

Uncle Oak: the Giant of Palomar Mountain

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It felt great to be back on Palomar Mountain. As I went about the business of unloading the bed of the truck and setting up camp, I could not help but marvel at the primordial beauty of the mountain and the relative solitude of the oak-studded forest. Thanksgiving Friday wound up being a perfect early winter afternoon, azure blue skies with a midday temperature approaching 18 C. (65 F.), warm for late November at an elevation of over 1500 m, even here in San Diego County.

Palomar Mountain itself began with a tectonic upheaval from the surrounding planes five million years ago as a single, 420 km² block of igneous rock. The high point of this fractured granite block now stands roughly 1900 m above sea level, near the site of the observatory which houses the 200-inch (508 cm) Hale telescope, at one time the largest, most powerful telescope on Earth.

My friend, Timothy Wolfe, and I had once again arranged to escape from the city for our annual Thanksgiving weekend adventure to eat leftover turkey, tell tall tales around the campfire, and visit our old friend, the ancient Palomar Mountain Canyon Live Oak (*Quercus chrysolepis* Liebm.) that we took the liberty of naming “Uncle Oak.” This campout had certainly evolved over the years, from a raucous party in the mid 1970s, with a dozen or so high-spirited friends (Dan Nutt, Mark Benner, Cousin Craig, Jenda, Debbie Lander, Debbie Miller, The Frenchman, et. al.) complete with guitars, dancing, card-playing, pilgrim hats, etc,



The author at upper left with John LeBoeuf and Guy Sternberg under Uncle Oak, 2005
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to a multi-family get-together with spouses and small children. A torrential rain event on Thanksgiving night, 1990 ended the family phase of this adventure. That night the force of the raindrops pounding against the roof of our tent created a continuous cold wet mist, and Debbie and I spent the entire night using our bodies as human shields for Jason and Joey, our 2 young boys, then age 11 months & 2 years 6 months. Now our Thanksgiving expedition has evolved into just a couple of old friends communing with nature.

I was first introduced to Uncle Oak in 1976. Tim and I had come to Palomar to do some trout fishing in Doane Pond. I don't recall the actual circumstances surrounding our decision to go for a hike in the forest, but regardless, we picked up a trail guide and ultimately found ourselves on French Valley Trail on our way to explore the old weir, constructed in the late 1800s. After hiking about a mile from the campground, we came around a corner and there it was! Standing majestically on its fractured granite promontory, this oak was indeed a monumental tree. Uncle Oak had managed to take root on top of the outcrop centuries earlier, sending its roots along a torturous journey through cracks in the rock and securing its foothold in the forest. It had long ago engulfed the 1.5 meter diameter, 1 meter high chunk of granite at its base. When I first saw the oak in 1976, it was also cradling a semi-toppled mature Ponderosa Pine in its massive branches, as if to offer the pine the opportunity to send its cones out into the forest for another year or two.

The oak tree was magnificent. I remember stopping to rest on the cool granite rocks around its base in the perfect shade of its canopy, above a forest floor carpeted with nothing but its oak leaves and acorns. Magical! I recall surveying all the possibilities for climbing this giant, but after several failed attempts came to conclusion that it was virtually un-climbable by mortal man without special



Guy Sternberg, John LeBeouf, and the author with Uncle Oak, 2005, as seen from the trail
photo©Guy Sternberg

climbing gear. Somehow, during that first encounter, the tree itself had become the destination from that time on.

Another memorable visit to the oak occurred the day of the Palomar Mountain monsoon. Tim, Joey and I were on the trail to visit Uncle Oak when a large fog bank, or at that elevation probably a cloud, rolled in. We each could barely see the person walking in front of us, but we wanted little Joey to find Uncle Oak so badly that we pressed on through the forest, at times with 2-year-old Joey riding on our shoulders. Then, at the very moment we came upon the tree, the clouds temporarily lifted revealing Uncle Oak standing majestically above us. After a proper visit, we hurriedly felt our way back along the misty trail only to be abused by the rain and cold as the full force of the Pacific storm rolled in that night.

Years later, Joey and Jason both spent sixth grade camp at the Palomar Outdoor School located in Doane Valley, only a ten-minute hike from the campground. Before they left San Diego, I gave them each detailed instructions on how to find Uncle Oak. I was very pleased to learn that each of them wound up leading an expedition of their sixth grade schoolmates to see the tree. The tree was becoming part of our lives.

In December of 2005, another pilgrimage to see Uncle Oak was responsible for re-uniting three old friends: Guy Sternberg, John LeBoeuf, and me. The three of us had headed west for the first time in 1972, and over the summers of 1972 and 1973 wound up traveling a total of 24,000 kilometers in Guy's 1971 Dodge Charger SE, visiting every national park west of the Mississippi River collecting and photographing tree specimens and amassing memories. Anyway, in 2005 Guy flew in from Illinois, John drove down from Fresno, and we all met up again for the first time in over 30 years. Besides the camping vacation, we spent one entire day hiking up French Valley and sizing up Uncle Oak. Good times, baby!

Back to the present. Tim and I spent Friday night on the mountain around a blazing campfire with music, copious amounts of food and drink, sharing stories of last year's encounter with a sasquatch (or someone dressed in a sasquatch costume?!?). Our friend Bobby McNeal saw it too! (Bobby didn't make this year's adventure...I wonder why?)

We also talked about the Poomacha Fire that in October of 2007 burned over 200 km² of the mountain, including over 400 hectares (1000 acres) in Palomar Mountain State Park. Some signs of that fire are still visible today, even around the campground itself. During our annual trip 2 years ago, in November 2008, we had hiked up French Valley trail as usual to visit the tree, but had grave concerns about Uncle Oak when we saw that the fire had burned right up French Valley. I had been so relieved when we came upon Uncle Oak standing tall and strong despite the previous year's inferno.

I awoke Thanksgiving Saturday morning to another glorious day on the mountain, and quickly made preparations for the hike to visit Uncle Oak. As I started out along the trail I noticed that whenever I came to an area burned out by the fire I found a meadow sprinkled with new knee-high seedling trees and shrubs. The young cedars, pines, and oaks had already begun spacing themselves out to anchor a new generation of forest.

Then I came around the final turn in the path, and to my horror, there was

Uncle Oak totally uprooted! Its fallen trunk created a massive ceiling-high oak arch over the trail. During its fall the oak had sheared the rock outcrop that had served as its foundation for all of these centuries. It was still holding the lion's share of that exposed granite in its craw. Virtually the entire root system of the tree was exposed and now totally compromised. I am still shocked and amazed by how such a tiny root system could support a tree of this stature.

Sadly, this tree ultimately was another victim of the wildfire that roared though the park in 2007. The entire twisted surface of the root system that had been in contact with the granite outcrop had been charred, and apparently damaged to the point where it could not resist the powerful winter storms of 2009.

What a magnificent specimen, and what a magnificent life it must have led. Even in death it commands the highest respect. I am quite certain that its massive body will continue to form a spectacular wooden arch over the French Valley Trail for the rest of my lifetime, and (barring another major fire) perhaps long after my passing.

Farewell old friend.

Editor's note: Joe Wasyl is an old friend and a new Oak Society member who has served since 1980 as a development engineer at the Center for Coastal Studies, and more recently, at the Marine Physical Laboratory at Scripps Institution of Oceanography, University of California San Diego. I was privileged to see Uncle Oak with Joe and another old friend, John LeBoeuf, in all its glory in 2005. I think all three of us presumed it had been there forever, and would still be there forever.



The fallen Uncle Oak arching over the trail, 2010

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