

VANDALISM IN SOUTHERN UTAH'S PETRIFIED FOREST

By
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Too late I became alert to the import of the most noteworthy landmark in our locality. It was a petrified tree of mammoth dimensions lying beside the road on the way to our ranch.

Camera shots that we took of it served to link us with one of nature's masterpieces. The inclusion of one or more of us in the shots identified us more conclusively with this prized landmark--a tree partially hidden among lesser standing trees it would have dwarfed to insignificance had it been erect in its entirety.

We had not the knowledge to realize the significance of that grand tree, its relationship in a geologic past which dates back further in time than the mind can conceive. We had not the experience, either, to conclude that it could well have been the largest petrified tree in this country. And we did not know that the forest, of which it was a part, extended for many miles behind the hills along our route of travel.

Secure in the belief that our tree was indestructible, that it was utterly unsuseptible to vandalism, we laid our pictures aside, after briefly exhibiting them to friends--and forgot them. We could not foresee that they would, one day, become more precious than mere keepsakes; that they would bear the only recorded and visual proof of the tree's identity, its great

size and perfection, its very existence.

With the picture out of sight the tree, itself, was out of mind, until one day my husband revived new interest in it through a story that he had picked up during the hunting season.

His special hunting companion for several days had been the late Anthony W. Ivins who was one of the stalwarts--a man of great integrity--of the Dixie mission, as the colonization of Washington county, Utah was called. And this man told my husband that he had visited nearly every petrified forest in the country, including the state of Arizona and Mexico, and that our tree, near Jackson spring, was the largest one that he had ever seen.

I do not know whether any one ever attempted to measure it or not; it never occurred to me to do so. And, too, its under side was partially embedded in the earth. However, I had believed that five feet would be a close estimate of its diameter, but a neighboring rancher, the oldest in age as well as in residence in this locality, assured me recently that it was all of six feet through.

So great was Anthony W. Ivins' regard for this priceless natural work of art that he expressed a keen desire to have a piece of the fossil wood for a headstone at his burial place when he should have passed on. I was gratified to learn not long ago that his wish had been carried out; that a fossil wood headstone had been placed at his grave in Salt Lake City--hewn from smaller pieces from another locality. That, of course, had been my confident deduction--providing the stone had been placed; I could not conceive of a man of his aesthetic stature wanting

to despoil that one perfect specimen.

There were those, however, their conscientious scruples not so marked, who saw a simple way to obtain an everlasting building material and to exploit in this ruthless way one of the locality's wonders. Many of its broken parts went into, what proved to be, an unsuccessful miniature golf course.

My husband and I had been hearing rumors of this use of fossil wood, and we began to wonder about our big tree. We investigated; it was gone! or all except that part--the larger portion toward the smaller end--which lies safely buried beneath the soil of the ages.

I was stunned at this vandalism. *at the loss of an irreplaceable* I was filled with regret that some one--perhaps myself--had not seen fit to take the proper steps that would have led to safeguarding it against wanton destruction. But the mischief was done; no good could come of regrets or recriminations.

Without an adequate knowledge of geology, I had believed that our arid mountains had once given rise to a noble species of trees which had petrified where they grew an unknown number of aeons ago. My ego suffered a set-back when I learned that the original trees were not native to our locality. Belatedly, I determined to find out as much of the truth about them as possible.

One intriguing clue that I came across in my search was a beautiful piece of bone white fossil wood owned by a friend in St. George. It had been found somewhere between Jackson spring and the 91 highway, a scope of country about nine miles long. Searching for other specimens would be like hunting for the proverbial needle in the haystack. And I might never have

found any but for a fellow rancher who gave me two items of information.

For the first, he gave me the location of a forest of petrified wood, including white wood. The second seemed too unrealistic to be true: a fortune in uranium had been found in a tree in the petrified forest in Arizona--a story to set any one's pulses racing.

While waiting for a favorable time to hunt out the location of the white fossil wood, I went to Arthur Bruhn, geology teacher at the Dixie College in St. George, for a story on the fossil wood. Judging by the looks of samples of rocks I had picked up on each side of the big tree's location and from information obtained from a Dixie College student, who did his Master's thesis on the geology of this area, Mr. Bruhn offered me this information:

The fossil wood appears to have come from the Petrified Forest Member of the Chinle Formation, the same formation that bears the wood in the Petrified Forest Of Arizona and in the Valley of Fire in Nevada.

The wood is believed to have been carried into this area by streams during the Triassic period of the geologic past. The Triassic is the earliest of the periods of the Mesozoic era, known as the age of Dinosaurs. Dinosaur footprints from the same Chinle formation in Zion National Park in southern Utah have been secured by the Dixie College department. However, they are not in the Petrified Forest Member.

Petrified wood forms when carbonaceous material, of which the wood is originally formed, is replaced by silicious material, the same essential material that makes up sand and quartzite.

The Petrified Forest Member, aside from the wood it contains, is largely made up of bentonite, originally volcanic ash. The volcanoes from whence the ash came may have been as far away as California. The wood was originally carried in here over 160,000,000 years ago.

My husband and I took time out on a recent trip to St. George, to locate the white fossil wood that our neighbor had given directions for finding. We cut through a wide, smooth gap, thickly dotted with junipers, which divided in two a long rock-encrusted ridge just a short distance off the road. The land dropped abruptly just beyond the gap and a small waterway intersected the point of hillside at our right. At the bottom of this waterway or wash, we found the bone white wood.

After gathering a number of specimens of the white wood and locating innumerable beautiful pieces of dark wood to our left, we followed the watercourse to the top of the hill to our right. Scattered over the entire hillside, we found an abundance of the brown fossil wood. There were literally hundreds of large fragments, possibly a foot and a half or two feet across and several feet long--sections from larger trees, but no entire trees.

I have been told that at the end of the ridge or thereabouts a whole large tree, its limbs intact still, is to be found, but I have not yet verified this rumor.

At the top of the hill, we found several monuments such as are used in locating mining claims. Curiously, we removed the topmost rock and read the notices we found, being careful to replace them as we had found them. The names thereon were not familiar so are not important to us. What captured our instant

attention was that they were posted in the interest of uranium and tantalum, a fact we instantly connected with the Arizona petrified wood uranium story, and had we not known differently, would have connected with the disappearance of our own big tree.

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