

Estimated at 600 years old, giant cedar gutted by fire sometime in 1800s

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colonial soldiers from Fiji who stopped in Vancouver en route to the fighting in France sometime between 1914 and 1918. The Fijians, with their Afro hair and zig-zag-hemmed khaki kilts reminiscent of grass skirts, are a striking bunch. They posed with a white officer.

In the 1920s, signs urged those driving through Stanley Park to be sure to stop in front of the hollow tree for a photo. Photographers also posted signs on the tree itself.

One of the most recent photographs the City of Vancouver Archives has of people posing in the hollow tree dates from 1940—a woman and her son, snapped by Don Coultman of Stef-fens-Colmer Ltd.

Today, it's no longer possible to back a car or carriage into the hollow tree; the curb around it prevents that. But visitors still pose in front of it on foot, and the giant cedar remains one of Stanley Park's enduring landmarks.

ON AN OVERCAST Vancouver afternoon, parks board urban forester Bill Stephen took time out from a hectic day of cleaning up the aftermath of the Dec. 14-15, 2006 storm to meet the *Courier* at the hollow tree. Unlike many of Stanley Park's other trees—the park lost an estimated one in 10

trees to the storm—the hollow tree wasn't damaged.

One of the reasons it escaped unscathed is because it's no longer a living tree. Ever since the 1930s, when the parks board topped it, all that remains of the hollow tree is a dead stump. There are, however, three smaller hemlocks growing out of the hollow tree—trees that can be seen as saplings in a 1940 photo, and that are a good size today.

Estimated to be 600 years old, the hollow tree was gutted by fire long before Stanley Park was officially opened in 1888. Its interior remains blackened today. Back in the 1890s, when people first started snapping photos of it, the tree was still alive, and still retained its bark. It's shrunk since then; today its wood is soft and spongy.

Noting that cedars make up about 15 per cent of the trees in Stanley Park, Stephen marvels at how long they can last. Some of the dead cedars lying on the forest floor of the park fell a century or more ago, and have yet to disappear back into the soil.

“Cedars have lots of resins to protect them from rot. That's why they last so long,” he said. “There's no other tree around here that lasts as long as a cedar. They just keep soldiering on. They'll hang on until the last branch.”

That said, the hollow tree today needs a little help. Stephens pointed

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out the steel rods and cables that were installed several years ago to anchor it. That might seem to be going a little far to help preserve a stump, but it could have been worse. Stanley writes that, back in the 1910s, foresters recommended filling the interior of the hollow tree with concrete, in order to preserve it. In 1965, City of Vancouver Archivist Major J.S. Matthews proposed making a mold of the stump so that a model of it could be made out of tinted concrete.

The original stump, however, remains. As for the three hemlocks that are growing out of it, the jury's still out on whether they're contributing to the hollow tree's survival.

“We're asking ourselves whether those hemlocks are helping the stump [survive] or helping it to break apart,” said Stephen. “There's no doubt they're a nice aesthetic. Their roots are helping to knit it together, but the trees act as a wind sail; [when the wind moves them] it's like a lever trying to

rip [the hollow tree] apart.”

The three hemlocks were topped at a height of about 10 metres to reduce wind drag.

A number of the park's other trees have also been topped, most of them in the 1960s and '70s; the parks board was worried about a repeat of Hurricane Frieda, which cut a swath of destruction through the park in 1962.

Today, workers are still struggling to clear up the aftermath of the December storm. Trees lie toppled everywhere, their root balls exposed. Many of the trees that fell have been cut into lengths and lie at the side of the road, giving sections of the park the appearance of a logging site. The trails leading to the hollow tree are cordoned off, and the parking lot immediately adjacent to it is closed; sections of log block the entrances.

That doesn't stop the sightseers from coming, however. While the *Courier* was waiting for Stephen to arrive, Mark Schootman and Adri-

enne Johnson came by for a look at the hollow tree. Having heard about the destruction in the park, they drove in from Richmond to see, first-hand, if the trees they remembered from childhood visits to Stanley Park had survived. Naturally, they brought a camera, and posed in front of the hollow tree.

A few moments before, Alicia Wind and Anna Howes, two 25-year-old students from the University of Guelph, rode up on rented bicycles to snap pictures of themselves in front of the hollow tree.

“It's beautiful, even with all of the devastation,” said Wind. “I'm glad we came.”

“It's neat to see,” Howes agreed. “Although it's sad, too.”

Many leave their mark on the hollow tree. Both exterior and interior bear carved initials and inscriptions, and at least one heart enclosing the names of lovers. People have written on it in Chinese characters in ballpoint pen, or emblazoned their initials and names on its blackened interior in white and orange paint. Many record the year they visited.

Outside the tree, a parks board plaque provides both information and photo tips. Use a wide angle lens, it suggests. And a flash, to illuminate the hollow tree's interior.

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