

“That’s Some Tree!”

History from Horseback

I heard the story, but didn’t believe it. A giant sequoia tree grew in the Pine Valley Mountains above St. George, Utah, in southwestern Utah. As a natural-born skeptic, I dismissed the story as apocryphal and went on feeding my four-days-a-week riding habit.

I had visited the California and Oregon coasts and knew that redwoods and sequoias are coastal trees definitely not native to the Southwest. The Pine Valley Mountains are a desert range located just north of St. George and west of Zion National Park. Signal Peak towers 10,365 feet above the desert valley where I ride during the winter months. The mountains are part of the Pine Valley Wilderness which is known for its incredibly diverse plant life, but giant sequoias are not part of this natural ecosystem. Finding a coastal tree at the junction of three distinct ecological zones – the Mohave Desert, Great Basin, and Colorado Plateau – made no sense.



Pine Valley Mountains

If you come to ride, be prepared for steep, rocky trails with grand views. It was while riding one of these trails that I came face to bark with the mythical Pine Valley Mountains Giant Sequoia. You can actually drive to the tree in a high-clearance vehicle, but what’s the fun in that? On a good horse, you can take the circuitous and somewhat hazardous route that my Friday riding buddy, Jim, showed me recently. I’m not sure I would call Jim’s route a trail, but you have to understand he takes great delight in scaring the hell out of me. After seven or eight miles of crashing through the brush and hanging off some perilous drops, we arrived at the historic Browse Guard station that we could have driven to.



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This misplaced coastal giant, according to the Utah Division of Forestry, is 108 feet tall and 11.25 feet in circumference. Perched at over 6,000 feet altitude on the east slope of the Pine Valley Mountains, this magnificent sentinel watches over the valley below and the Kolob Canyons section of Zion National Park to the east. According to Brian, a retired Forest Service silviculturist who worked on the Dixie National Forest, the tree’s height varies because the top dies periodically and is replaced by new growth because of its modified environment. Brian told me that during the last ice age giant sequoias were native to the area, but not today.

How and when the tree was planted is an open question. The Utah Division of Forestry estimates its age at 83 years, but who actually planted it isn’t all that clear. As you may know, southwestern Utah still has a number of active polygamous communities living in the area. Fred, the retired Wilderness Ranger on the Pine Valley District, offered me an interesting theory. With all the people who told him their grandfather planted the tree, he speculates it might have been a polygamist. Brian, the silviculturist, believes the tree was planted by someone in the 1920’s or 1930’s who was trying to reintroduce giant sequoias all over the west. This may have been Walter Cottam, a University of Utah horticulturist, that the local paper, [The Spectrum](#), reported in 1986 as having planted the tree. The existing tree may be the only survivor of these efforts to reintroduce giant sequoias to the area. Another frequent explanation is that the tree was planted along with others in 1933 or 1934 by a Forest Service employee

working at a research station located by the Browse Guard Station. My wife's unsubstantiated theory is that Louis L'Amour planted the tree while manning a fire tower in the area and writing one of his western novels. I guess we will never know for sure.

More recent efforts to reintroduce giant sequoias to the arid southwest have been unsuccessful. Brian has some Forest Service records documenting a 1979 Sequoia Planting Study around the Vermillion Cliffs. He also described a 1992 Eagle Scout project "to provide friends for the existing tree." UPS delivered 100 trees – 50 giant sequoias, 25 cedars, and 25 jeffrey pines – to him from a California nursery and the Boy Scouts planted them in the area around the existing tree. Within four or five years, all the cedars and pines had died, but six to seven sequoias were still alive. Unfortunately, "the big fire" a few years later destroyed most of the trees around the guard station. The Forest Service made sure the big tree survived the fire, and the tree continues to thrive because of where it was planted. Brian told me the tree was placed in "a perfect little aquatic zone along the creek." He speculates that other sequoias might have survived within the vicinity of the guard station. I might have to take my horse and go look again this spring. Since I value my life, I will avoid what my riding buddy Jim calls a trail.

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