

Historical Series

SEQUOIA NATURE GUIDE SERVICE

GENERAL GRANT NATIONAL PARK

Creation of the Park

The full story of the creation of General Grant Park must be told in a later bulletin. Suffice now to say that but for the efforts of George W. Stewart, of Visalia, D. K. Zumwalt, of Tulare, and others, that glorious woodland and grove of mammoth trees would now be wasted by ax and fire, like most of its surroundings.

The park was created in 1890. Before and since that date the great primeval forest which surrounded the park has been in greater part logged off; so that today the four square miles of General Grant Park are an oasis of nature amid the destruction wrought by man. Congress created the park to preserve a grove of exceedingly large California Big Trees (*Sequoia gigantea*), many of which are of historical interest. The General Grant tree, the largest tree in the grove, was named in honor of the General while he was still in command of the armies of the United States in 1867. Therefore the name of this tree was given to the park when it was created twenty-three years later. The General Grant tree is 264 feet high and has a base diameter of 35 feet.

Remnant of a mighty forest.

The General Grant National Park contains the only large Sequoias that are left of the once mighty General Grant Grove. Before this grove felt the lumberman's ax, it spread over an area of over 2,000 acres and contained about 3,500 trees. The park takes in a notch of the east central portion of the original grove. Some think that the General Grant Grove and the Converse Basin Grove are one and the same grove. But after studying the situation for the past 37 years, I believe that, although the groves border one another closely, they are separate and distinct groves. The Converse Basin grove has been entirely milled off. This grove, when standing, spread over an area of some 5,000 acres and contained about 12,000 Sequoia trees. It was one of the finest primeval forests of America, practically as fine as the Giant Forest in the Sequoia National Park; but it has passed away now.

It was during the summer of 1867 that I first wandered in these two groves of Sequoias, privileged to view their magnificent splendor while the trees were still standing. At the time I was employed by the late Smith Constock, of Visalia, who was operating his sawmill at the Big Stump Basin, about one mile south of what is now the park. While there, I spent every Sunday in rambling through these unsullied forests of mighty giant trees and never tired looking at them. But all the while my mind was stricken with horror at the thought that all of these trees would soon be cut. For I had been informed that the lands containing both of the groves were in private holdings, and already lumbering had begun.

The Sequoia trees when standing in both the General Grant and Converse Basin Groves were truly wonderful, and ranked in size with those of the Giant Forest Grove in Sequoia National Park. The most noticeable difference was that the trees were more scattering and at no place was the stand so dense as in Giant Forest. Then, too, the reproduction of trees under the age of, say, 500 years seemed less than in the Giant Forest Grove.

Naming the General Grant Tree.

The General Grant Tree was named by Mrs. Lucretia P. Baker, of Visalia, Calif., who was a member of a party which camped near the tree in August, 1867. Information regarding the naming of this tree is best set forth in a letter from the General to Mrs. Baker, under date of October 4, 1867. The letter in question is now in the hands of Mr. Henry Ford, of Porterville, California, a son of Mrs. Baker. The following is the wording of the letter in full:

Headquarters,
Armies of the United States,
Washington, D. C.,
Oct. 4th, 1867.

My dear Madam:

Your favor of the 5th of September by express, accompanying a box containing branches, etc., from the largest tree in California, and no doubt in the world, which too partial friends have done me the honor to name after me, is at hand. Please accept my thanks for thus remembering me, and also for the kind expression of regard contained in your letter.

With great respect,

Your Obt. Svt.,

To:
Mrs. Lucretia P. Baker,
Visalia,
Tulare Co., Calif.

U. S. Grant,
General.

The Centennial Tree -- a Forest Massacre.

In checking up the early-day history of General Grant National Park, the Centennial Tree furnishes a chapter of historic importance. For it was from this gigantic tree that a large section was taken to exhibit at the Centennial Exposition held in Philadelphia, Pa., in 1876. Regarding the taking and handling of this enormous exhibit, Mr. Milton S. Decker, Chief Park Ranger, General Grant National Park, succeeded in obtaining a statement from two pioneers, early settlers of Tulare Co., a few days ago. Messrs. Hudson D. Barton, of Auckland, California, and Bartley Sterling Robinson, of Orosi, California, are the two informants. This is the statement that Mr. Decker obtained from these men on Feb. 24, 1925:

"The Centennial Tree originally stood about 150 feet northwest of the General Grant tree. It was felled in 1875, so that a Big Tree section might be shipped to the Centennial Exhibition at Philadelphia. Two brothers, William and Thomas Vivian, took the contract to ship two sixteen foot sections of the tree to Philadelphia. As this tree stood on Federal land, it is not known by what authority they destroyed it.

"The Vivians let the contract to fell the tree to John Tout and John Carrington. These two men took nine days to cut down the ancient monarch of the forest and were paid \$50 - fifty pieces of silver to kill and destroy a tree which was at least two thousand years old when Christ was born in Galilee.

"A man named Robinson was hired to keep the chips away from the tree while it was being cut down, and to do this he used a horse and sled.

"The whole party working on the tree lived in the hollow Sequoia log now known as the Fallen Monarch tree, which is located about 300 feet from the Centennial Stump. The Fallen Monarch has been so hollowed out by fire that a man can ride on horseback through its entire length of 125 feet; so it housed the work party with room to spare.

"A man named Campbell hauled the two sections of the tree by bull team by Sequoia Lake, Happy Gap and over the now abandoned Story Point Road by Logger Point. There remained, of course, a great portion of the tree on the ground, and two brothers, Thomas and William Clark, cut up a sixty foot section of the butt into posts.

"It is understood that the Vivian's contracted to get the sections of the Sequoia out and ship them to Philadelphia for \$3000, and that they lost money on the deal. Thomas Vivian made a trip to Philadelphia in connection with setting up the sections at the exhibition.

"Unfortunately, when those who massacred the Centennial Tree had done their work, they piled all the debris of chips, bark and foliage on the stump and set fire to the mass. Notwithstanding this treatment, the big stump is still one of the wonders of the world and, mutilated as it is, measures 38 feet 4 inches in diameter. Chief Ranger Decker states that the Centennial Tree was undoubtedly the tallest in the grove, and was over 300 feet in height."

Development of General Grant Park

Since its creation in 1890, the Federal Government has spent \$110,000 in the development of the park, the greater part of this having been spent in the last two or three years. The excellent roads constructed by Fresno and Tulare Counties to the park boundary have rendered the park so accessible that it has taxed the park officials to provide camping grounds, water and sanitation.

In 1923, however, a new water system was installed with a four inch main line and many laterals to campgrounds. A sewer line was also laid down and septic tank constructed, so that it is now possible to extend campgrounds and provide other facilities for the public. Many thousands of visitors annually visit the magnificent General Grant grove of Big Trees and camp out in the forests of pine and fir alongside verdant meadows.

For the 1925 season many additional improvements have been made, including two large comfort stations near the central meadow and headquarters; these contain also showers, hot and cold, for men and women. Water has been piped to the Big Tree grove and lunch tables and fireplaces provided.

General Grant Park is administered directly from the headquarters of both parks at Alder Creek in the Sequoia National Park, and is less distant from park headquarters than many outlying stations in the Yellowstone, Yosemite and other national parks are from their park headquarters.

Chief Ranger Milo S. Decker is in immediate charge at General Grant Park, and in the summer time has a force of four other rangers to assist in handling the large volume of travel. For the past two seasons Park Ranger Charlie Lee has been stationed at the park during the winter months, and has given assistance to those visiting the park to enjoy winter sports.

In a future bulletin of the historical series additional facts about the history and attractions of General Grant Park will be given.