THE POINT

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Giant Live Oak Tree Found In Stage II

While making cuts into the dense maritime forest in Stage II last month, surveyors found what may be the largest live oak tree on Bald Head Island. Fred Spencer and Carl Spears of Brunswick Surveying in Holden Beach, N.C. and Rob Moul, an environmental contact with Timber & Land Management Consultants, Inc. of Wilmington, N.C., could not put their collective arms around the tree. They notified Bill Brooks, the Island Naturalist of the Bald Head Conservancy. Brooks measured the tree with a forester's diameter tape, 4½′ from the ground (the standard height to measure a tree). The tree measured 17½′ in circumference, or just over 5½′ in diameter. A big tree. As most of the live oak trees on the Island are no more than 3′ to 3½′ in diameter, calls were made, and other trees measured. The tree believed to be Southport's largest is 5′ in diameter. Those that regally stand guard at Orton Plantation measured between 3′ and 4′. However, in a clearing on the way into the gardens stands a magnificent live oak that measures 7″ larger across than ours—6′1″.

Dr. Paul Hosier, Professor of Biology at the University of North Carolina-Wilmington, told us that it was believed that at one time all the barrier islands along the coast of North Carolina were heavily forested. ''Very few forested islands are left now,'' he said, ''notably Bald Head Island.'' He added that two eminent biologists, B. W. Wells and I. V. Shunk studied the Island in detail in the 20's and 30's. ''They called it a 'salt spray climax forest', in other words, the vegetation was described as the climax vegetation or end product of the changes to the stable vegetation under the influence of salt spray.

''As a result of man and natural processes, those other forests are gone,'' Dr. Hosier continued. ''Man has logged the forests, storms have hit the islands with resulting oceanic overwashes, and the shoreline is constantly changing.''

It is known that Bald Head Island has been logged, and that there have been many severe storms in the last one-hundred years, particularly the Storm of 1899 and Hurricane Hazel in 1956. Why did this tree survive?

The answers, according to Dr. Hosier, could be many. ''Perhaps it was open-grown, a specimen tree, and never had to compete for sunlight and water, and its distance from the spinal dune ridge may have protected it from salt spray and storms.'' And, perhaps, as a specimen tree that may have been planted by an early settler, it was not taken for the shipbuilding industry (the naturally curved branches of live oaks were used for ship bows, ribs and knees).

Forester Bob Fish, an Island resident, visited the site and agreed with Dr. Hosier's beliefs. ''It's been naturally protected,'' he noted, ''and is growing in a hollow behind a hill. That may be why it's survived the storms.'' He added that the tree was open-grown, and that the surrounding trees were no competition for either sunlight or water. ''All the neighboring trees—cedars and water oaks—are only 6″ to 12″ in diameter, and probably no more than 20 to 40 years old. The area has probably been kept open by storms.'' Mr. Fish would like to think that the tree is more than 300 years old. ''But I've not had much experience with estimating the age of live oaks,'' he told us. ''Actual age can only be determined by boring through to the center for a core sample and then counting the rings. This tree has center rot, so the ring count would not be accurate.'' He added that only by comparison with other trees in the area in similar situations could an accurate age be determined.

Bob Fish

Bill Brooks, Island Naturalist, and the live oak tree found in Stage II found just off Federal Road. Those interested in viewing the tree should contact Mr. Brooks for detailed directions.

''The live oak's natural range is along the southern coastal regions because it has a high resistance to salt spray,'' Dr. Hosier explained. ''It appears to never lose its leaves, and so it's commonly called an evergreen.'' It does lose its leaves, mainly while new leaves are coming out in the spring. It's known as a decidious evergreen to botanists. But, like typical evergreens, it never appears to be bare.

Dr. Hosier spoke of the importance of our maritime forest and the role it plays in keeping Bald Head Island from natural destruction by the elements. ''The forest is a very complicated structure. The canopy assumes a defensive shape to deflect the damaging force of the salt spray and the wind.'' All the trees on our Island play a part in the Island's protection. And the strength of the live oak couldn't be more clearly illustrated than by that one single tree that has survived all these years.

That tree, now host to moss, ferns, poison ivy and Virginia creeper, is still healthy, even with the rot, and even with the loss of some of its branches. Perhaps it can live three hundred more years.