

A Big-Tree Hunter's Dream Come True

FOUND AND SAVED: THE NATIONAL CHAMPION EASTERN WHITE PINE

by R. Bruce Allison *Photos by the author*

"I wonder how my great trees are coming on this summer?"

"Where are your great trees, Sir?" said the divinity student.

"Oh, all around about New England. I call all trees mine that I have put my wedding-ring on, and I have as many tree-wives as Brigham Young has human ones."

Our landlady's daughter asked me then what I meant by putting my wedding-ring on a tree.

"Why, measuring it with my 30-foot tape, my dear," said I. "I have worn a tape almost out on the rough barks of our old New England elms and other big trees."

Oliver Wendell Holmes conversing with fellow boarders in *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*

FOR THOSE OF US who "hunt" the big trees, it is thrill enough to locate and put our "wedding ring" around a national champion. But to help save one is honor enough for a lifetime.

The story of the saving of a national champion big tree began back in September 1982. My wife and I were on a whitewater canoe trip with another couple on the Brule River in northwest Wisconsin. Molly doesn't understand why our summer vacations always have to be in different, out-of-the-way places scattered across the northern forests of our home state. She'd rather vacation on the beach. But champion trees don't grow in the sand.

We had just passed through some rapids on the Brule and were entering an area of tranquil water near the beautiful and historical Cedar Island Estate. I carried a brochure on the river that said Cedar Island Estate served as the 1928 summer White House for Calvin Coolidge and that its rustic beauty and excellent trout fishing had attracted other famous visitors such as Herbert Hoover and Dwight Eisenhower. But the comment that held my attention appeared beside a little dot on the map of the river. It read: "World's

Largest White Pine." (The sign would have been more accurate had it read World's Largest *Eastern* White Pine;" the western white pine is generally much larger—*Ed.*)

In 1979, I authored a book on the champion trees of Wisconsin, so I knew that a big white pine was located here and that years ago it had stood as the national champion. But Wisconsin's rivalry with the state of Michigan over recording national champions had bounced the title back and forth across the border a couple of times since then (see sidebar on page 19). This particular tree, because of its remoteness, had not been measured in some years. I had often wondered if a re-measurement might return the national champion title to Wisconsin. I suggested to the canoe party that we pull over for a few minutes to allow me to take out my tape measure and go searching for the white pine.

At that moment I spotted a man walking across the old cedar foot

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Left: Molly Allison stands at the base of the giant white pine. The fallen leader, itself larger than most trees, left gaping wound in the champion

Right: Gregory Good positions himself to cut the dead leader out of the tree piece by piece, leaving the healthy portion of the tree to carry on for a few more years as the national champ





Above: Bruce Allison's vantage point gives him a chance to take a picture of his own boots along with a shot of Gregory Good making some final cuts

Right: successful completion of the task calls for a group photo. Left to right, standing, are Emmett, Harold, and Jody Swanson. Seated are R. Bruce Allison and Gregory Good





The prognosis for the patient looks good, according to this tree-care specialist who has just performed surgery

bridge which connected Cedar Island to the bank. I called to him for directions to the white pine. He just shook his head and said I couldn't leave the river, because the land on either side was private property. We paddled under the low, arching bridge, and I explained to him my special interest in measuring the tree. He knew about the tree, he told us. He had been caretaker on the estate for the past 15 years, and his father had been caretaker for 40 years before that. Many canoeists read about the "world's largest white pine" in the brochure and thoughtlessly trespassed across the estate and disturbed the fish-hatchery operation along the bank. When he tried to stop some of these people, they would come up with preposterous stories. Why should he believe me, he asked, when I told him I was author of the state big-tree

record book? And besides, he said, the tree was lost (!) last month.

I recoiled at that shocking news. Lost last month! I couldn't believe it. What an incredible stroke of bad luck. The intensity of my emotional response to this news showed me how obsessed I had become with my search for the big trees. Like Captain Ahab's continual combing of the seas in search of the white whale, my search for big trees had carried me to all corners of the state and to any forest that might conceal the giant which would assure me a place on the list of champion-tree nominators. The Brule white pine had been my best chance to wrap my wedding ring around what in my book was the biggest prize of all, the national champion eastern white pine.

Disappointed but not ready to give up, I asked the caretaker if I could at

(Turn to page 55)

The Champion Game



The former (maybe) national champ and its Wisconsin nominator, Chad McGrath

According to Kay Hartman, Director of AFA's National Register of Big Trees, the proper procedure for turning over the "champion" title to a contender includes the remeasuring of the current champ.

In this case, the current champ was Chad McGrath's discovery in Michigan's Porcupine Mountain State Park (see "Stalking the Big Tree: This Is It!" in the April 1982 issue of *AMERICAN FORESTS*). Unfortunately, remeasurements were not available. But Paul Thompson, coordinator of Michigan's Big Tree Program, has conceded the title back to Wisconsin for the Brule River tree rediscovered by R. Bruce Allison. Thompson says he *will* remeasure the Michigan white pine so that AFA's records can be brought up to date.

The pleasure of being listed as the champion's nominator will stay with the original nominator—W. E. Scott, who discovered the tree in 1962. The thrill of saving the tree, of course, stays with Bruce Allison. The eagles are just glad the whole thing is over.—*Rita Malone*

life and property. It was doomed to be cut down.

But, I thought to myself, what if that dead spar could be removed? The lean and weight of the tree would then be away from the buildings. If it fell it would probably land harmlessly in the woods.

Such a pruning operation seemed impossibly difficult. As owner of a tree service in Madison, I had been involved in countless limb removals, but never in my wildest fantasies did I ever imagine working on a tree that was four times the height of most urban trees. The first limb was higher than our tallest ladders. The dead limb, because of its closeness to the buildings, would have to be lowered piece by piece. I wasn't even sure I had ropes long enough to do the job.

But then I reminded myself this was a champion tree—a tree that had survived innumerable challenges as it lived longer and rose taller than all others of its kind. Wasn't this at least in part the message of the champion-tree program—to point out living examples of excellence as an inspiration for all to rise above the

average? I had walked into a challenging situation—that was all too obvious. But it was also an opportunity. In fact, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I had the knowledge and tools to save that tree. Did I have the courage and tenacity to overcome the obstacles?

I told Emmett that, in my opinion, the tree could be made safer and could be preserved by removing only the dead leader. Would he and the owners be willing to take that approach if my tree-care company provided the trained personnel and tools to get the job done?

Emmett practically kissed me. Deep in his heart he wanted nothing more than to save the tree. And the owner, I learned to my delight, was a gentleman who had a deep respect for the natural environment, a noted conservationist who had consistently made significant contributions to the preservation of natural resources. He had just, in fact, generously given up all development rights on his property along the Brule River. The river frontage would be preserved in its scenic, pristine condition for posterity under the auspices of the

Nature Conservancy.

My written proposal to save the tree received an immediate and enthusiastic response providing approval and funding.

In October I returned to the Brule with expert tree climber Gregory Good and groundsman Mark Eggleston. It is a six-hour drive from Madison. We arrived in late evening, intending to camp out and get an early start on the tree the following day. Emmett, however, offered us beds in one of the estate buildings, a spacious dormitory-dining hall built in the 1920s by skilled laborers brought in from Europe—cabinetmakers from Sweden and Italian masons. The long halls had inlaid maple floors, and each bedroom had its own hand-crafted marble sink.

The building had been closed for the winter; sheets covered the furniture and the windows were tightly shuttered. This gave it an eerie feel, but it was warmer and more comfortable than a tent.

Greg, Mark, and I were up before daybreak. We drove to the caretaker's house, where Emmett's wife Lois prepared a Paul Bunyan breakfast of flapjacks and fried eggs. We were at the fish hatchery by dawn, sizing up the job ahead of us. Emmett's brother Jody and his 77-year-old father Harold were on hand to watch and help if needed. As I walked up to the mammoth white pine and craned my neck to get a good look at the towering crown, I said under my breath, "We'll need all the help we can get."

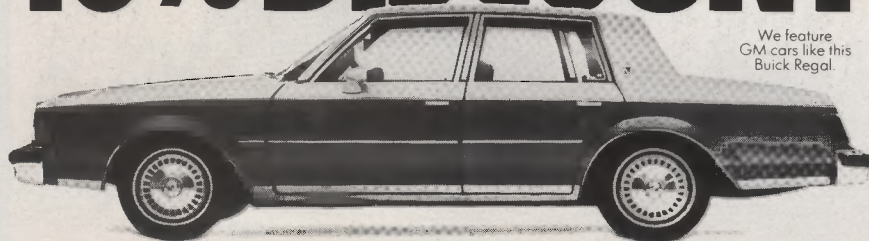
Fortunately, Emmett had a 40-foot extension ladder that reached the first crotch—barely. It would serve as the first leg of our assault on the big tree.

I went up the ladder first, fighting its unsteadiness as I worked my way to the wide "V" formed where the trunk split into leaders. I stationed myself there. The job of climbing to the top belonged to Greg.

He is an extraordinarily capable climber. His six-foot two-inch, 180-pound, muscular frame would give him the reach and strength to pull himself up this giant. Of Swiss descent, he had spent time with a logging operation in the Alps, where he learned to be cool and confident with a chainsaw, on the ground and high in the trees. From my perch I could see Greg warming his hands by rubbing them together. He made a last-minute joke that made the

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others laugh nervously.

Within a minute he was up the ladder and standing beside me. From there we tossed the end of his climbing rope over the nearest branch, 20 feet up. As he tightened the buckle on his leather safety harness, I checked the 120-foot length of rope one more time, letting it run through my fingers, feeling for the telltale tufts of a nick that could lead to a break and tragedy.

"Ready?" I said.

"Ready." Greg attached the large snap on the end of his rope to the metal D-rings on the front of his harness. It made the loud and decisive clicking sound of metal against metal.

I belayed Greg as he pulled himself up the live leader to the first limb. Securely on that limb, he used his belt line to tie himself to the tree while he pulled in his climbing rope. He tossed its end over the next limb 20 feet above, released his belt line, then used his climbing rope and the limb like a pulley to muscle himself up another 20 feet. He repeated this operation several times until he reached a strong branch about 20 feet from the top—140 feet above the ground.

My belaying responsibilities over, I climbed down and moved the ladder away from the tree. I watched as Greg, looking very small in the distant crown, swung on his rope like a

dangling spider from the live leader to the dead one. Using his belt line again, he secured himself to the leader. He had carried a second 150-foot length of half-inch rope into the tree. He uncoiled that rope and dropped an end down to where I stood. I attached a chainsaw to it, which he quickly pulled up.

From then on it was four hours of chainsaw buzzing, creaks of stressed rope, and thuds of falling logs. Greg used his powerful saw to slice 10-foot sections off the end of the leader. The chunks toppled down one after the other, burying themselves like unexploded bombs in the spongy forest soil.

By dinnertime Greg was back on the ground. In four hours he had taken down what the tree had taken 300 years to put up. But by doing so we saved 500 years of living growth.

As we recoiled the ropes and returned the saws to their cases, Emmett whistled from across the trout pools and pointed skyward. High overhead, an American bald eagle made a wide circle around the now-single-leader white pine. It remained in this orbit for several minutes, then with a rush of powerful wingbeats soared up and out of sight.

Emmett smiled. He knew the eagle would be back tomorrow to reclaim its favorite perch atop the world's largest eastern white pine. ■

Big Secret Trout (From page 36)

Standing on the dry bank in my moccasins, I calmly stripped out line and kept rolling it upstream and inshore—so as not to disturb my quarry—until I figured my fly was out perhaps 10 feet more than the distance between me and the steadily feeding trout. And that was plenty far. On each test cast the noble little gray hackle quickly appeared and rode beautifully. "God bless Peterson," I murmured. Then I began boldly to arc the cast out into the main river, gauging for distance, and then—suddenly—I drew in my breath and drew up my slack and rolled out the fatal business cast. *This was it.* The fly lit not 15 feet upstream from the top fish—right in the down whirl of the merry-go-round. The little gray hackle bobbed up, circled a trifle uncertainly, and then began slowly to float downstream

like a little major. The fish gods had smiled. Exultant, I mentally reordered three dozen precious little gray hackles. Twelve feet, 10 feet, eight . . . holding my breath, I also offered up a tiny prayer to the roll cast. "*Slp, slp . . .*" The countdown continued—five feet, two feet, one foot, "*slp*"—and he was on.

Like many big browns, this one made one gorgeous dripping leap and bore down in a power dive, way deep, dogging this way and that like a bulldog shaking a terrier. Keeping light pressure, I coaxed rather than forced him out of the merry-go-round. Once out I let him conduct the little gray hackle on a subterranean tour and then—and then—I saw and heard his companion resume his greedy rise, "*Slp, slp.*" That nearly unstrung me, as though one's fishing companion had yawned and

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