

# A Last Stand in Arkansas

by R. B. Figlar

In his book, 'A Natural History of Trees,' Donald Peattie closed a chapter on *Magnolia macrophylla* with this comment; "*Magnolia macrophylla* is probably rarer today (1948) than even in Michaux's time (1745)...When encountered, it symbolizes, more perhaps than any other tree, that lost and pre-Columbian America...that was seen in its days of innocent perfection by those lucky first explorers Bartram, Fraser and Michaux."

No doubt *M. macrophylla*'s numbers have been further reduced since these colorful words were written. E. L. Little's distribution map of this magnolia shows many small disjunct occurrences over eleven states. This wide range is deceptive because even in areas where it is known to occur, the species is found at scattered stations usually with few individuals. One of these scattered stations is represented by E.L. Little as a single "dot" in northeast (Clay County) Arkansas. Since this was by far the closest station to our home (at that time) in St. Louis, it seemed the logical place to start a search for wild *Magnolia macrophylla*.

The Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission sent us a report titled 'Bigleaf Magnolia Site - Clay County' which gave an account of the Commission's last visit to the site in April 1976. The report indicated that only two individual trees still existed, one 15 feet tall and another 3 feet tall. The site was described as being along a small creek on the northern reaches of Crowley's Ridge near Piggott, Arkansas. Crowley's Ridge is an

elevated strip of land which stretches from Cape Girardeau, Missouri, to Helena, Arkansas (see map).

This ridge is unique in the region because its very rich flora resembles that of the Appalachians farther east. Species such as *Ilex opaca*, *Fagus grandifolia*, and *Liriodendron tulipifera* are close to or at their western limits here. *Magnolia acuminata* occurs very sparingly on Crowley's Ridge, particularly in deep ravines and on lower north slopes in both Missouri and Arkansas.

After studying this report from the Arkansas Natural Heritage



*Skyward view of Clay County Magnolia macrophylla in December photo.*



Commission along with detailed maps of the region. I began my search for this remote stand of *Magnolia macrophylla* in Arkansas.

I arrived in Piggott, at about 2:30 p.m. on Saturday, December 1, 1979, and proceeded in the general direction of the *Magnolia macrophylla* location some 10 miles west on Crowley's Ridge. The road became rough, the last 8 miles being unpaved. Following my hunch as to the location of the site I turned up another road, then another which eventually dead-ended near a residence. A woman living there had never seen nor heard of the tree but was eager to help in my search. Recognizing some of the landmarks indicated by the report to be on the property, she agreed to show me the area (and took along a shotgun to protect us from "wild hogs" which were known to frequent the area!). We found some of these landmarks but no Bigleaf Magnolias. It was then late in the afternoon and after a half hour search I decided to call it a day. My

plan then was to get more information—check with Miss Inez Hartsoe, a local authority, and the owner, Mr. Eugene Allen—and start anew in the morning.

I found Miss Hartsoe's house in Piggott with no difficulty. Miss Hartsoe, a retired school teacher, is a local naturalist and is very knowledgeable of the area and its flora. She described the discovery and subsequent rediscovery of *M. macrophylla* at this site.

The magnolias were first reported in 1929 when a grade school student of Miss Hartsoe described the trees and their location to her. Displaying a large leaf from one of the trees, the youngster referred to it as a "Wahoo" tree (interestingly, Joe McDaniel tells me that *M. macrophylla* has been called "Wahoo" in some parts of Kentucky). That's about all the attention the big leaf trees got, and from 1929 to 1950 the real identity and location of the trees remained a secret.

In 1950 while doing graduate studies in botany at the University of Arkansas, Miss Hartsoe realized these big leaf trees near her home were actually *M. macrophylla*. After two unsuccessful attempts, a group of interested individuals from the university located the site and did indeed find a grove of 25 or 30 *M. macrophylla* trees which were doing quite well along a small stream on Crowley's Ridge some 10 miles west of Piggott and 8 1/2 miles south of the Missouri state line.

The news of the rediscovery spread rapidly. The local newspaper in Piggott published the sensational find and many of the smaller trees were removed by the local residents for transplanting into their own yards. The owners of the property (at that time) offered plants to friends and acquaintances. Ultimately this resulted in the near extirpation of *M.*



Miss Inez Hartsoe displays fallen leaves of *M. macrophylla* (over her shoulder, to left) on December 2, 1979. *macrophylla* in Arkansas.

Miss Hartsoe went on to express her fear that the magnolias might all be gone. We decided to go to the site the next day and see for ourselves.

Later that evening, I telephoned the owner of the property, Mr. Eugene Allen of Pollard, Arkansas, to inquire on the condition of the trees. He assured me that two trees still survived; one large one and a small 4 or 5 foot sapling--good news! Mr. Allen further indicated that the two trees were several hundred feet apart and were both growing along the small intermittent stream that flows through the property.

On Sunday morning, December 2, Miss Hartsoe and I began our expedition. We started our search to the north of the sand and gravel pits on the property. In a short time we located the small creek and began following it downstream. Along the route we observed the following plants:

*Phoradendron flavescens* (Mistletoe), *Quercus falcata* (Southern Red Oak), *Vaccinium arboreum* (Tree Sparkleberry), *Ilex decidua* (Possumhaw), *Acer rubrum* (Red Maple), *Ulmus alata* (Winged elm), and *Fagus grandifolia var. caroliniana* (Beech), along with tuliptree, sweetgum, black oak, white oak, and others common to Crowley's Ridge.

After about an hour and a half, we sighted a *M. macrophylla* leaf on the ground near a large fallen oak tree (10 feet from the creek). Within seconds we located the magnolia tree! It appeared to be in excellent condition and of straight and upright growth habit. It measured 8 inches in circumference at 4½ feet above ground level, and we estimated its height to be 20 feet. A small (4 foot) sucker type growth was apparently growing out of the base of the tree. Growing immediately next to the magnolia were *Aralia spinosa* and *Cornus florida*.

We were unable to locate the second magnolia probably because such a small tree could not deposit enough telltale fallen leaves in its vicinity for us to detect. Whatever the case, we'll assume that the second tree does exist and that the *M. macrophylla* stand consists of the two individual trees.

So there we have it, the last known survivors of Bigleaf Magnolia in Arkansas and the only "stand" within 150 miles. With only two surviving trees left, its obviously a very precarious situation for *M. macrophylla* here.

## Epilogue

Several months after this exploration I was able to contact Dr. Dwight Moore, emeritus professor of botany at the University of Arkansas and author of 'Trees of Arkansas.' Dr. Moore was among the group that "rediscovered" the *M. macrophylla* stand back in

1951. In April, 1952, Dr. Moore presented a paper to the Arkansas Academy of Science on 'The Rediscovery of the Bigleaf Magnolia in Arkansas.' In it he indicated that *M. macrophylla* was first reported in Arkansas in 1889 from three trees observed south of Forrest City (also on Crowley's Ridge); however, that stand had been unobserved since that time. Herbarium specimens from the Clay County site were first sent to the University of Arkansas in 1939. Dr. Moore further indicated that the search for the Clay County Magnolias was hindered by the death of the man who knew where the actual site was, and that a good stand was finally located in June 1951.

This "good stand" has been reduced to two known trees and as of this writing the site is still under private ownership and, therefore, remains unprotected. The author urges those who would like to see the site preserved to write to the Arkansas



*Photo of Bigleaf blossom from Clay County stand taken by Dr. Dwight Moore on May 27, 1952.*

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*Dr. Dwight Moore stands in front of one of the trees in possibly the first photo of rediscovered Clay County *M. macrophylla* trees, taken by Miss Inez Hartsoe.*