

The Rhodes Bald Cypress

Kenosha County

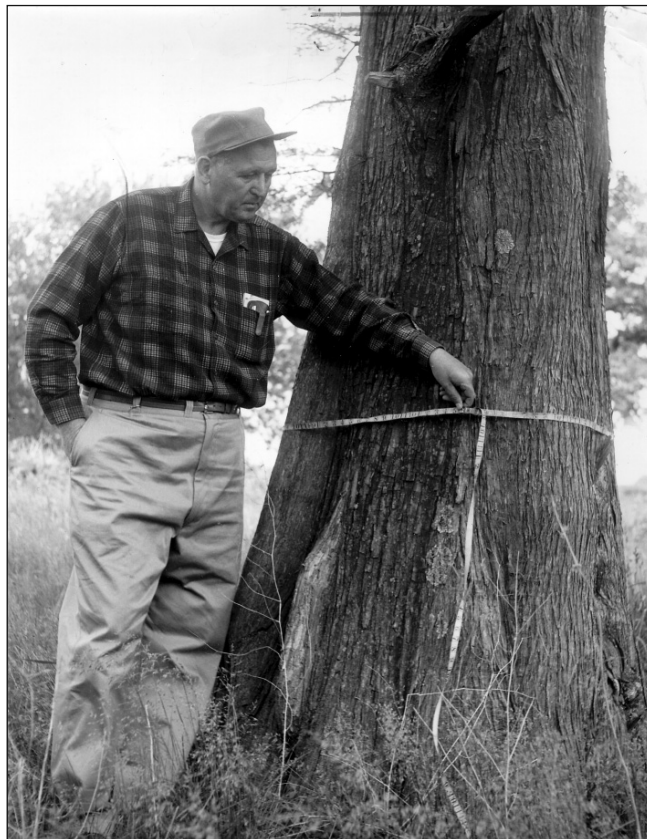
A bald cypress, a tree normally found in the semi-tropics, has achieved record size in Wisconsin because of a man's penchant for the unusual. Well over 140 years old, it still stands in the yard of the family farm in Kenosha County. Phil Sander, a conservationist and naturalist, rediscovered the tree and ferreted out the story.

Clarence Rhodes, who with his brother Frank owned the farm until it was taken over by the Bong Air Base, said his grandfather, John Rhodes, planted the tree near the house, along with at least 14 other unusual species of trees, because he liked unusual things. The tree produces round cones instead of oblong ones.

John Rhodes, whose father, Abraham, had bought the land for \$1.25 an acre back in the 1840s after sailing to the United States from Liverpool, England, obtained the tree when he visited his daughter, Mary Hoyt, in Estherwood, Louisiana. Possibly the tree symbolized the healing over of the rift that developed when his daughter married young Hoyt, contrary to her parents' wishes.

The tree, which now stands over 65 feet tall and measures 11 feet 5 inches in circumference, is the largest of its species in the state. Typically, strange nubbins, called knees, shoot up from the roots of cypress trees. It is recorded by John's son, Clarence, that the knees were a nuisance and had to be continually cut away so the lawn could be mowed.

The tree revealed its preference for warmer climes by audibly suffering through the cold Wisconsin winters. The Rhodes family, inside the farmhouse on nights of bitter cold, would often hear the tree give a mighty crack. In the morning, they would find a crevice in the trunk big enough to put a mittened hand in. The cracks healed over, though, forming protrusions on the trunk, and the tree lived on.



Rhodes Bald Cypress with Phil Sander

Wally E. Schulz (1962)

Cypress trees are known for their ability to attain a singular age, and for their importance in history and in the Bible. Perhaps those were the associations that appealed to John Rhodes when he brought the tree back from the south and planted it on his farm. Four generations lived there. The bald cypress and its unusual fellow trees, including a white ash, an Austrian pine, and a ginkgo, are now part of what is called the Richard Bong State Recreational Area, named after Major Richard I. Bong, a Wisconsin native who was America's leading air ace during World War II.

Source: Phil Sander, Kenosha