

Redwoods Sawed and Saved: What Happened to the Redwoods of Humboldt County?¹

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Abstract

The early day logging of coast redwood in Humboldt County was destructive, dramatic, and dangerous. Giant old-growth redwoods were felled by pairs of “choppers” using double-bitted axes and long crosscut saws. Felling a single tree could take a week. After bucking, logs were initially moved by water to mills on the shores of Humboldt Bay. Logging railroads gradually took over part or all of log transport. In extreme situations, movement of logs required use of inclined railways and trestles built directly over streams. As late as the 1970s, loggers were subjected to a mortality rate of 1.25% per year, a startlingly high figure that meant a timber cutter who worked 40 years in the woods had a 50% chance of being killed.

Decades of unrestrained cutting eventually resulted in effective preservation efforts that saw the creation of several state redwood parks. Early efforts to preserve stands of redwoods resulted in small successes, such as the establishment of Eureka’s Sequoia Park. During the 1910s, pressure to protect the trees increased as the new Redwood Highway brought scenery loving tourists to the North Coast. In 1918 activists formed the Save-the-Redwoods League. Subsequent fundraising and land purchases resulted in the creation of Humboldt State Redwood Park, with the first acquisition, the Bolling Grove, dedicated in 1921. Meanwhile, cutting by the Pacific Lumber Company continued near the highway. Ultimately, significant tracts of old-growth forest, mostly west of the Eel River, were protected by inclusion in the park. Areas to the east, such as the drainages of Bridge Creek and Perrott Creek, fell to the logger’s ax. The race between sawing and saving was on, only reaching its climax in the 1960s and 1970s with the establishment and expansion of Redwood National Park.

Keywords: Redwood history, redwood cultural values

¹ A version of this paper was presented at the Coast Redwood Science Symposium, September 13-15, 2016, Eureka, California.

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