

CULTURAL HISTORY

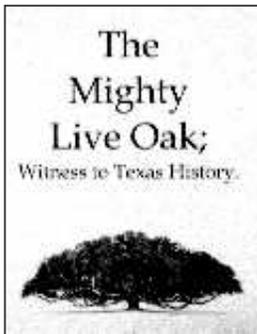
The Mighty Live Oak: Witness to Texas History

by Neal McLain

Brazoria County is noted for the magnificent live-oaks, which attain an immense size, often measuring from six to fifteen feet in circumference, and towering skyward fifty feet or more; their generous shade is grateful alike to man and beast, and their bountiful supply of acorns fatten the hogs who devour them with avidity. Live-oak lumber is valuable for railroad ties, bridge timbers, fence posts, and for building purposes, lasting as it does for nearly a century without decay. It is highly prized by shipbuilders, who can afford to pay a large price for it on account of its exceeding durability. In 1875, government contractors took 4,800 live-oak logs from Brazoria County at highly remunerative prices.

Texas, Her Resources and Capabilities.

South Western Immigration Company, Austin, 1881, 239.



The quotation above is one of many that you'll find at "The Mighty Live Oak: Witness to Texas History," a new exhibit recently opened at the Brazoria County Historical Museum in Angleton. Through historic photographs, modern photographs, and historic documents, this exhibit illustrates the significance of Live Oaks in Texas history, and highlights several individual trees of historic importance.

The Museum is located at 100 East Cedar Street, Angleton. The exhibit will remain open until the end of October, 2009.



Photo: Neal McLain

"The Mighty Live Oak" Exhibit. The large photo left of center is the San Bernard Oak, photographed by Dave Brandes

The Mighty Live Oak: Witness to Texas History

Here are some of the live oaks featured in the exhibit:

Orozimbo Oak

The Orozimbo Oak was located on Orozimbo Plantation, northeast of West Columbia. Dr. James A. F. Phelps, owner of the plantation, was one of the "Old Three Hundred" settlers who took up land in Stephen F. Austin's colony.

At the Battle of San Jacinto, Texas forces, under the command of General Sam Houston, defeated Mexican forces led by General Antonio López de Santa Anna. After the battle, Santa Anna and his officers were arrested, marched to Orozimbo, and held under guard there for several months. According to Texas Forest Service,

"Santa Anna and his officers, although closely guarded by about 20 men, enjoyed their only peace while imprisoned. In their leisure hours, they no doubt enjoyed the cool shade provided by the live oak tree."

Dr. Phelps died in 1847 and is believed to have been buried in the family cemetery near the oak. The tree was destroyed by fire in 1981. A stone monument dedicated to Dr. Phelps, his plantation, and the tree is all that remains today.

Source: Texas Forest Service. <http://tinyurl.com/Orozimbo>



Photo: Texas Forest Service

Bailey's Oak

James Briton ("Brit") Bailey, another member of Stephen F. Austin's "Old Three Hundred" colony, established a farming and ranching operation on the east bank of the Brazos River in 1818. After his death, Bailey was buried in a grove of trees (presumably, Live Oaks) near the plantation house. According to a popular rumor, Bailey's manservant, Uncle Bubba, placed a jug of whiskey in Bailey's coffin, but Mrs. Bailey removed it.

For years after his death, residents of Bailey's old home claimed they were visited at night by Bailey's ghost. Local residents occasionally noticed "periodic appearances of a fireball that rose from Bailey's grave." Uncle Bubba claimed that these phenomena were his old master, carrying a lantern in search of the jug of whiskey.

The legend of Bailey's ghost persists to this day. Residents of the area — now known as Bailey's Prairie — still claim to have seen him, still searching for the jug of whiskey,

The original Bailey's Oak died years ago, to be replaced by other oaks that have grown in its place. The tree shown in the photo is said to be watching over Bailey's unmarked grave.

Source: Texas Forest Service. <http://tinyurl.com/BaileysOak>

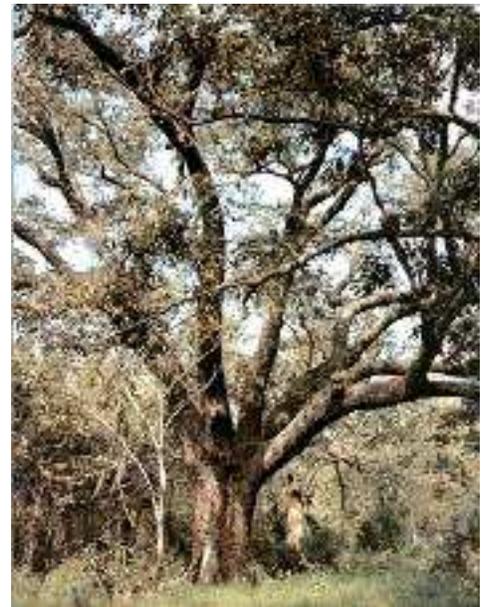


Photo: Texas Forest Service

The Mighty Live Oak: Witness to Texas History

Stephen F. Austin Death Site Oak

Stephen F. Austin died in 1836 at the home of George B. McKinstry, a few miles north of Columbia (now West Columbia), then the capital of the Republic of Texas. He was buried in Gulf Prairie Cemetery at Peach Point (now Jones Creek). He was reinterred in 1910 on the "Hill of Heroes" in the Texas State Cemetery in Austin.

During the Texas Centennial Year of 1936, a stone monument was placed under a large live oak at the old McKinstry homestead where Austin had died. In subsequent years, the property was all but abandoned. In 1994, the property was purchased by Billy F. Price, a Houston businessman and long-time Brazoria County resident. Under Price's direction, the site was cleaned and a flagpole was erected. A Texas flag now flies continuously at the site, and the old live oak continues to stand guard over the monument.

The site is open to the public. It is located on Oil Field Road, off State Highway 36 north of West Columbia.

Source: Local Legacies: *Steven F. Austin*. Originally submitted by Ron Paul. <http://tinyurl.com/AustinDeathSite>



Photo: Neal McLain

Masonic Oak

In the winter of 1834, Anson Jones, who was to become the first Grand Master of Texas Masonic lodges, and later the third president of the Republic of Texas, met with five other Masons to discuss the possibility of establishing a Masonic Lodge in Texas.

The meeting was held under this live oak in Brazoria. A petition was forwarded to the Grand Lodge of Louisiana and dispensation was granted for the formation of a Grand Lodge in Texas.

The Masonic Oak is located in Brazoria, on the south side of Pleasant Street about one block east of State Highway 36. The tree is visible from the street.

Source: Texas Forest Service. <http://tinyurl.com/MasonicOak>



Photo: Neal McLain

The Mighty Live Oak: Witness to Texas History

San Bernard Oak

We recognize this tree solely because of its size. No famous Texans are buried nearby, and no historic meetings took place under its branches.

The San Bernard Oak is registered by the Texas Forest Service as the Champion Live Oak — the largest Live Oak (*Quercus virginiana*) in Texas. This registration is based on the following measurements:

- Circumference: 386 inches
- Height: 67 feet
- Crown: 100 feet



Photo: Dave Brandes

Source: *Champion List for Species Native or Naturalized to Texas*. Texas Forest Service. <http://tinyurl.com/BigTreeRegistry>.

Michael Lange, a Wildlife Biologist with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, was the first person to identify the San Bernard Oak as the largest Live Oak in Texas, although he doesn't claim that he "discovered" it. As he explained in an e-mail:

I cannot claim to have discovered this tree first. After all, it is several hundred years old and local hunters and cattlemen knew it was there. I had been told by more than one person that "there's a big tree in those woods". However, when I came across it myself and saw how big it was, I thought it likely to be the champion. When I went back to find it, I had trouble finding it again. A party of about eight of us finally found it on a rainy winter day and I wrote an article about it for the TPL newsletter. I definitely don't claim to have found this tree; I did, however, recognize that it might be the champ, and I nominated the tree and had the Texas Forest Service come out and verify it.

By the way, some people say that there is a bigger tree in those same woods, but I have not found one that comes out with a bigger score using the Forest Service's formula.

Michael's article was published by the Trust for Public Land in the Spring 2003 issue of its newsletter, *Texas Newsletter*. It's available on-line at <http://tinyurl.com/TPL-SanBernardOak> (scroll down to "A Day on the Land").

The San Bernard Oak is located in the San Bernard National Wildlife Refuge. It is accessible by automobile through a locked gate on the north side of County Road 306. Persons wishing to visit the tree must register at the Refuge Headquarters during business hours, either in person or by telephone to 979-964-3639. After-hours visits are permitted, but must be arranged in advance with Refuge Headquarters staff. A map is available at <http://www.refugefriends.org/maps/BigTreeMap.gif>

The Brazoria County Historical Museum is located in the historic 1897 County Courthouse building at 100 East Cedar Street, Angleton TX 77515. "*The Mighty Live Oak: Witness to Texas History*" was executed by the Museum's curator, Michael Bailey. The exhibit will remain open to the public until the October 28, 2009.