

Requiem for the Senator

The mood of this year's Martin Luther King Jr holiday celebration turned somber early Monday morning as the demise of Florida's oldest citizen was announced. The Senator, Florida's "champion" baldcypress tree, became totally consumed by fire and collapsed.

Adjectives such as magnificent, grandiose, stalwart, or regal come to mind when describing the Senator. The tree stood over 100 feet tall, with a girth of over 35 feet. From its vantage point in Big Tree Park in Seminole County, the Senator bore witness to historical events that occurred over multiple centuries. Although the surrounding landscape significantly changed during its lifetime, the Senator's presence remained as a constant, a benchmark of Florida's natural environment when left undisturbed by human activity.

The Senator epitomized the reasons why the champion tree program exists. The program recognizes the largest trees of each species. The Senator was the "largest of the largest" Florida champion, towering over the biggest live oaks, hickories, and magnolias, as well as the ficus and seagrape of South Florida. You would have to look to the redwoods and sequoia of the Pacific Northwest to find trees that surpass this big baldcypress in grandeur.

Once a tree exceeds a certain size and age, the diversity of wildlife species it attracts and the number of micro-habitats it provides multiplies. Thick bark, large branch crotches, and hollow places become receptive sites for small plant communities to colonize, which in turn attracts various mammals and birds. The Senator provided significant wildlife habitat in this manner, while still maintaining sufficient vigor to thrive and withstand the natural elements.

People visit historic places, peruse old books, and study genealogy to give themselves a sense of history. They also visited Big Tree Park to see the Senator for the same reason. The historical significance of the Senator, plus the fact that they were viewing a live organism, drew particular attention to the tree. Its fissured bark and gnarly limbs also lent character and personality that resonated with people.

Those who preserved the Senator's legacy over the years deserve special mention. First, there is Senator Overstreet, the tree's namesake, who originally donated the park property in the 1920's. Then, there is the Seminole County Parks Department, who has provided viewing opportunities and information to the public. Also, there are the private arborists who have lent TLC to the Senator over the years. Kudos to everyone involved.

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