

At home in the West

Around 1815 a Bigleaf Maple seed helicoptered into the fertile flood plane of the Chemainus River on Vancouver Island. It grew quickly, nourished by the water and spawning salmon which also nourished members of the Halalt First Nation, the only local inhabitants at the time. Over two centuries it grew to be one of the oldest and largest trees of its kind in the world. Unlike stories of people that follow them along a journey, the story of a tree is that of a sentinel, patiently watching as history moves past. Our oneTree, in its special place witnessed many things within meters of its great roots; floods, building and launching of dugout canoes, Potlatches, settlement by the British, death by disease of 75% of the natives, construction of the E and N railway, the first Westholme post office, the Island Highway, barns, grazing cattle, children swinging and climbing and hunting Easter eggs, millions of spawning salmon, hundreds of nesting birds and many other things.

One of the humans this tree knew best was Captain Charles Edward Barkley of the British Royal Navy who built a fine house beside the tree in 1892. Whether the tree knew or not that the diary of Charles' grandmother Francis Barkley had been carefully stored in the house beside it, it must certainly have wondered about the sanity of humans when Captain Barkley, who was 80 years old in 1909, ran back into his burning house for the second time. Neither he nor the diary were ever seen again.

The diary's writer, Frances Hornby Trevor, was a 17-year-old minister's daughter when she met 27-year-old Charles William Barkley in September 1786. Within weeks they were married and had set sail for the New World on Barkley's ship the Imperial Eagle. They arrived in Nootka less than a decade after Captain Cook had discovered Vancouver Island. Trading for sea otter pelts as they went, they discovered Barkley Sound, the Strait of Juan De Fuca and Puget Sound. Twice, Francis saved them from destruction by the natives when she shook out her flowing red hair and was taken to be a goddess. They sailed to Kowloon Bay in China, sold their pelts, and took on a new cargo for Mauritius. There they discovered that Meares, their partner back in England, had sold them out to the East India Company who confiscated their ship, cargo, maps and logs, leaving them and their small children with nothing.

Eventually they found their way back to England to discover that Meares had used their maps and logs to claim that he, not the Barkleys, had discovered Barkley Sound and the Strait of Juan De Fuca. Amazingly, Frances kept a daily diary for the eight years it took her to become the first woman to circumnavigate the earth (and have seven children). Her diary helped prove that they had been the ones to make the voyage in the Imperial Eagle, and in doing so, restore the family's fortune and reputation. To her grandson in his eightieth year, it was worth risking his life to save it from his burning house near our maple tree.

What does a tree care about circumnavigating the world? A tree stands still while people run around beneath its limbs in a rush for adventure and fortune. How amusing humans must seem. We all come to our end, even the world's largest, centuries old, oneTree. Bigleaf Maple did not add a deterrent for

bacteria and insects as it turned its sapwood into heartwood, like its Red Cedar cousin would have. Like other maples, it protected itself from the outside by drowning out invaders with sap. Once breached, often from the ground through the root, or through a broken or cut off branch, the heartwood was irreparably vulnerable. Our oneTree was rotting from the top and bottom, dropping limbs and ready to split in half.

A proud tree, living to double the age of most of its species, it will be survived by the countless seeds it spawned. Its legacy continues through the work produced from its wood and memory by more than 70 artists and artisans exhibiting from November 15, 2019 to February 29, 2020 at the Robert Bateman Gallery of Nature in Victoria BC.