



UI Extension Forestry Information Series II

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Giants Among the Big Trees

Yvonne C. Barkley

There are many impressive things on this big blue ball we call home, but few surpass the magnificence of a soaring, magnificent big tree. Called the superstars of their species, champion big trees have been recognized by the American Forests Champion Trees program since 1940. With more than 700 species in the Champion Trees National Register, these big trees are found in the fields, forests, rangelands and urban parks and yards of America. Idaho has participated in the Champion Trees program since the mid-1960s, with a shared mission of locating, measuring and recognizing the largest individual tree of each species.

Big tree hunters are people of all ages and walks of life who share a love of one of nature's finest accomplishments – a truly splendid big tree. In the five decades that the Big Tree Program has been active in Idaho, there have been a few big tree hunters that have stood out from the rest – true giants among the big trees.

Fredrick D. Johnson, Professor Emeritus, University of Idaho.

Born in Chicago, Illinois, Fred was schooled in the ways of the woods by his uncles during summers spent in Wisconsin - experiences that generated a life-long passion for outdoor adventure and exploration. A World War II veteran, Fred was a member of the 502nd Parachute Infantry regiment of the 101st Airborne Division – the famous "Screaming Eagles." Mustering out with a Bronze Star, Fred returned to Chicago where he met the love of his life – Virginia Stichcomb, known by all as Jinny. Married in 1948, Fred and Jinny headed west to Oregon State University, where Fred was awarded a Bachelor's of Science in botany. Next stop was Moscow and

the University of Idaho, where Fred was awarded a Master's of Science in Forestry in 1952. Having both fell in love with the rolling hills and abundant forests of northern Idaho, Fred and Jinny decided to stay in Moscow, and for the next 38 years Fred conducted research and taught at the University's College of Forestry.

As part of his duties at the UI College of Forestry, Fred acted as the first Idaho Big Tree Program Director. The program's archives hold many letters and hand-written notes from Fred to big tree nominators and owners. He was no slouch when it came to hunting the big ones himself, and the current Idaho Registry of Champion Trees still has Fred listed as the nominator of 16 state champion trees and co-nominator with his dear friend and colleague, Steve Brunsfeld, of an additional nine state champion trees. Fred passed away on August 9, 2014 and is still missed by everyone who knew him.



Dr. Fred Johnson measuring the current state champion *Purshia tridentata*. Taken by Steve Brunsfeld in 1985.

Photo courtesy of the Idaho Big Tree Program.

Steven J. Brunsfeld, Professor, University of Idaho.

Steve was born in 1953 and also grew up in the northern suburbs of Chicago, where he was always happiest when outdoors. After high school, Steve came west and enrolled at the University of Idaho, where he earned two Bachelors' of Sciences degrees, one in Forest Resources and the other in Botany. A Master's Degree in Botany from the University of Idaho was then added to his resume, soon to be followed by a Ph.D. in Botany from Washington State University. Steve became a Professor at the University of Idaho in 1990 and also served as the Director of the Idaho Forest, Wildlife and Range Experiment Station Research Herbarium.

During his undergraduate years, Steve met the love of his life, Pam, and they married and raised three children while living and playing in the forests and fields surrounding the Palouse. Steve was an accomplished scientist and musician and also an avid big tree hunter with his mentor and friend, Fred Johnson. Steve still has 12 nominated state champion trees to his name on the current Idaho Registry of Champion Trees. Steve passed away in 2006 after a heroic 11-year battle with cancer. He too is very greatly missed by everyone who had the pleasure of knowing him.



Dr. Steve Brunsfeld with the champion Pacific willow (*Salix lasiandra*) on the University of Idaho Campus near the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences. This tree has since died and been removed and no other has been nominated to take its place
Photo courtesy of the Idaho Big Tree Program.

Robert Michael (Mike) Bowman - Forester and Urban Forester.

Mike Bowman was a well-rounded individual who had a variety of interests, but maybe none greater than trees. Even as a small boy Mike knew that he wanted to be a forester. Born in 1935 in West Virginia, Mike went west for his University training and was awarded a Bachelor's of Science Degree from the University of Washington in 1959. During his time as an undergraduate, Mike trained as a smoke jumper at the North Cascades Smokejumper Base in Winthrop, Washington and jumped fires for five years out of several different bases in the West.

Following this, Mike served two years of duty in the U.S. Army as a battery commander in Ft. Niagara, N.Y. Once done serving his country, he started his career in forestry with the Bureau of Land Management in Alaska. He lived and worked in 19 different places during his forestry career, always working for either the BLM or the USDA Forest Service. Mike was instrumental in the development of the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, ID, as well as the National Fire Academy in Emmetsburg, MD. Mike's last assignment was for the Forest Service in Missoula, MT, as the Assistant Director of Fire Management. He retired in 1985, after a stellar career spanning almost 30 years.

Not one to sit around, Mike looked for something to do in his "retirement" and accepted a position



Mike Bowman with the current state champion flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*) in Lewiston, ID 1995.
Photo courtesy of the Idaho Big Tree Program.

with the City of Lewiston, ID, where he established their current Community Forestry Program. This is also when Mike became interested in big trees and quickly found many trees to nominate to the State and National program. Mike still has 15 nominated state champion trees to his name on the current Idaho Registry of Champion Trees.

These are three of many who have participated in the Idaho Big Tree Program over the past 50 plus years. There are several big tree hunters on the Idaho Registry who have nominated multiple state champion trees. The newest Idaho State Champion was awarded in 2016 to Aaron and Amanda Black for their red alder (*Alnus rubra*); the oldest state record we have was nominated to the state list in 1967 by Fred Johnson and Marvin Newell for their northwestern paper birch (*Betula papyifera* var. *subcordata*).

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of locating, measuring and recognizing the largest individual tree of each species.

Today, there are many tree species without current national champions. The National Champion Trees program currently has a list of species without champions. There are also many species on the Idaho Registry that are larger than current national champs. Some of these reigning state champs may or may not be alive; many were also measured too long ago to submit for national status.

Big tree hunters are people of all ages and walks of life who share a love of one of nature's finest accomplishments – a truly splendid big tree.

To learn more about how you can participate in the Idaho Big Tree program, go to the University of Idaho Extension Forestry website at: <http://www.uidaho.edu/extension/forestry/big-trees>



The state champion red alder (*Alnus rubra*) is located in the USDA FS Idaho Panhandle Forests in Bonner Co., ID.

Photo courtesy of the Idaho Big Tree Program

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