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The life and death of Virginia's largest tree



Media General News Service

“Big Mama,” the largest tree in Virginia, grew along the Nottoway River. It is shown in this June 2006 photo.

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Big Mama, an ancient bald cypress that reigned as Virginia's largest tree, has died after an unexpected illness.

The champ passed away quietly at her home at Cypress Bridge, a remote swamp in the Nottoway River 80 miles southeast of Richmond.

Big Mama spent most of her life engaged in anonymous volunteer work, such as removing carbon dioxide from the air and providing homes for birds and bugs.

But in her final three years, Big Mama attracted statewide attention for her great size and age. Big Mama was among about 100 leafy stars featured in the new book, "Remarkable Trees of Virginia."

Big Mama began her career as a seedling, long before Columbus set foot in the New World — and possibly during the time of Jesus Christ.

"That tree was probably between 1,500 and 2,000 years old," said Byron Carmean of Suffolk, a retired horticulture teacher who discovered Big Mama in fall 2005.

Others estimated the tree's age at 1,000 to 1,500 years, but no one knew for sure.

"You don't expect something that old to just die overnight, but that's pretty much what happened," Carmean said.

Friends who loved to visit Big Mama first noticed she was in poor health in fall 2007, when they saw her towering trunk oozing droplets of reddish sap.

"We sort of nervously joked, it looks like the tree's bleeding," said Tom Smith, director of Virginia's Natural Heritage Program, which works to protect the state's natural wonders. "We didn't know what it was, but we didn't think it was a good thing."

This past spring, when other cypresses were sporting new, needlelike leaves, Big Mama produced no sign of renewal.

"I thought, maybe she's just a little slow this year," Carmean said. "But there was more to it than that."

Big Mama was dead. The cause is not clear, but old trees, like old people, become less resistant to health threats. Carmean said boring insects may have caused the sap to ooze, hastening the tree's demise.

Winds had blown away Big Mama's top and most of her large limbs, but the tree had persevered through centuries of hurricanes, floods and droughts.

"It's a sad thing," said Smith. "It's so rare that we get to see and touch something that is alive and has been around for that period of time."

Big Mama was the matriarch of Cypress Bridge, a sort of lost forest — 40 acres of virgin wilderness so remote that no one even reported its existence until 2005.

More than 99 percent of these cypress-tupelo forests — named for the trees that dominate them — have been cut in the Southeast, experts say.

A swamp is a forest that stands in water. Cypress-tupelo forests, full of eerie shapes and shadows, are the classic swamps of horror movies and coffee-table books.

Cypress Bridge was full of monster trees, but the largest was Big Mama — 123 feet tall, with a massive base that flared out like bell bottoms. The base measured 12 1/2 feet wide, the size of some Fan District rooms.

State scientists, not the most easily impressed bunch, took to calling the tree Big Mama. "It was pretty spectacular," Smith said.

Big Mama was declared Virginia's largest tree in October 2005, supplanting an old tulip poplar in Bedford County.

The poplar later lost some limbs to pruning, so upon Big Mama's death the state's biggest-tree title went to a smaller cypress downriver on the Nottoway.

Virginia officials plan early next year to buy about 375 acres, including Cypress Bridge, from International Paper and turn the forest of giant trees into a nature preserve.

But cypress wood is remarkably durable. Even in death, Big Mama will probably impress children and adults for decades.

Nancy Ross Hugo of Ashland, co-author of "Remarkable Trees of Virginia," said: "I'll be long gone — my bones dust — before the base of that tree rots away."