“ A disservice to the Douglas fir...”

A FIR TREE OF THE MIND

by Todd Carney

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Four hundred and seventeen feet of living matter, of tree. The familiar Douglas fir suddenly looming unbelievable among its dwarfed brothers. The overwhelming *Ah-men* of utter mass. Imponderable ponderous mass. But live, delicately quick in rippling browns, fluttering greens, four hundred seventeen feet up. Up sheerly and as if forever slowly continuing to climb out of the stilled insubstantial forest floor dropping beneath that first man's feet, his Eden-stunned eyes being pulled bird-like into the green storm of its sky.

At four hundred seventeen feet in height it would have been as tall as the new Toronto Dominion Bank building at the corner of Georgia and Granville in downtown Vancouver. But the tree's forty stories would be growing and enriching, pitch authentic and pungent, to be shared among families instead of forty seized and seasonless ones of concrete and steel to be filled each morning by office workers. The year would be 1895, not 1972. The man whose name is to be notched into the historical carcass of the tree is George Cary, one of the first logging settlers of B.C.'s coastal rainforests. The harbourer of this immense secret shout of a tree would be a lush fold on the North Shore of Vancouver known as Lynn Valley. This area had already afforded earlier loggers some very large, even huge firs, one thirteen feet across the butt.

Thirteen feet in diameter is huge, yet the Cary Fir would be nearly double at twenty-five feet across the butt. Its circumference, seventy-seven feet. Walking around its base would be akin to circumnavigating some new world. Going around its ineffable girth it would come to you the power implicit in one of those tiny winged seeds the size of a hangnail; how sown on the wind and chance it could establish its ground and open out and probe down, plunge up and through its potential to finally become the heart of its promise, to be such towering praise.

The volume of the tree would certainly be respected by the fallers. Respected yes, or more likely, feared. The bark itself would be sixteen inches thick. Chewy absorbing insulation to the first axe bites. Just to begin to reach the actual wood would raise rivers of sweat in the muggy August underbrush. Try and stretch wide enough to grasp the awesome brute mechanics of falling such a tree with the equipment available in 1895. The undercut alone would take days. And what about the saw? Forged together from several blades, how awkward it would be.

Then as the tree neared falling to hear the terrible groans that would flow from its wound shaking the gut as the wedges were driven deeper and the cut widened. And when it slides to topple, taking half the forest with it in a delirium of flailing branches and a hail of cones, the cloud of dust and pollen billowing up from the forest floor to envelope ringing ears and thudding bodies.. . And when the cloud settles back down to reveal the fallen tree, its four hundred seventeen feet of life that keeps on going on under the boots: at two hundred seven feet the diameter still nine feet, to the first limb at three hundred feet... And when the cloud settles.. .

It is 1972 and the evidence seems indisputably weighed against the historical existence of the Cary Fir. Gone the forty green stories and now standing in its stead we have the monolithic fact of the T-D Bank building to bring to us what that tree's stature would have been if it were not a tall tale, a myth.

So the Cary Fir is cut down not by axes and saws but by the knowledge of the UBC forestry experts and it falls into the category of legend. Now it is a fiction invented to appease the need of B.C. people to have claim to a world's record. For the Cary Fir at four hundred seventeen feet would have easily topped even the redwoods. Still, for those interested, the Cary Fir is mentioned in the Guinness Book of Records, even though its measurements are reported as unverified.

And that word "unverified" is the problem. According to Professors Haddock and Smith of U.B.C.'s silvicultural department that word is one that gives far too much leeway to the imagination. Their examination of the photograph shown here, the one (the only one) that appeared to create and continue the tall tale as truth, reveals to them unequivocally, that the tree is not a Douglas fir at all but a coast redwood; and since no redwoods have grown naturally in B.C. since before the ice age, it couldn't have been cut in B.C. Their proof that the tree is a redwood and not a fir is:

> *1. There is a burl at the base of the trunk (to the left of Cary on the ladder) and that type of growth doesn't appear on Douglas firs but does on redwoods,*
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> *2. There are whiskery sprouts on the ragged chunk of its base the tree left when it was felled (to right of Cary on the ladder) and this again is a growth that can be attributed to redwoods but not to Douglas firs, and*
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> *3. The texture and shape of the bark is relatively smooth and free of deep crevices, and runs relatively straight up and down the trunk, all of which is characteristic of a redwood; whereas Douglas fir bark is very rough with numerous deep crevices and highly irregular longitudinal markings. They further point out that statistically speaking there is almost no chance of a tree that size being a Douglas fir, as it is one hundred feet taller and eleven feet larger in diameter than the largest Douglas firs reported in B.C. and elsewhere.*

Professor Haddock summed up his case in a letter (part of the correspondence he has carried out over the past ten years in an effort to squelch the public's craving for a world's record) to one of the many publishers of the Cary Fir as a fact and not fiction story: "In brief, there is not a shred of evidence that any such tree existed. The photo is not faked, but was probably taken of a coast Redwood, doubtless in California, probably Humbolt County, many years ago."

The fact that George Cary cut the tree in 1895 or any year is nonsense according to the late J.F. Matthews who was a Vancouver city

archivist and friend of Cary. Matthews writes to Professor Haddock: "Every word he (Cary) spoke to me has been recorded in writing. He said he never cut such a tree, that no such tree grew in Lynn Valley where he had done extensive logging." And explaining how the photo and the legend of the tree came about, Matthews had this to say. "About sixty years ago in the state of Washington I believe, the Hoo Hoo Club was formed by a group of lumbermen and occasionally they would have a banquet. One year it was held in Vancouver and as our lumbermen wanted 'to put one over' on their colleagues from the State of Washington, they invented the legend..." And Matthews concludes, "I don't know positively, but what I think the men did was use a photo of a Redwood and then concoct an inscription to go beneath it. I would not waste time on it..."

Adding to the evidence against the truth of the tree are the many comments of old time loggers who said no one in those days would have been foolish enough to cut such a tree even if it did exist. The skidroads and sawmill setups just weren't capable of handling a tree of such a size at that time in B.C.

Finally, there is no mention of the tree as either fact or local lore in the small historical booklet on the settlement and development of Lynn Valley written in the 1920's. There is a picture of a Douglas fir with the title "Largest Ever Cut" but the tree is the same huge fir mentioned earlier, thirteen feet across the butt.

Thus it would seem that the Cary Fir was a tale arrived at in later years, perhaps woven of many such tales, placed in the Lynn Valley area and granted to George Cary's name.

For some reason the history of the controversy over this tree's historical existence did not really begin until 1946. On October 24 of that year the *Vancouver Sun* printed a story on the battle between Canada and the United States for claiming the largest tree on record. The *Sun* gave these "facts": "John Palmer recalls that in 1895 George Cary felled a tree 77 feet in circumference, 25 feet in diameter, 417 feet tall, trunk 300 feet high to the first limb, 9 feet in diameter at 207 feet, bark 10 inches thick." The *Sun* also printed a reply from the U.S. Forest Service to the discovery of the tree in which they said they "think something was wrong with the measurement."
The next day the *Sun* published the (in)famous photo on the front page with a headline saying: "Lynn Valley Tree Largest". The paper assumed this proof would put B.C. in the world record books to stay.

Then on October 30 the *Sun* followed up this big scoop with a commentary by C.L. Armstrong, veteran Assistant Forester of the B.C. Forestry Service, who "positively identified the tree as a fir" and ascertained that "expert examination of the Lynn Valley giant's picture while not able to accurately substantiate full 25 feet diameter claimed, showed that the butt, discounting 'flair' or 'swelling' was apparently at least 18 feet."

Since this beginning in 1946 many publications have printed stories down through the years all tending to present the Cary Fir as fact and not fiction. And of course Professors Haddock and Smith of U.B.C. and the late Major Matthews of the Vancouver City Archives have all tried for the last ten years and more to put an end to the tree and label it for what they felt and feel it is, a nuisance legend in no way authenticated by any proof whatsoever.

Yet the tree still stands tall in many minds and I suppose it will continue to as even now it does in mine, swaying in the wind of a people's need for legend, for myth. For to me the public's desire for such a tree to exist in their memories and dwell in their dreams is deeper and much more than a provincial pride in waving a record at the world. It is more than a tall tale. It has its own truth that need not contend with the scientist's other. For the Cary Fir begins to grow into the a historical sky and ground of myth, an area where it does not so much ignore the evidence against its existence as subsume it, grow around it as an oyster orbits layer after layer of secretion around its found world of pain to produce a pearl, a larger world, one with a different beauty and quality. For the Cary Fir as myth seems to demonstrate man's reach to embody with the belief of his blood, the massively dense, the somehow gentle yet demonically intense sheer growth potential of such a rainforest as is found on B.C.'s west coast.

And who knows, perhaps there were a few redwoods that continued to grow in B.C. after the ice pulled back. Perhaps one grew in Lynn Valley. Perhaps waiting in some as yet undiscovered valley is tree as large as people wished the Cary Fir to be.

Yes, I hear you, Professor Haddock. The next one will be five hundred seventeen feet, no doubt.

Response by Dr. A. C. Carder, Victoria

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I recently acquired a copy of your *Raincoast Chronicles First Five* and read through it with great interest. One article which caught my attention particularly was "A Fir Tree of the Mind," which purports to expose British Columbia's entry under tallest trees in the *Guinness Book of Records,* the 417-foot Douglas fir reputedly cut by George Gary of Lynn Valley in 1895, as "a nuisance legend in no way authenticated by any proof whatsoever.. . a fiction invented to appease the need of B.C. people to have a claim to a world's record."
The writer, Tod Carney, implies that a tree of such dimensions is well beyond the realm of the possible and traces the legend to a doctored photograph of a redwood tree used by a group of turn-of-the-century Vancouver lumbermen to "put one over" on their colleagues in Washington State. He quotes two U.B.C. silviculturists and the late Vancouver archivist Major J.F. Matthews in his support and no doubt feels he has closed the book on the issue.

While I do not dispute Mr. Carney's findings regarding that particular much-used photograph, which indeed seems spurious, I think his other statements do a disservice both to the people of B.C. and to the Douglas fir. In short, I do not think his conclusions reflect accurately either on our gullibility or on its size, and I am hoping your readers can help me prove that a fir tree of record size was in fact cut on Burrard Inlet in 1895, whether or not it was cut by George Gary or had the exact dimensions of the one credited to him by Guinness.

To begin with, just how naive would it be to believe that the Douglas fir, growing under ideal conditions, could reach heights in excess

of 400 feet? According to Mr. Carney this would have made the Gary tree a hundred feet taller than the largest specimen elsewhere reported. A tree of such size may well seem unimaginable today, but our sense of scale in this matter has diminished over the years. I remember visiting the Vancouver Museum with my father in 1920 and seeing a photograph there of a Douglas fir which had been measured at 410 feet. To us, living in the Fraser Valley at a time when many stands of giant fir were still extant and having personally heard of specimens well over 300 feet being felled, 410 feet seemed exceptional but quite realistic.

William H. Harlow, professor of Wood Technology, State University of New York, states of the Douglas fir in his *Textbook of Dendrology* (1958), "... heights of 325 feet and diameter of 8 to 10 feet are not uncommon. The tallest known specimen in the United States stood near Mineral, Washington and was approximately 385 feet in height and 15 feet in diameter." This tree, which presumably inherits the record if the "Gary Fir" is disqualified, would have been only 32 feet or 7.6% shorter than the one considered fantastic by Mr. Carney. In a virile, genetically plastic species known for giantism like the Douglas fir, I would not consider this a fantastic degree of variation. My principal reason for taking issue with Mr. Carney, however, is the photograph I mentioned seeing above. This photograph, which is not the one discussed in your article, would appear to offer tangible evidence that a tree tall enough to be the world's record was indeed cut on the North Shore of Burrard Inlet, whether or not it is the same tree at back of the Gary Fir legend. As I say I viewed this picture in the old Vancouver Museum at Main and Hastings one day in 1920 while visiting with my father, who was very interested in such things. It was, as I recall, about five inches by ten inches with typed caption and was prominently displayed. Along and in front of the butt was a scattering of people standing but no ladder as in the discredited picture of the redwood. I remember it being pointed out to me that one individual was the then Vancouver mayor. There were other dignitaries too, of the city of that time. I also seem to remember that the tree was felled in or near Capilano. But what I do remember very clearly were the measurements of the tree: diameter 25 feet and height, not 417 feet, but 410 feet.

The Vancouver City Archives are now unable to find any record of this photograph. I am not entirely surprised considering that the museum remained in the very cramped Main and Hastings quarters until 1968 and much discarding of material must have occurred. Forty-eight years is a long time for a photo to last on display.

I might have been convinced to let my memory rest had I not come across an item in a book entitled *The World of Trees* by H. L. Edlin during a recent trip to England. I quote "In 1895 lumberjacks in the Capilano grove felled a Douglas fir which proved, after measurements on the ground certified by the mayor and sheriff, to have been the tallest tree known anywhere on earth! It scaled 417 feet (127 m.) and was 50 feet (15.2 m.) round." This information seemed to coincide quite nearly with my memory of the old photograph so I contacted Mr. Edlin at the Forest Research Station in Farnham, Surrey and he agreed to send me anything of use he could find among his references. Nothing has come of this yet, but it occurs to me that readers of "Notes and Queries" may be able either to throw some light on what has become of this old photograph or at least corroborate my own memory of having seen it. Either way we may be able to strengthen B.C.'s claim to having had the world's tallest tree in fact and not just in wishful fiction.

Dr. A. C. Carder, Victoria, B.C.

Support for Dr. Carder from Ernie Dalskog, Fanny Bay, B.C.

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Three cheers for Dr. A.C. Carder and his spunky defence of the Cary Fir legend in your last issue!

***Editor's note**: It is on the basis of the Cary Fir, a 417' x 25' Douglas Fir allegedly cut in Lynn Valley near the turn Of the century by one George Cary, that the record for the tallest tree ever cut is granted to British Columbia by the* **Guinness Book of World Records**. *Experts quoted by Tod Carney on page 143 of* **Raincoast Chronicles First Five** *claim the Cary Fir is "a nuisance legend invented by the people of B.C to appease the need for a world's record" and flatly state there is "not a shred of evidence any such tree ever existed," but Dr. Carder has challenged this claim on the basis of a photograph he remembers seeing in the Vancouver City Museum as a boy.*

I can't help Dr. Carder in his search for this missing photograph but I have some evidence of my own which leads me to believe Dr. Carder is right and the experts are wrong.

In the fall of 1930 I with two friends was taking out split cedar bolts on Grouse Mountain. During our daily travel back and forth we decided one day to go and see the reported giant fir stump located not far from Lynn Valley centre. We found the place and were amazed to see the stump, planed, polished, and with a railing built around for a dance floor. Steps had been made for getting up on it and a bandstand built along one side.

The stump had been cut down to about four feet above the ground and the three of us took careful measurement of its diameter. To the best of my recollection it measured 27 feet.

One of my partners, Bill Crabbe, has passed away, but I have reason to believe the other, Babe Nugent, is still alive and could verify the above facts.

Incidentally, I believe there were other fir trees in B.C. that reached heights in excess of 400 feet. It is a matter of record that one was taken out of Copper Canyon by MacMillan Export Co. in fairly recent years.

Ernie Dalskog, Fanny Bay, B.C.