

Up on top at age 81

Long life in the forest fed a love of trees

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SCOTTS VALLEY — Les Liebenberg is at home amid the tall trees that line the Santa Cruz Mountains.

The 81-year-old Ben Lomond resident has spent much of his life not only walking the forest floor, but hanging in the tree tops — a place few experience.

Without intending to, Liebenberg may have reached a world record of being the oldest tree topper. He is also known as a “high climber,” scaling to the tops of lofty trees to remove threatening branches or to douse a fire.

He is being nominated for the Guinness Book of World Records by chain saw maker Stihl Inc. The only other nominee, at this point, is a 64-year-old from Washington.

“It is accidental,” he said softly in the

woods outside Scotts Valley.

Modest and mild mannered, Liebenberg is the picture of a man dedicated to hard work. His striped shirt, dark work pants and climbing spurs suit him well.

Born in 1915 in San Francisco, he followed in the footsteps of his father, Henry J. Liebenberg, who established a tree business working around Brookdale and Boulder Creek.

“When I was 17, he hurt his leg and wasn’t able to climb, so I took over on summer vacations and weekends,” remembered Liebenberg.

Several years later, around 1936, he and his brother, Herman, earned their first job after taking over the business, Liebenberg Tree Service.

“We didn’t know how to bid,” Liebenberg said. “We worked for 75 cents an hour.”

The tree was an old oak that had grown

inside a Brookdale house and eventually right through the roof. Working with hand saws, the brothers brought down the tree and earned \$12.

The Liebenbergs have not always followed convention. The family was well known for their environmentalism even before the word was used. It was not unusual for them to urge landowners not to cut trees — thus talking themselves out of work.

Their profound respect for the forest has earned them a reputation as philosophers and woodsmen. Liebenberg still blesses every tree he cuts.

When tree work was not in demand, the family became proficient in other fields. Liebenberg helped build roads in the 1960s and 1970s. When chain saws were developed, he sold those for a time.



Les Liebenberg, working the woods of Santa Cruz County for more than 60 years, sometimes has talked people out of cutting trees.

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Sentinel

But he never strayed far from the trees.

He has climbed redwoods, Douglas firs and eucalyptus throughout the peaks and valleys around Santa Cruz. Each has been an adventure.

About 35 years ago, he climbed a redwood that was threatening a home in Paradise Park.

"The top was spindly," remembered Liebenberg. "The top didn't taper."

He climbed 100 feet above the ground to where the tree was a mere three inches in diameter.

"The tree started to sway, move," he said, rocking back and forth on his legs to demonstrate. "It started to circle."

Liebenberg moved a few feet down to where he was still high enough to cut the top and then push it with his hand so it would miss the house.

In 1943, he climbed to what was likely his greatest height. The tree was in Palo Colorado Canyon in Monterey County. A family had built a tiled swimming pool on its estate, but a redwood was dropping limbs into the water. Liebenberg was called to trim the tree.

"I was so high," he said, estimating that he was 250 feet up. "I tried talking to my ground person, but we couldn't understand each other."

As a young father, he would take his five sons with him into the forest. His son Steve joined him in the business when he was 16, as Liebenberg had followed his own father.

"It was so amazing," said Steve, now 47. "I was watching him where I wanted to be some day."

From the tree tops, one can see above the forest in all directions, he said, still in awe of the experience.

Steve does much of the climbing these days with high-tech equipment used in mountain climbing and emergency rescues.

The elder Liebenberg still works almost every day. A heavy leather belt that he straps to his lean frame was made in 1959. He still uses an ax, in addition to a small chain saw, to trim limbs at a time when other tree toppers rely exclusively on saws.

His only serious injury came about six years ago when he was, of all places, on the ground. An inspection found no "widow makers," branches that can come loose and kill, but a 30 to 40-pound limb fell from a fir tree



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Liebenberg's only serious injury came on the ground.

and landed on his head, which was protected by a helmet.

Two hours later, Liebenberg woke up in the hospital. He was paralyzed on his left side. He was hospitalized five weeks and spent four months recuperating before he was able to return to work.

The father-and-son team has since been out on a number of important jobs. Last fall, they were called to climb and extinguish fires in old-growth redwoods in Big Basin Redwoods State Park.

It's part of the Liebenberg attitude of being environmentally sensitive.

They have left their good-paying jobs to help fight forest fires, said Battalion Chief Craig Herrett of the state Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

Where others would simply cut down a burning tree, the Liebenerg's climb its trunk, pulling a fire hose up behind them in an effort to put out the flames and save the tree, he said.

"They are the best," Herrett said.

Much of their work centers around carefully cutting and removing hazardous trees around

home sites, using cranes. Many loggers are used to working in the forest and don't have the expertise that the Liebenerg's have with working around homes and utility lines.

They were recently summoned to Pogonip in Santa Cruz for a controversial removal of trees that were growing from and destroying historic lime kilns. The trees had to be removed without a limb so much as touching the fragile kilns below.

The two are also well-known for their rattlesnake taming. While in the woods, Les Liebenberg observed that the snakes seemed timid despite their reputation. He and his son have since become expert handlers. People who want rattlesnakes removed from their land have sought their assistance.

The elder Liebenberg, when he was 75, pursued his interest in karate, and earned his black belt.

There are no plans for retirement in his future.

World record or not, he has gone where few others do.

"To me, it's not work," he said. "It's something that has to be done."