

The Press Democrat

Save the Redwoods League acquires oldest tree in Sonoma County



(1 of 8) One of the largest redwood trees in Sonoma County is part of a 730-acre old growth redwood tract north of Cazadero, May 9, 2018, acquired by Save the Redwoods League, which plans to open it as a public park in about three years. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat) 2018

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The oldest and widest redwood tree in Sonoma County — a long-held secret by a pioneer logging family — stands in a quiet 730-acre forest north of Cazadero just acquired by the Save the Redwoods League, which plans to open the property as a park in three years.

“This is the McApin tree in all its glory,” said Suzanne Moss, the league’s campaign director, resting one hand on a massive hump at the base of the tree that sprouted more than 1,000 years before Sir Francis Drake landed on the Northern California coast.

The titan, 1,640 years old and 19 feet in diameter — as wide as a two-lane country road — is “vibrant and alive,” the league said, despite a large fire scar running up its trunk. Townsend’s big-eared bats dwell inside the trunk hollowed out by fire and a pellet from a great horned owl lay at the tree’s base.

It's far from the tallest tree in the forest tract, which has more than 300 old-growth redwoods over 250 feet, but the 239-foot McApin tree is twice as old as any of the other giants.

In longevity, it beats the Col. Armstrong Tree at Armstrong Redwoods State Natural Reserve near Guerneville by about two centuries.

"There were many trees like this once upon a time in Sonoma County," said Todd McMahon, a forest management consultant to the league. "Now they're all inside buildings in San Francisco," he said, referring to the heavy use of county redwood in rebuilding after the 1906 earthquake and fire.

The San Francisco-based league, a nonprofit that has protected more than 200,000 acres of redwoods, closed a deal last week to acquire the forest, known as the McApin piece, from the Richardson family.

The group will pay \$9.6 million for the property and transfer the 868-acre coastal Stewarts Point Ranch to the family.



(5 of 8) A group of hikers including those with the Save the Redwoods League, hike in a portion of a 730-acre old growth redwood tract north of Cazadero, May 9, 2018, acquired by Save the Redwoods League, which plans to open it as a public park in about three years. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat) 2018

The 730-acre tract has been renamed the Harold Richardson Redwoods Reserve in honor of the family patriarch, who died in 2016 at age 96. Richardson made his living as a logger, but never touched the old-growth trees on the property his grandfather acquired in 1918.

“This opportunity does not come along very often,” said Catherine Elliott, the league’s senior manager of land protection. “Old-growth forests are treasures; there are not many of them left.”

Mountain lions, wild pigs, bears and deer roam the reserve, located off Tin Barn Road about 20 miles northwest of Cazadero and close to the Odiyan Buddhist Monastery and Retreat Center.

It’s also home to the northern spotted owl and marbled murrelet, both species in jeopardy, and Pacific giant salamander that grows up to a foot long.

There’s hardly any flat land, but there are trails wide enough for a four-seat, side-by-side vehicle to carry visitors through the meadows and into the forest of mostly redwoods and Douglas firs.

Haupt Creek, a tributary to the Wheatfield Fork of the Gualala River, flows across a corner of the property, which was the largest remaining old-growth forest in private ownership from the Oregon border to Big Sur, Elliott said.

The league is surveying its new possession to assess its features and plot where hiking trails will eventually be built.

Part of that effort involves placing nets in the hollowed tree trunks to catch bat guano, which is sent to a laboratory for DNA analysis to identify the various bat species in the forest. A league property on the Mendocino Coast was found to have eight species of the flying mammals.

The league also needs to determine an appropriate conservation strategy for the reserve. Harold Richardson and the Native Americans long before him selectively set fire to the landscape to burn off undergrowth and preserve the meadows.

“The forest wants to grow,” McMahan said. “We have to battle it back.” Redwoods have been growing on the land for at least a million years, experts say.

Dan Falk, a fifth-generation Richardson family member, said it was his great uncle Harold’s wish late in life to guarantee preservation of the old-growth redwoods.

Through inheritance and purchase, Harold Richardson amassed about 8,000 acres of woodlands that he logged sparingly, Falk said. “He only took as much as he needed from the land to live off it,” he said.

In the 1960s and ‘70s, Harold Richardson flew over the northwest Sonoma County forests, observing the clear-cutting practices around his holdings. “Too much greed,” Falk said, expressing his great uncle’s sentiments.

Harold Richardson considered the McApin piece, named after its previous owners, a “sacred place” and never cut an old-growth tree, Falk said.

He also kept the McApin tree a secret, showing it only to a few friends. The redwoods league was unaware of its presence before the deal began unfolding, Elliott said.

The Richardson family presence dates back to the 1870s, when Herbert Archer Richardson, known as H.A., arrived in the Stewarts Point area and founded an empire that included 50,000 acres of property, a railroad and ships to transport lumber to San Francisco. His holdings were divided up among subsequent generations of Richardsons, and the McApin piece ended up in Harold Richardson's hands.

Dan Falk manages Richardson Ranch LLC and operates a salvage sawmill, adjacent to the reserve, that mills otherwise unusable redwood logs into "ranch lumber" good for fencing and barn repairs, he said.

The reserve's location, biological abundance and high-quality redwood forest made it the league's "highest conservation priority" in the coast redwood range to protect from commercial logging, as well as development, fragmentation and stream sedimentation, the league said in a statement.

Located 90 minutes from Santa Rosa, a portion of the reserve will ultimately be open to the public, Elliott said. Meanwhile, people interested in a docent-led tour may call 415-820-5864.

Founded in 1918, the league has protected 200,000 acres of redwood forest, with an emphasis on old-growth trees, and helped create 66 redwood parks.

But the organization still operates with a sense of urgency because the world's tallest trees have taken a beating in modern times.

Coastal redwoods, a species that flourished throughout the Northern Hemisphere during the age of dinosaurs, are now found nowhere else on Earth but the California-Oregon coast.

There are only about 113,000 acres of old growth, representing about 5 percent of the original 2.2 million acres of tall trees on the land before the California gold rush.

In Sonoma County, where logging the redwood giants along the Russian River began in 1836, there are some 143,377 acres of coastal redwoods, including 9,037 acres of old growth, most located on private property.

"There's something really inspiring" about the towering trees, Elliott said. "These survivors are amazing."

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