

# Rosa the Ponderosa

## Reading the journey of an old growth “mother” tree

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I must have walked by her hundreds of times taking our dogs for their (and my) daily walks. Sure, it was obvious she was stately, large and very old. Her 32” diameter stem (at five foot height) “plated” with almost seamless reddish bark would classify her as an old growth Ponderosa. But what distinguished her from the other old growth trees left behind by the loggers some 115 years ago was that from that five foot height to her spire-like top she was straight and true and would have made fine saw logs. The other “left behinds” were either miss shaped and curvy, no straight efficiently milled lumber there, or multi-stemmed and deformed, probably from being infected with dwarf mistletoe. This sort of “high value” logging was typical of that era. It was her first five feet that was the problem I figured. Oddly lumpy and a good 38” in diameter it gave her a unique presence that hinted at a good story...if I could crack the code. I started thinking of her as a resilient survivor and named her Rosa. Yeah I know, I know....anthropomorphizing a tree. But she’s a tough old bird so she deserved a name I figured.

From time to time as I passed by her I’d give it a bit of thought. The narrow gauge rail line the Santa Barbara Tie & Pole Company temporarily built around 1908, to transport the old growth timber to mill ties for the Panama canal project, was only a couple of hundred feet away. Why would they leave this beauty behind when they didn’t have to drag her far to the line?

On closer examination of one of the “lumps” near the base I noticed a 3” diameter end-grain round just barely protruding from the bark. It was clear that the tree had been trying to “heal” this anomaly for a very long time. I wondered if this wasn’t the original sapling stem that had been bent nearly sideways some three hundred or so years ago leaving a side branch to assume continuing the climb to the canopy becoming the new main stem in search of sunlight. What sort of near catastrophic event could have done this? A heavy, wet Spring snow or a neighboring old growth giant falling over on her might have done that...but the truth is I’ll never know for sure. What seems plausible is that this “accident” led to a strengthening growth of sap filled wood (pitch pine) around the mangled sapling stem to support the weight of the new, off-set, main stem and over the centuries this led to its bulbous, lumpy base.

It wasn’t until a recent stroll when I paused in front of “Rosa” pondering her lucky escape from the early sawyers when some odd, very old horizontal scarring on her bark fell into place in my subconscious. Her early life traumatic wounds had saved her! Why hadn’t I put two and two together



Figure 1: Off-set stem from early traumatic accident



before? Well, the bark had over 115 years to try and heal those scars and had done a pretty good job but with careful examination one could make out a horizontal scar at about waste height. Just the right height for a two man cross-cut saw to start making a wedge cut to direct the felling. I'm sure it didn't take long for that saw blade to get bogged down in that pitch saturated wood for the sawyers to give up. I can just see them looking up the stem and realizing that if they could make their cut at the five foot mark, they'd be out of that sticky sap and besides, the trunk is narrower there anyway...piece of cake! Unless, of course, you've ever tried your hand at a two man cross-cut saw and understood you'd need all your weight and strength pulling together to make it through a tree of this girth. At about neck height this task becomes much more difficult and I'm sure it didn't take long for those sawyers to give up on Rosa all together and decide to pursue easier game. This would explain those two parallel, horizontal old, nearly healed over scars at about the 30" and again at the 60" height.

You've heard the phrase "what doesn't kill you, makes you stronger"? For Rosa it was that early adversity and her odd looking healing response to it that saved her from the saw. But this wasn't all she had to overcome to still be standing after some 300 or maybe even 400 years of life. Some 50 years after the old growth trees were cut and the rail line removed the second growth trees were harvested. Why didn't she fall to the recently invented power chain saws? I'm guessing that when these later sawyers showed up with their trucks, her size and weight might have put her outside their



*Figure 2: Lower two-man crosscut saw scar*

ability to handle her. There were plenty of smaller trees way easier to cut, load and mill in the smaller local sawmills of the time.

But that's not all old Rosa had to overcome. Like most old growth trees she has evidence of a burn scar, just one of many buried in her growth rings I'm sure, at her base and at some point the top 20 feet or so of her spire died back, making her a living snag and prime real-estate for cavity nesting birds. Her large, partially rotted horizontal lower branches have numerous down facing small cavities pecked into them...the winter warming house for pygmy nuthatches. So she's a lively old matriarch surrounded by a grove of beautifully formed younger Ponderosa, I'm guessing in the 100-120 year old range. My last speculation is that these youngsters are her children. Why not...Rosa's grove!