

West Virginia's Big Trees: Setting the Record Straight

Melissa Thomas-Van Gundy and Robert Whetsell

People love big trees, people love to find big trees, and people love to find big trees in the place they call home. Having been suspicious for years, my coauthor and historian Rob Whetsell, approached me with a species identification challenge. There are several photographs of giant trees used by many people to illustrate the past forests of West Virginia, specifically, these photographs are claimed to be of a giant white oak (*Quercus alba*) in Tucker County, West Virginia. Rob was sure these were of a species not found in West Virginia... and he was right.

A pair of photographs found in *Tumult on the Mountains* (Clarkson 1964) was the original source of our curiosity (Figures 1 and 2). After searching the Internet with a phrase something like “historic logging photograph two boys in an undercut,” the image shown in Figure 1 showed up on a commercial image website. We contacted the owner of the site and asked about the original sources of these images, explaining that the image was described as a logging scene in West Virginia. The owner of the commercial site gave us the source of the photos as Humboldt County, CA. Further Internet searching determined that the original negatives and glass plates for these images are located in the Humboldt State University (HSU) archives (Figures 3 and 4); we also found an alternate view of the tree in Figure 1 in the archives (Figure 5). Written on that photograph is “Room For More In the Undercut Of This 16 ft. Humboldt Company Redwood, Keir, Fortuna, CA” which made us certain that the other photographs are not of oaks from West Virginia.

The HSU collection lists a photographic print in the Humboldt County Photos Collection of their archives titled “Two men and two children posed in an undercut” (Figure 3). The tree is most likely a coastal redwood (*Sequoia sempervirens*) based on location, bark thickness, and the color of the heartwood especially in contrast to the sapwood layer. Finding the photograph showing more of the large tree with two of the same men and boys as shown in other photographs clearly shows that the trees in these photographs are not from the eastern United States.

Another photo used to illustrate the early forests of West Virginia, featuring men standing on three sections of logs in a forest setting (Figure 2), was also identified in the HSU archives under two different collections with multiple images and varying poses.



Figure 1. *Tumult on the Mountains* (Clarkson 1964) Figure 10. Clarkson's Figure 10 caption reads: “The King of the forest,” a huge white oak with a notch for felling. Near Lead Mine, Tucker County (1913). The men shown here are Howard and Obie Bohon of St. George, Tucker County. Courtesy Ruth M. Barrho.” Image used with permission of Roy Clarkson.



Figure 2. *Tumult on the Mountains* (Clarkson 1964), Figure 11. Clarkson's Figure 11 caption reads: “This white oak was probably the largest tree cut by lumbermen in West Virginia. The log on the left is marked “13 ft. diameter, 16 ft. from the base, John Vance.” The next log is marked “10 ft. diameter, 31 ft. from the base.” Cut by Mangold, Straub, and Carlston (1913), near Lead Mine, Tucker County. Courtesy Ruth M. Barrho.” Image used with permission of Roy Clarkson.

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Affiliations: Melissa Thomas-Van Gundy (mthomasvangundy@fs.fed.us), USDA Forest Service, Northern Research Station, Parsons, WV. Robert Whetsell (rwhetsell@fs.fed.us), USDA Forest Service, Monongahela National Forest, Elkins, WV.

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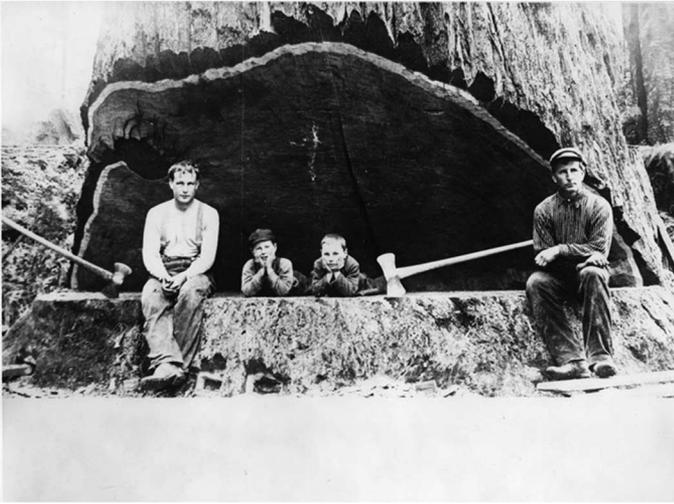


Figure 3. Photograph in HSU Library titled “Two men and two children posed in an undercut,” Walter Keir, photographer, photo ID #1999.07.3470, Palmquist Collection, HSU Library. Image used with permission of Humboldt State University, Arcata, CA.



Figure 4. Photograph in HSU Library titled “Workers posing on top of two sections of redwood logs in the forest,” photographer listed as Ericson, photo ID #2003.01.3408, Palmquist Collection, HSU Library. Image used with permission of Humboldt State University, Arcata, CA.

The original glass plate negative of the image used by Clarkson was taken by famed California photographer A.W. Ericson and is housed in the HSU archives in the Ericson Collection (Figure 4).¹ A second print of the same image, housed in the Palmquist Collection (photo ID #2003.01.3408), is also marked “A.W. Ericson” and has the same text seen in Clarkson’s book, which reads: “13 ft. diameter, 16 ft. from the base, John Vance” on one log and “10 ft. diameter, 31 ft. from the base” on another log.² The John Vance referenced was the owner of the California-based lumber company where this photograph originated and is well documented in California’s Humboldt County logging history.

As we looked into publishing our findings, we realized that we weren’t the first to be suspicious of the images or to have found the originals. A West Virginia forester found the photograph of the sectioned tree used in *Tumult* in a book on logging California’s redwood forests (Grafton 2005). Also, members of the Eastern Native Tree Society have been questioning the origin of the Lead Mine Oak images and the need for verified photographs of the tree for years.³ However, as far as we could find, no one had made the connection between the copy of the photograph of the two loggers and boys in the undercut (Figure 1) with the image in the HSU archives showing

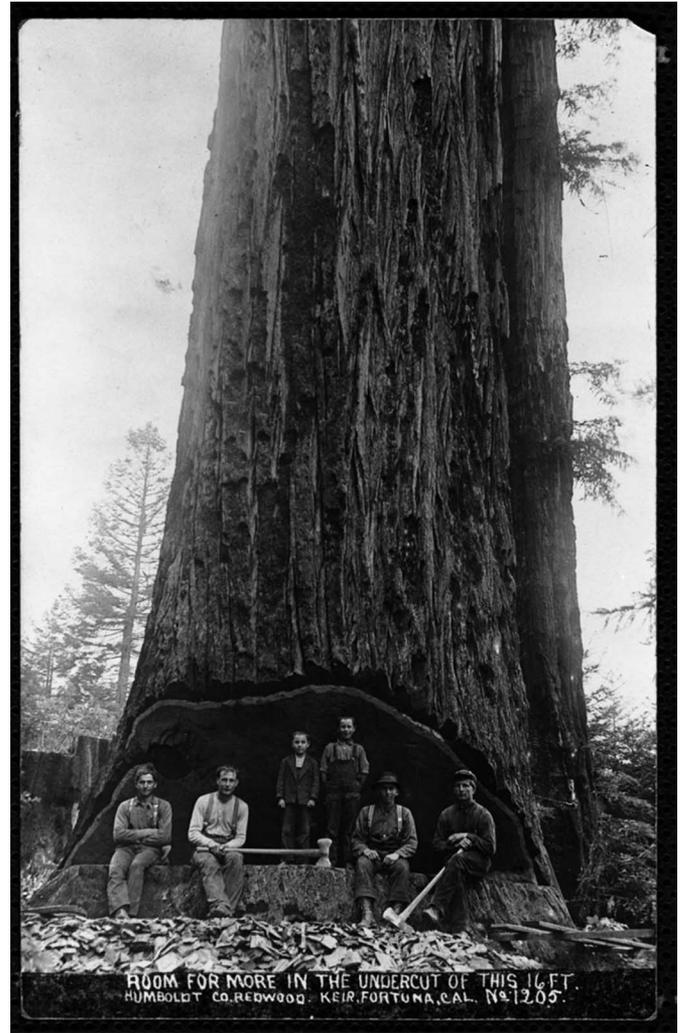


Figure 5. Photograph in HSU Library titled “Room for More in the Undercut of this 16 ft. Humboldt Company Redwood,” photographer Walter Keir, photo ID #2003.01.2142, Palmquist Collection, HSU Library. Image used with permission of Humboldt State University, Arcata, CA.

more of the tree with species, location, and photographer written on the glass negative (Figure 5).

Our goal with this article is to set the record straight about the origins of these images and certainly not to discredit Clarkson’s excellent history of logging in West Virginia. We hope that the findings of this research will result in these images being correctly identified as having California origins and removed from West Virginia collections and websites that erroneously label them as West Virginia oak or American chestnut (*Castanea dentata*). Most important, it is hoped that this effort will place renewed emphasis on a better understanding of the native trees present in the old-growth forests of West Virginia—an ecosystem that did support big trees; just not these redwoods.

Endnotes

1. For information on the photographer A.W. Ericson, visit library.humboldt.edu/humco/holdings/EricsonNews.htm.
2. For information on the Palmquist Collection, visit library.humboldt.edu/humco/holdings/PalmquistAid.htm.
3. For more information, visit www.nativetreesociety.org/bigtree/great_eastern_trees.htm.

Literature Cited

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- GRAFTON, E. 2005. The “largest” white oak in West Virginia. Fact Sheet No. 57, West Virginia Forestry Association, Ripley, WV. 2 p.