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**A TALE OF A TREE**  
**by John Parminter**

One of the most enduring and controversial stories about local big trees concerns the so-called Cary Fir, reputedly a large Douglas-fir felled in 1895 in Lynn Valley, North Vancouver by a logger named George Cary. It was supposed to have had a stump diameter of 25 feet, circumference of 77 feet, height of 417 feet and bark thickness at the base of 16 inches -- making for a very large tree indeed. However, its very existence has often been called into question. A photograph supposedly of the Cary Fir has commonly been pronounced a hoax perpetrated by some Canadian lumbermen on their American counterparts. The story is anything but straightforward.

It may have begun at the turn of the century but rose to prominence courtesy of the August 1922 issue of the trade journal *Western Lumberman*. Its cover was graced by a photograph of the butt of a large felled tree, complete with a group of people perched on the bole and an adjacent ladder. The photo was provided by a Mr. Oscar L. Mullett of Vancouver, a scaler for the B.C. Forest Branch, who had been given it by a Mr. M. Laval (or Lavell). The latter claimed to have both witnessed the felling of the tree and to be one of the people in the photo. This image has been reproduced more than a dozen times in various journals since its original appearance in print over 73 years ago.



Although both the existence of the giant tree and the authenticity of the photograph were accepted for several decades, doubts were eventually raised as to whether the photo is genuine and if the tree is in fact a Douglas-fir or a coast redwood being passed off as a Douglas-fir. There is some room for suspicion here since the major dimensions given (25 by 417 feet) correspond exactly with those of a notable (but felled) coast redwood, a portion of which was put on display in Chicago at the Columbian Exposition of 1893.

It is curious that publicity about the tree was uncommon until 1922, some 27 years after the tree was reportedly felled. That date varies somewhat, is often given as 1910 and even as late as 1940. The date is much less changeable than the location, which also includes Lynn Creek instead of Lynn Valley, the Capilano watershed and Seymour River valley. As part of a series of items about record-sized trees, the *Vancouver Sun* publicized the details of the Cary Fir in October of 1946. Mr. C.L. Armstrong of the B.C. Forest Service expressed the opinion that the photo is indeed of a Douglas-fir with a butt diameter of at least 18 feet. Foresters with the U.S. Forest Service subsequently wrote to the paper and expressed scepticism regarding the measurements.

Major J.S. Matthews, archivist for the City of Vancouver, knew George Cary and in 1960 recalled how Cary used to hunt ducks in a pond which became the grounds of the Vancouver Art Gallery on Georgia Street, possibly cut a trail up the North Shore mountains which became Lonsdale Avenue and logged extensively in Lynn Valley. Matthews stated that Cary denied the existence of such a tree and certainly denied having felled it. The whole thing was, according to the archivist, likely a hoax perpetrated by the lumbermen of the Concatenated Order of the Hoo Hoo through the use of a doctored photo of a coast redwood tree.

Silviculturists and foresters continued to disagree as to whether the tree was a coast redwood or a Douglas-fir. Professor C. Frank Brockman -- formerly of the University of Washington -- and several of his colleagues there examined the evidence in 1979 and believed the photo to be of a Douglas-fir. They also felt that the background shown is more typical of the coastal Douglas-fir region of B.C. and Washington than of the coast redwoods of California. Dr. Phil Haddock of the University of B.C. and Dr. Dale Thornburgh of Humboldt State University in Arcata, California disagreed and considered the photo to be of a coast redwood.

While Douglas-firs do not usually exhibit such prominent bark ridges as are shown in the photo, the largest trees of that species (such as the Westholme Tree, DBH of 17 feet and the Mineral Tree, DBH of 16 feet) do in fact have such ridges. If they are common to the rarer, very large Douglas-firs then most people would be unfamiliar with this feature. In addition, if the photo is really of a coast redwood it likely would already have been known to those in the industry in the Pacific Northwest. So any attempt by Canadian lumbermen to pull the wool over the eyes of their American brethren by promoting the story of a felled giant Douglas-fir through the substitution of a photo of a coast redwood probably would have failed.

The Cary Fir photo has never been found in collections of coast redwood prints, despite diligent investigations by several researchers in Oregon and California. It has been examined by photo processing professionals, who could find no evidence that the image had been tampered with or faked in any way. While current digital technology may permit this sort of trickery, the technology of 1922 was much more primitive and any fakery should be detectable.

It has often been claimed that George Cary is the man on the ladder and that possibility could have been conclusively dealt with by Major Matthews, who knew Mr. Cary. Curiously, Matthews never seems to have stated one way or the other if the man was in fact George Cary. On the other hand, a Mr. R.M. Essie, in a letter dated October 23, 1930, stated that there "...is not the slightest doubt that the tree was felled in the vicinity of Vancouver. Several of the people in the picture can be identified as residents of this district."

So, if we consider the photo to be both genuine and of a Douglas -fir felled in the Vancouver area near the turn of the century, then what is the story? Firstly, a large Douglas -fir was felled in Lynn Valley but that was in 1902, not 1895. It was, according to North Vancouver historian and naturalist Mr. Walter Draycott, only 14 feet 3 inches in diameter inside the bark five feet above the base. The outside bark diameter at that point would have been 16 feet 4 inches. Access to this tree was by rough skid roads only and it is highly unlikely that women and children (as shown in the photo) would have traveled into the area.

Secondly, a large Douglas-fir was felled in the Kerrisdale area in 1896 and the details of it were related to Draycott by several men. One of these was Mr. Julius Fromme, who was the superintendent of timber operations for the Hastings Mill, Vancouver. Fromme handled the Kerrisdale tree and reported that the butt log was 13 feet 8 inches in diameter and the total length of the tree was nearly 400 feet -- the largest Douglas-fir he had ever seen. Mr. Harold Fromme, Julius' son, also recalls his father talking about the big tree from Kerrisdale.

This tree, in contrast to the real Lynn Valley tree felled six years later (but not the Cary Fir), was easily accessible and crowds of people went to see this significant local curiosity. Livery stables did a good business hiring out horses and buggies for the purpose. It is quite likely that a photo taken of the Kerrisdale Tree would include both lumbermen and ordinary citizens, as are present in the famous Cary Fir photo. Walter Draycott was quite sure that the photo is actually of the Kerrisdale Tree and not the supposed Cary Fir.

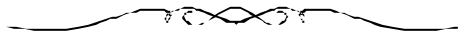
However, the photo appears to depict a tree that is about 15 or 16 feet in diameter -- slightly larger than the figure of 13 feet 8 inches reported by Julius Fromme. Such large trees were often split by powder charges before being hauled to the mill and so the lowest portion may have been lost in the process. Also there is the question of bark thickness, which can easily be 1 1/2 feet on trees of this size. That would add nearly three feet to Fromme's figure, most likely given for the diameter inside bark only because he would be interested more in the wood content alone.

Could Douglas-firs of this size have existed at all? Another with similar dimensions was felled in 1902 by the Tremblay brothers on the present site of Argyle Road, off Mountain Highway in North Vancouver. It was situated on the property of Alfred John Nye, the first pre-emptor of land in the area, who measured the felled giant at 415 feet in length, with a diameter of 14.2 feet and a bark thickness of up to 13 1/2 inches. The largest sections of this tree were split with powder before being taken to the mill at Moodyville on Burrard Inlet. Ten years later the stump was removed to allow for construction of Argyle Road.

The conclusions to be drawn from this convoluted story are:

- although George Cary -- the supposed faller of the Cary Fir -- was involved with the timber industry and did exist, the tree named after him did not,
- a large Douglas-fir was felled in Lynn Valley in 1902 but it was neither the Cary Fir nor the one shown in the famous photo,
- the photo is genuine and very probably of a large Douglas-fir, not a coast redwood,
- the Kerrisdale Tree, as reported by Julius Fromme and others, did exist, was felled in 1896 and visited by many local curiosity seekers,
- the famous photo is most likely of the Kerrisdale Tree but this has not yet been proven conclusively and
- that the Cary Fir story was a hoax perpetrated by Canadian members of the lumbermen's Hoo Hoo Club on their American colleagues is also in doubt. Although Major Matthews considered this to be true, there is little evidence to back his theory.

There are two myths involved here -- the myth of Cary Fir and the myth of the phoney photo. If the tree could talk we would know the story but doubtless it is now part of a few buildings in B.C., California and/or Australia -- common destinations for prime Douglas-fir (and coast redwood!) lumber in bygone days. Little do the occupants of those buildings know of the controversy which has raged on through the decades regarding the origins of their lumber.



Al Carder, a long-time member of the FHABC, began his research on big trees in August of 1977 as a retirement project. This work was described in the very first issue of this newsletter in December of 1981. The fruits of his labours were recently published by Fitzhenry & Whiteside of Markham, Ontario. Entitled "Forest Giants of the world, past and present," the book makes for fascinating reading and will interest foresters and naturalists alike.

This story was written from background material provided by Al Carder, additional information from his book, archival sources and other published works, including:

Carney, Todd. 1976. A fir tree of the mind. Raincoast Chronicles First Five, collector's edition. Harbour Publishing, Madeira Park, B.C. pp. 142-143.

Tiemann, Harry. 1935. Where are the largest trees in the world? Journal of Forestry 33(11):903-915.