

Will the real champ please stand up?

by Harold Hopkins

As a junior news writer many years ago I was cautioned by older and wiser heads to be wary of using superlatives in a news story because better information will surely turn up that will require you to crawlfish; so when news sources or tipsters speak of the biggest, best, brightest, oldest, smartest, first, last, youngest and other "ests," I look for some way to describe a subject without making the claim that it's a oner. This means dropping "unique" and other frequently misapplied excesses from my vocabulary.

Even so, I want to lay a small claim that, if sufficiently circumscribed and qualified, may hold its ground against the oddsmakers. It concerns a new, or rather old, *Magnolia grandiflora* that the National Forestry Association calls the national champion (and, by extension, the world champion, *M. grandiflora* being the largest magnolia species) based on its height, width of crown, and girth of trunk.

In November 1986 I was visiting my sister in the tiny hamlet of Mize, in Smith County, Mississippi, where I spent the first 18 years of my life. Knowing I was more than ordinarily interested in magnolias, she showed me a photo and caption freshly published in the *Smith County Reformer*. The photo caption said that a timber cruising crew—a crew that looks through a given acreage of forest, spots all potentially merchantable timber trees and estimates the number of board feet in each—recently had encountered a large magnolia tree in the swamp near Hatchapaloo Creek.

I decided to look into the matter, appreciating that timber spotters, of all people, should recognize a large tree when they see one. Hatchapaloo Creek is a small fishable stream that empties into Ocahay Creek not more than 3 or 4 miles from Mize, as the crow flies. I had hunted and fished there as a boy, had even made my last hunt at that very spot right after World War II (and found that the chase no longer held any thrill for me); had dipped and drunk its clear waters out of an old felt hat to quench my thirst; and now and then had taken a skinny dip in its sparkling, secret pools.

The *Reformer* photo showed three men standing at the trunk of an obviously large *Magnolia grandiflora*. I would have known it was *M. grandiflora*, even had there been no picture, because I know that practically all Mississippians recognize only *M. grandiflora* as a magnolia. Of course, the good people of my home state have other colorful names for the five other species of magnolia that occur naturally in various parts of the state.

I took the clipping home to Mobile, where I lived at the time, and about the first of January 1987 telephoned Benton F. Atkinson, the forester in charge of the Mississippi State Forestry Commission office at Raleigh, the county seat of Smith County. He knew about the tree, and confirmed that an employee from State Forestry headquarters at Jackson had already visited the tree and had reported its measurements to the National Forestry Association.

The measurements: 122 feet in height, 63 feet 3 inches crown width, and 20 feet around the trunk at



chest height, the standard method of measurement used by the National Forest Association in its competition records kept for many years on the known "champions" of each tree species, native and non-native, in this country. The Smith County tree thus had already been designated a few weeks before as the champion *Magnolia grandiflora* of the United States, supplanting another monarch in, I think, North Carolina.

We set a date in mid-January to look at it, and Mr. Atkinson told me to bring boots, because it had been raining for days and the low ground of the Hatchapaloo swamp was saturated and full of runs and puddles. The timber cutters in the fall had already done their work of harvesting the larger trees in that part of the swamp before the winter rains set in. The only real tall trees remaining were the crooked and forked ones or those that were otherwise unsuitable for timber.

That, of course, was the reason the big magnolia hadn't fallen to the timberman's saw long ago: its trunk was hollow for about 20 feet up, and

the rest of the tree apparently wasn't worth cutting for timber. As we made our way through the woods, trying to avoid the deeper puddles, old stream beds now filled with rainwater, and the big tree tops left from fallen timber that obstructed our progress, we failed to find the big tree, even with its full, evergreen foliage now highly visible. Large numbers of smaller trees, even when defoliated by winter, can obstruct one's view of larger trees on this level terrain. So we went back to the parked truck and started again, this time sticking closer to the creek's left bank, and I was the one who finally spotted it several hundred feet away, towering majestically over its area of the swampy domain.

I suddenly remembered that in the middle 1930s, scarcely into my teens, I had been walking through these same parts with my shotgun, unsuccessfully looking for squirrels, when I came upon a large great horned owl standing awkwardly on the ground under a large tree. Was it under a beech, or a magnolia? It was the closest I'd ever been to one of

these magnificent creatures. The owl let me walk right up to it, flapping its large wings and peering at me defiantly. I thought about what to do. I didn't know then, and still don't whether this big predator was blinded by daylight or was injured in some way (I saw no blood or evidence of injury). I finally decided the owl was probably in no trouble and was just waiting for nightfall, and I left it there in charge of the tree and moved out of its kingdom to another part of the swamp to look for squirrels.

As we approached the big tree, I saw about 20 feet away another *M. grandiflora* that would normally have been considered a large tree if it had been in another part of the swamp. And even closer was an *Ilex opaca* that was growing sideways toward the upper trunk of the granddaddy magnolia. It reached up about two thirds the height of the magnolia, and thus, for this species, would have been considered large too but for the big magnolia that towered above it. We measured the magnolia around the trunk and verified it was 20 feet, but we had no instruments for checking the height and crown. Since this was in January, there were no flowers.

I took pictures, both Kodachrome transparencies and black and white. Later I lost the black and white roll before it was developed, so the photograph shown was originally a color slide. Some individuals, the timber crew or others, had decided to commemorate their visit and achieve fame of a kind by carving their initials deeply into the trunk. My attempt to thwart them by finding an angle to photograph the trunk without the initials was difficult.

The State Forestry Commission speculates that the big magnolia may be doomed. Its hollow trunk weakens it and its heavy foliage, summer and

winter, is no longer protected from winds because most of the other large trees nearby have been removed by recent timbering, making the magnolia more susceptible to the force of strong winds. I'd kind of like to go back there and see the big grandiflora in flower, even if they can't be reached. Anyone who contemplates visiting this big magnolia should get Mr. Atkinson's help to locate it, for it would be hard to find without a map and directions.

It certainly was a surprise to find that the nation's champion magnolia—at least until another one turns up—is growing only a few miles from where I sprouted and grew myself so many years ago.

Previous page: Benton Atkinson with champion Mississippi magnolia; following page top: flower of 'Bracken's Brown Beauty'; bottom: flower of 'Harold Poole'

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