

From: David Wilkinson, *Gertrude's Oaks, book manuscript.*

*People hope and labor and despair,
Laughter they have and sorrow;
The trees their gods' composure wear
Tomorrow and tomorrow.*

*~John Vance Cheney
"The Trees"*

Chapter 19 WOODLAND'S KING OAKS

During Woodland's formative years, entire oak woodlands surrounding what is today the old part of Woodland were scraped of its trees and other vegetation for farming. But some extraordinary trees, like nature's cathedrals, are so awe inspiring, so utterly powerful, they manage to escape the proverbial woodpile of lesser oaks.

Two giants with a diameter of 7 feet and estimated to be 400 years old are the king trees of Woodland. One of these primordial tree gods commands the sky at 304 Casa Linda Drive. This tree is a stunning work of nature. Its specialness humbled the housing developer who instructed his civil engineer to route the street *around* instead of through it when Casa Linda Park was developed in the 1950s. Aside from the visionary work of engineer Mark Daniels to preserve as many oaks as possible in Beamer Park when he laid out that upscale enclave in 1913, moving a street in Woodland to preserve oaks was rare indeed.

An oak of this stature would normally be money in the bank for a pioneer farmer or housing developer considering the cordage of firewood it would produce for ready brokers. As an example, when Joe Davis was hired in 1926 to cut down a 150 year old oak near Main and Elm streets to clear the way for a new car dealership, he estimated at least 16 cords of wood could be taken from the fallen tree.¹ We would expect significantly more cordage from the Casa Linda oak.

The Casa Linda oak dwarfs most trees by its sheer size and weight. Based upon its 81.8 inch diameter, 94 foot height, and extremely dense hardwood, Rolf Frankenbach of the Woodland Tree Foundation, using published data, calculated the specimen weighs 66.3 metric tons or 146,191 pounds. This is the equivalent of stacking up 47 Toyota Prius cars and weighing them. A tree of this hugeness has been storing carbon for centuries, which it extracts in the form of CO₂ from Woodland's sky. Its woody biomass contains over 34,000 pounds of carbon, which means this single tree has absorbed in its lifetime 125,000 pounds of CO₂, a greenhouse gas. With proper care it might live another one hundred years.

¹ *Woodland Daily Democrat*. December 3, 1926.

As a younger but still very large tree 150 years ago, this remnant of Woodland's "first forest" served a utilitarian purpose: when the land was plowed around it, the oak sheltered animals, farm workers, and shaded farm structures.

This superlative tree is easy to spot on a 1937 aerial photo. It was part of the *Roselawn* farm and stock enterprise owned by Thomas and Virginia Gibson. Their handsome colonial revival farmhouse, set in a large lawn dotted with swaying Mexican fan palms (*Washingtonia robusta*), is a picture of civility. Located at 311 Gibson Road, there's a large oak on the eastern side of the house, likely planted or allowed to grow as a small wild tree at the time the house was built in 1905. The Casa Linda oak is spotted on the map behind the house along a dirt road connecting Gibson Road with West Street. It appears to be shading a structure. With the exception of another large tree nearby and smaller trees retained near the main farmhouse, the surrounding farmland, by this time, was devoid of trees.

Thomas Gibson's parents, William and Mary Gibson, pioneer settlers whose "home place" is located nearby at 512 Gibson Road (now a museum) sensibly built their Corinthian-columned, Greek Revival-style farmhouse, inspired by their Southern roots, in 1870 near enough to their king oak to provide natural "air conditioning" during the blistering summer months. They named their estate "Lone Oak."

In a 1929 interview with the *Daily Democrat* Robert "Bobby" Gibson, William and Mary's oldest son who lived at Lone Oak and farmed 173-acres, which remained after most of his parent's farmland was sold after their deaths, explained that when his parents settled the place in 1857 the large oak was a solitary specimen with few trees in this section of Yolo County. Bobby Gibson was born in 1860 in a small cabin just west of where the "mansion" would be built ten years later.

By 1929 the lush garden and tree-scape surrounding Lone Oak looked much like we see it today. Gone, however, are the date palms that were planted when Bobby and his siblings were kids, as is the large eucalyptus that Bobby personally planted. As an aging adult he grew tired of its leaf and bark shed. One of the two Mexican white cedars (*Cupressus lusitanica*) planted by Bobby's brothers in the front lawn still stand 160 years later. The older citrus trees have been there for over a century. The progeny of the Lone Oak have popped up on the estate. One of these valley oaks, which lies fifty yards west of the mansion in the front yard of a modern house in a subdivision split off of the Gibson holdings, is quite impressive.

Lone Oak's symmetry is pretty intact for a tree of its age, but a large scar from a huge limb that dropped in 1929 shortly before Bobby was interviewed is very visible. According to Bobby: "Before that limb came down you could allow two feet per person and at noon put 6,200 people in its shade—the whole population of Woodland."²

² Ibid. September 6, 1929.

Hyperbole? Perhaps, but Lone Oak was the scene of many grand parties under the protecting, motherly limbs of this famous tree.

In 1900 the iconic balcony of the brick house was draped in red, white, and blue bunting. It was Independence Day and the Gibsons were in a mood to celebrate their good fortune. They, like other hard-working pioneers, had achieved their slice of the California dream. Their patriotism and gratitude was manifest in smiles, laughter and handshakes as they greeted good friends to share in their bounty. Two hundred other hearty Woodland luminaries were invited to a festive BBQ dinner with music, speeches, toasts, and good cheer. 500 pounds of beef, mutton, and pork was roasted over a large pit to serve guests, who were treated to cake and ice cream for desert. Tables for all guests were set up under the heroic oak whose galaxy of lobed leaves stirred in the late afternoon breezes. ³

Today Lone Oak remains the centerpiece of the Yolo County Historical Museum's garden and cultural center, the active scene of weddings, lectures, art shows, historical tours, plant sales, and destination for students learning about California history. Woodland's king oak is well maintained by the county, and may live to be 500 years old. Regular tree maintenance by experienced arborists is essential for these old oaks. In order to reduce the chances of a huge limb dropping onto the house, arborists inspect the oak every few years for any signs of decay and water intrusion which can rot and weaken the limbs; excess weight should be pruned off of the main limbs to reduce stress and mitigate failure.

This immense tree is as tall as a ten story building and has an 83 inch diameter, which is slightly larger than the Casa Linda Oak. It weighs over 165,000 pounds, the equivalent of about 13 African bush elephants or 1,000 average-sized humans. An ecological workhorse, during its 400 year life it has absorbed 64.4 metric tons of CO₂ or the equivalent of CO₂ emissions from 7,247 gallons of burned gasoline. All this while producing the oxygen we breathe.

While the Gibson House oak is considered a living treasure to be preserved as long as possible, the fate of the Casa Linda oak is precarious. The community's decades-old quest to protect and preserve its dwindling stock of valley oak trees, balanced by the imperatives of public safety and economic development, was put to the test once again in October 2000.

When Casa Linda Park was laid out, the new road respected the tree. The problem was, a house was built literally under one of the huge limbs, instead of creating distance with a small pocket park with the oak as the centerpiece. Today, in the new Spring Lake residential neighborhoods, for example, the few remnant oaks exceeding 33 inches in diameter are protected under the city's current tree ordinance and kept in the landscape. Ample room is left around the tree's dripline (width of canopy) and this area

³ Ibid. July 5, 1900.

will remain dry during the summer. The new houses are spaced far enough away from these oaks to be unaffected by any wayward tree branches.

On a fall day in 2000 there was a sharp cracking sound and the Casa Linda oak, without much advance warning, shed one of its huge, weighty limbs that brutally tore through the roof of the house at 304 Casa Linda Drive, causing major damage. Luckily, no one was hurt. Fearing for his family's safety, owner Don Huff Jr. spoke before the Tree Commission and asked the city to remove the tree, albeit with conflicting emotions:

*We love the tree. We have been there 32 years and admire it every day. The tree is reaching the end (of its useful life). Whether that end will come immediately or not is a crapshoot. For the safety of all, it should be removed. And if you're going to recommend cabling it and monitoring it, I hope you use strong cables.*⁴

Tree advocates were passionate in their defense of the iconic tree, asking commissioners to forestall the death of the oak and advocate for its preservation in their recommendation to the city council. The tree had a major pedigree. According to assistant city manager, Phil Marler, the Casa Linda oak, with its classic stout trunk, mushroom shape, and gnarly spreading crown was the inspiration for the design of the City of Woodland's official flag, which proudly displays the oak as the centerpiece.

The potential demise of this emblematic specimen set off emotional fireworks and conflicting opinions on how much liability and risk is acceptable when the fate of an ancient tree that symbolizes Woodland's natural history and identity is at stake. Was there a middle ground that protected the tree and eased the fears of the neighborhood?

Tom Hall, a state biologist who lived near the tree, sided with the oak:

*The tree is one of the largest I have seen in my career. I regret the recent damage to Mr. Huff's house but I'd be more than willing to trade homes.*⁵

Arborist Miles Danforth, who had inspected and climbed many oaks while managing his local tree services company, estimated it would cost between \$5,000 - \$10,000 to have the huge tree removed, compared with \$2,000 - \$3,000 in pruning and cabling costs, followed by regular inspections and maintenance.

John Murphy, the chair of the Tree Commission, after listening to passionate and reasoned testimony stated:

⁴ *Davis Enterprise*, October 29, 2000.

⁵ *Ibid.*

I think the tree deserves a heroic effort and the city should put together a dream team to see to full implementation (of the recommendations for inspections and cabling of the tree).⁶

In their recommendation to the city council, the commission agreed with Murphy and voted 3-1 to save the tree.

A few days later while addressing the city council Murphy went even further in his defense of saving the tree: *“If this oak is not worth a heroic effort to save it then what is?”⁷*

In the end, the city council voted to accept the tree commission’s recommendation and preserve the tree. To allow the Huffs to sleep better at night, another massive tree limb pointing in the direction of their house was removed, altering the overall shape and symmetry of the tree.

Today, nearly two decades since that gut-wrenching decision to stay the removal of the town’s iconic oak, it stands proudly, a revered, albeit wounded, arboreal monarch. Long-lived and extraordinary tree specimens, which inspire awe among mere humans from one generation to the next, over the passage of time become more than mere landmarks: they transcend to the realm of the sacred.

Yet, some people don’t see it that way. In 2017 I nominated the Casa Linda oak to be designated a Woodland landmark. This honorary designation elicited grumbles from at least one Casa Linda Park resident, re-kindling old fears; the city put the nomination on hold. There is time. I have a feeling this ancient tree, too prominent and useful to be destroyed for agriculture and a mid-twentieth century subdivision, will outlive us all.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *Woodland Daily Democrat*, November 3, 2000.

