

The Champ

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Sam Houston Memorial Museum

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Way back in the day tree-huggers were object of scorn and derision, hippies and freaks, humanists gone feral, smelly organic-communal-living dropouts, who roamed the woods, dressed like John Muir and misquoting Thoreau, eating semi-poisonous berries and sifting cow patties for magic mushrooms, the better, evidently, to enjoy the pretty colors of the coming Apocalypse.

Nowadays though, in the midst of this crummy drought, this endless August when living large is an inch of rain and an ambient temperature below 95, we have all become tree-huggers, because, as Joni Mitchell observed, there is something in our nature that doesn't appreciate what we have till it's gone. And in our pretty little town, tree after tree after tree is gone. The humanist and the righteous weep to see the stands of pines where green is the exception and brown the rule, the oaks we grew up with (or planted) now gray and dead, where they stood for decades handsome and leafy and green.

Even if you don't make your living in the landscape, it's hard not to take this personally, and though this drought too shall pass, there's no knowing when, nor how many more trees will be lost until. The Sam Houston Memorial Museum grounds have taken a hit, but in the spirit of hope, we can offer a little green solace in the form of our county champion bald cypress, still standing, impervious for now to the worst of nature, happy beside the duck pond.

Any healthy cypress makes a lovely tree, but at the risk of jinxing with praise, the Champ is magnificent. Five feet above its sprawling network of roots and knees, its rich, brown, furrowed trunk measures 15'8" in circumference. Another ten feet above that, the trunk splits off neatly into two (either one of which would make a proud tree on its own), and then, further up, those split yet again. Now this splitting and re-splitting of trunks is not necessarily desirable in any tree, and a split trunk can be a tree's weak point. For all I know one of these splits may become the Champ's Achilles heel, but it's been growing great guns for about 115 years, it's too late to do anything about it now, and it gives the Champ a visually stunning, arching, graceful rounded crown, almost as wide as it is tall (80-90 ft.), a shape more like that of the stately willow oak that mirrors it across the pond. Yet it is distinctly cypress, and seeing its hanging clumps of bright green needles swing in the breeze on a sunny day is like witnessing the very act of photosynthesis, and not just its effect.

You don't get to be the Champ of anything without a bit of luck. As with real estate, so with trees - location, location, location. The Champ was planted (or planted itself) in a small piece of cypress heaven. Cypress like the wet ground, and the Champ stands in the wettest part of the park, what was once the drain-flow of Sam's spring and is now the overflow of the duck pond (into which the remnants of Sam's spring still trickle). Cypress also like to bask in the sun while they wet their feet, and a hundred years ago the park was not so heavily wooded as it is now and the Champ had room enough and time to take the rays. Luckiest of all for the Champ (and us) is that nobody cut it down. This may seem absurdly self-evident-*duh*- but the Champ was not always the huge and graceful specimen of tree it is now. The

Champ is, and we are- lucky that no one vandalized it as an adolescent, built or paved too close to it as a young adult. It's been through half a dozen hurricanes, countless lesser storms and been struck by lightning at least twice that we know of. It dates to near the great drought of the last of the 19th century, cruised through the drought of the 1950s, and, as of this writing, stands verdant and proud against our all too often cloudless sky.

The Champ is available to all on the Museum grounds, seven days a week, from dawn to dusk, free of charge, and this may be the coolest thing about it, the Champ does not discriminate. Chickens, ducks, squirrels, hawks, or humans, the Champ is there, bestowing its gifts of shade, strength, beauty and grace for any and all who seek it, especially its greatest blessing- as a matter of course, that ancient, mysterious symbiosis of man and plant- oxygen in, carbon dioxide out; carbon dioxide in, oxygen out. Come visit the Champ at your leisure, you don't have to hug it, but you may want to give it a little pat.