

The kindest cut: Wisconsin's world champion white pine . . .

R. Bruce Allison, Madison arborist



Tree expert Gregory Good begins his climb to the top of the champion, tools dangling.

John Muir when expressing his affinity for nature would love to say, "We all travel the Milky Way together—men and trees."

Some men are bigger than others and some trees are much bigger than others. This one was in danger.

■ The biggest tree I ever met was the champion white pine on the Brule River. When I first saw it in September of 1982, it was 160 feet tall, more than 18 and one-half feet in circumference and had an average crown spread of 55 feet. It was a champion tree, the biggest white pine in the world, but it was a champion in trouble. After five hundred years of lifting wood upward, some of that tree was starting to fall back down.

In the condition that I found it, the tree posed an unacceptable threat to a fish hatchery building nearby and to those who worked there. It was doomed to be cut down—unless someone climbed the tree and pruned out the dead wood—a prospect that seemed impossibly difficult.

As owner of a tree service in Madison, I have 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. I wasn't even sure we had ropes long enough to do the job. Dead limbs would have to be lowered piece by piece, because of the nearby building.

But then, I reminded myself, this tree is a champion that has survived innumerable challenges, living longer and rising taller than all others of its kind. Wasn't the message of the champion tree program, at least in part, to laud such living examples of excellence as an inspiration for all to rise above the average?

That it was a demanding situation was all too obvious, but it was also an opportunity. In fact, a once in a lifetime opportunity. As a professional arborist, I had the expertise and tools to try and save that tree. Did I have the courage and tenacity to overcome the obstacles? I contracted with the landowner and

caretaker (they also wanted to save the tree) to return in autumn and do what I could.

In October, I returned with expert tree climber Gregory Good and groundsman Mark Eggleson. We arrived on site about daybreak. As I walked up to the mammoth white pine, craning my neck to get a good look at the towering crown, I quietly said to myself, "Now is the time, Allison. . ." This is a photographic chronicle of what happened. ■

In Memoriam: Death of a Champion

It was in 1983 that Bruce Allison and his crew worked to save Wisconsin's magnificent champion white pine. But despite the effort, the ravages of time and old age finally won out. This winter the tree was reported completely dead.

It now stands as a stark reminder of the inevitable. The eventual fate of its giant skeleton is still undecided, but its loss reminds us of one common law of nature: every living thing has its time, a beginning and an end. While the big white pine lived, we were able to recognize it as a national champion and marvel at its majesty, history and mystery. Now another tree, located in Michigan, replaces it as the national record holder. And another replaces it in Wisconsin too. Once again the MacArthur Pine in Forest County reigns as a state record. Ironically, it was the previous champion before the Douglas County tree was registered.



Upper left: The 160 foot high white pine dwarfs arborist R. Bruce Allison as he ascends on a conventional-sized ladder.

Upper right: Secured with ropes, Good saws branches from the top to make room for later cuts.



Balanced between the forks, Good saws off a 10-foot chunk.



Within four hours, the attempted rescue was nearly finished. The fish hatchery below was no longer threatened.

Photos by Mark Eggleson