Tree, located in Underwood Park on Redwood Highway in Mendocino County, was cut in 1937. The tree lives today and for a fee of \$5.00 a car can be driven through it.



(Above) Post cards sent by tourists helped to give Big Basin's Auto Tree a world wide reputation.

Visit the Tree

The Auto Tree

Where: 75 feet north of park headquarters.
Big Basin Redwoods State Park,
21600 Big Basin Way, Boulder Creek

What:
Photography Exhibit
The Auto Tree:
One Tree, Many Stories

Where:
Exhibited through April 3
Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History
1305 East Cliff Drive
Santa Cruz, California