

# gallery

## JARED FARMER ON EMBLEMATIC MEGAFLORA

EVERYWHERE WE LOOK we see trees—organic trees, artificial trees, artifactual trees, virtual trees, graphic trees.

Consider the seal of Stanford University. Every diploma, letterhead, and Web site created at Stanford bears a stylized image of a particular redwood, the former local landmark known as El Palo Alto. To examine the multiple manifestations of this California plant is to glimpse the multifarious natures of trees on Earth. The seal—like the tree itself—has gone through various forms. Figure 1 shows an engraved version appropriately set in wood. Depending on the rendering of the seal, the redwood looks more or less shaggy; in general, the artistic tree is more erect, full, and symmetrical than the actual tree, visible in Figure 2. This second photograph from the early twentieth century shows a southbound train on the main peninsular rail line; the engine is about to pass the redwood as it crosses San Francisquito Creek, hidden below in its arroyo.

The relationship between the university seal, the redwood, and the railroad goes back to Leland Stanford, president of the Southern Pacific (SP). Stanford bought a former Mexican rancho adjacent to the creek to raise his stud horses, and later used his Palo Alto Farm to build a mission-revival campus in memory of his dead teenaged son. University Park, the instant college town erected alongside the instant university, changed its name to Palo Alto in 1892. The town's street numbering system used El Palo Alto as its base and meridian. The arboreal initial point attracted Stanford students: representatives from different graduating years competed to place their class flags atop the lanky redwood before the administration put a stop to the tradition around 1910. In the years before the Great War, undergraduate sentinels guarded El Palo Alto

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**Figure 1. Stanford University Seal, Date Unknown.**



Courtesy the Office of the Vice President for Business Affairs.

**Figure 2. Southbound Train Approaches El Palo Alto, Early Twentieth Century.**



Courtesy Stanford University Archives.

before the “Big Game” with the University of California, lest Berkeley partisans should fell the honored tree. It would not have taken much to do the vandal’s deed. For over a century, El Palo Alto has been known primarily for being close to death—a haggard tree in a hazardous setting.

However, all of Stanford University’s seals have removed the redwood from the railroad. From 1920 to 2002, the official design even depicted a grove of roundish, pruned orchard trees—easily mistaken for a flock of sheep—in the background; the arboricultural landscape represented a California idyll, a time before the Cold War when Stanford really was “The Farm.” The current seal, without the fruit trees, makes the lone redwood appear more wild and rarified. Though the graphic tree derives significance from the organic tree, El Palo Alto in its “natural” setting can no longer emblemize the qualities that Stanford wants to project.

This small episode in iconography suggests a general point: people look to megaflores for meaning. Almost every mythology features a Cosmic Tree, a World-Tree, or a Sacred Tree. From the Epic of Gilgamesh and the Book of Genesis to *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Lorax*, many of the world’s most powerful stories feature tall woody plants. In the landscape of the imagination, trees function as intermediaries between Heaven and Earth, and life and death (a theme recently recycled in the phenomenally popular film *Avatar*). Old ones can be imagined as guardians or grandparents. It requires little effort to individuate and anthropomorphize single-trunk plants. On currencies, stamps, seals, and flags, trees serve as emblems of institutions of every size. They can symbolize rootedness, fruitfulness—or practically anything. In their dual roles as matter and meaning, trees stand for the hybrid world that humans co-create and co-inhabit. A single plant might be a biological member of an urban or agricultural ecosystem; an ornamental feature of the vernacular landscape; and a site of discourse. Such plants are “good for thinking.”<sup>1</sup>

Stanford’s totem plant, El Palo Alto, is good for seeing, too. In pictures, as in life, this tree opens up a different view on Coast Redwood (*Sequoia sempervirens*). What do you see with your mind’s eye when you visualize a redwood? It’s probably something like the forest moon of Endor from *Return of the Jedi*, filmed on location at Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park. Or something like Figure 3, also shot in Humboldt County, California. This image comes from *Saving the Redwoods*, a 1919 special edition of the bulletin of the New York Zoological Society written by Madison Grant, a cofounder of the Save-the-Redwoods League (and a luminary of eugenics). Shafts of light—crepuscular rays—descend from the understory like missives from God. The tops of the lofty trees are out of view, suggesting magnitude and mystical power.

Figure 3 is pure “windshield wilderness”: it comes from the point of view of an automobilist, and portrays cars and car tourism as saviors of primeval America. The Save-the-Redwoods League, one of the most successful U.S. conservation groups of the interwar period, explicitly tied redwood preservation to driving. To encourage tourism, the league distributed tens of thousands of

**Figure 3. “Redwoods Grove, Dyerville Flat, Humboldt County,” 1919.**

From Madison Grant, *Saving the Redwoods: An Account of the Movement During 1919 to Preserve the Redwoods of California* (New York Zoological Society, 1919), 108.

This grove is now part of Humboldt Redwoods State Park.

copies of a windshield emblem; on the front, it showed a car next to a giant tree, and on the back it showed a road map. Even the league’s official seal depicted a road running through a forest. In its publications, the league innovated the exploitation of nature photography for political aims. To achieve its desired effect, the league juxtaposed two kinds of images: a beautiful “before” shot of a fern-lined scenic road; and an ugly “after” shot of a logging road lined with stakes, stumps, and slash.<sup>2</sup>

But saviors could also destroy. As Figure 3 shows, car campers could, as of 1919, drive up to the trunk of a giant redwood, park at will, and pitch a tent. Habits didn’t begin to change until the late 1920s, when Emilio Meinecke, a pathologist with the U.S. Bureau of Plant Industry, produced an alarmist report on the impacts of tourism on California’s redwood state parks. The trees’ “suffering” began with the “invasion” of automobile access roads that cut across roots and boles, and continued when campers parked their cars. “If the Redwoods were merely saved from the ax to fall victims to the slow but fatal change in their living conditions brought about by excessive tourist travel, the main purpose of creating the parks would certainly fail,” he wrote. Building on his reports, Meinecke created a government planning book that became the blueprint for the modern campground—one-way roads hemmed by boulders leading to parking spurs that terminate with log barriers, next to permanent hearths, picnic tables, and tent sites.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 4. El Palo Alto, aka Twin Redwoods, circa 1875.**



Courtesy Stanford University Archives.

This is the earliest known photograph of El Palo Alto.

Most images of El Palo Alto, such as Figure 2, show the tree in relation to railroading, not camping, hiking, scenic driving, or logging. In most every way, in fact, photographs and postcards of Stanford's emblem deviate from iconic redwood scenes. El Palo Alto has never been associated with the "redwood forest." Historically, the tree did not have surrounding greenery, so it could be pictured in whole—a rarity for a redwood. Yet the solitary tree never looked mystical. Rather, it always looked ambiguous. This unexpected landmark existed in contradictory states in a liminal zone.

The use of El Palo Alto as a visual marker goes back to the Spanish period, when the tree looked different. As shown in Figure 4 (circa 1875), it looked double. This two-trunked redwood was already old in 1769, when Gaspar de Portolá, governor of Las Californias (Baja and Alta), embarked from San Diego Bay on an expedition to Monterey Bay. New Spain wanted to strengthen its presence on its northwestern coast to ward off challenges from Russia and England. Although Portolá failed to locate Monterey, he went down in history as the European discoverer of San Francisco Bay. He and his large party, about sixty-five men and two hundred horses, crossed the Santa Cruz Mountains and camped for several nights at San Francisquito Creek, which they used as a base camp for exploring the Bay Area. It was an obvious terminus. A line of

redwood trees visible for more than a league marked the spot where the stream had cut a shallow arroyo through an alluvial fan near a shellmound. Before the suburbanization—and accompanying afforestation—of the San Francisco Peninsula, these riparian redwoods were a commanding and uncommon skyline feature. *S. sempervirens* preferred the peninsula's shady mountain canyons, especially on the ocean side. The fog-loving species generally shunned the bayside piedmont, a drier and sunnier habitat dominated by oaks and grasses.

In the years after Portolá, the tallest of the out-of-place trees became a milestone for horseback and foot travelers on El Camino Real, the six-hundred-mile-long royal road that connected the missions of Alta California. Historians cannot say which particular tree served this purpose; most likely it fell down, or people cut it down, before California became a U.S. state. But legends don't require evidence. By the 1850s Americans were using the Hispanicized name "El Palo Alto" (the tall stick/tree) for the tallish redwood previously known as Twin Redwoods. The peninsular railroad, constructed in the early 1860s, bridged the creek right beside the eye-catching tree—a surveyor's point—making it the de facto landmark in the age of train travel.

In Figure 4, the earliest known photograph, the tree, the tracks, the trestle, the telegraph poles, and the fence all seem in harmony—wood in different states of being. But remove half of the tree and add a railroad engine, and the visual effect is totally different—the machine in the garden. Figure 5 was taken around 1930, four or five decades after Twin Redwoods lost one of its trunks—through a flood, perhaps, or through the retrofitting of the Southern Pacific. In the photograph, the iron horse seems to mock the skeletal plant. Even in its doubled form, the tree was hardly a prime specimen of *S. sempervirens*—not especially tall, not especially full. San Francisquito Creek, already inferior habitat, deteriorated as railroad traffic increased. Steam engines like the one seen in Figure 5 belched coal smoke on the leaves up to seventy times a day. The soot-covered tree began to look scrawny and sad like a drenched cat held by the neck. Local newspapers initiated a deathwatch: "OLD LANDMARK IS DOOMED" (1926), "TREE SYMBOL OF PALO ALTO IS NEAR DOOM" (1929), "LOCOMOTIVE FUMES SLOWLY SPELL DOOM" (1932).<sup>4</sup>

Concerned tree-lovers made plans to memorialize the tree, and create a city park around it. To raise awareness, the president of Palo Alto's planning commission announced in 1920 that dirt removed from the base of the tree—"the most sacred soil within the confines of this Golden State"—would be placed in the garden of the community center next to a new war memorial flagpole erected by the American Legion. Boosters earnestly broadcast the "fact" that the tree had been sacred to Indians, who used it as a council site in olden days. In 1926 the local chapter of the Native Sons of the Golden West, a fraternal organization, placed a bronze plaque beside the tree (California Historic Landmark #2) that unequivocally marked the plant as the terminus of Portolá's renowned expedition. About a thousand people filled the new

**Figure 5. El Palo Alto, circa 1930.**



Courtesy Stanford University Archives.

A train belches smoke onto the single-trunked El Palo Alto. Guy wires are faintly visible on either side of the tree.

postage-stamp park—leased from Southern Pacific from its right of way—to commemorate the “greatest landmark on the El Camino Real.” Even as they offered praise, the speakers of the day railed against SP and the sulfurous fumes from its trains, and warned of the tree’s imminent demise.

Yet the redwood failed to die. This unexpected outcome was partly due to the heroic medicine performed by tree doctors. Faintly visible in Figure 5 are two guy wires attached to El Palo Alto, running out left and right at downward angles from the middle of the trunk. These cable supports were part of an elaborate engineering effort to protect the tree—and the rail line. Figure 6 shows the concrete retaining wall built by SP to prevent the creek from undercutting El Palo Alto, which would have caused the tree to collapse on the bridge. (Also notice that SP replaced the wooden trestle with a steel truss bridge.) After assuming control of the tree plot, the city of Palo Alto paid for regular

**Figure 6. Girl in Arroyo of San Francisquito Creek, Early Twentieth Century.**

Courtesy Stanford University Archives.

Under El Palo Alto railroad bridge, early twentieth century.

maintenance. Rotten parts of the basal trunk were cut out and filled with cement. As necessary, city arborists sawed off termite-infested branches, dressed wounds, worked the soil, and applied fertilizers.

Hydration was a deeper problem. The embankment protected the roots too well, denying moisture. Even worse, the available water diminished, as illustrated by Figure 6. This posed photograph from the early twentieth century shows a young girl in the arroyo in her Sunday best. Evidently the historic tree was still deemed worthy as the backdrop for a formal portrait. The stylish child is in no danger of getting her boots and stockings wet; the creek below the tree—a steelhead trout run—is dry. Historically, streams such as this did go underground during California's protracted rainless season. But now the hidden water was declining, too. As the orchards of Santa Clara Valley expanded, and as Palo Alto, Menlo Park, and Stanford University grew, people drew more water from wells, lowering the water table, while upstream canals siphoned off streamflow. Since the time of the unknown girl's portrait, the channel has incised deeper: El Niño floods scoured the creek even as upstream Searsville Dam blocked sediment replacement. The obsolete 1892



**Figure 7. Mister Pipe Attached to Trunk of El Palo Alto, 2007.**

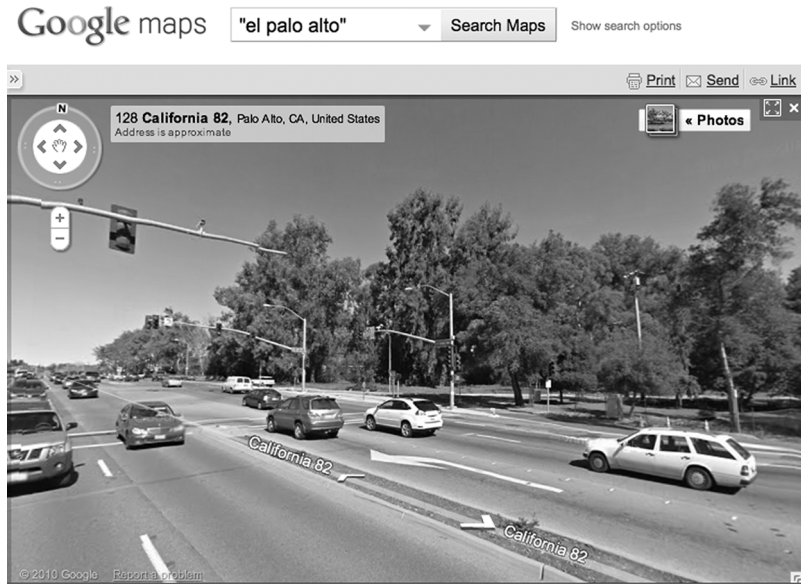


Photograph from <http://www.flickr.com/photos/blmurch/1002818104/>. Some rights reserved.

dam, now owned by Stanford as part of its famed Jasper Ridge Biological Preserve, has been targeted for removal by stream restorationists.

Today, life-sustaining water for the tree comes from a different hidden source. Since 1956, the tree has received regular misting from an elevated pipe—an attempt to simulate the conditions of coastal fog. Figure 7 offers an unusual variation on a common kind of redwood forest snapshot—the camera facing straight up from the base of a trunk. The difference here is that the mister’s metal conduit leads heavenward through the branches. And the unseen canopy isn’t that far away. From 1930 to 1950, the height of the “tall tree” dropped from 162 to 135 feet; and by 1977 it reached only 110 feet into the air (after arborists topped the dead crown). But height isn’t the same as health. After a half-century of artificial fog, the lower part of the tree looks fuller and greener than ever.

The symbolic stature of El Palo Alto has not recovered in kind. Palo Altans today show far less regard for their “Heritage Tree No. 1” compared to the early twentieth century. Since the 1970s, a few local NIMBYites have used concerns about El Palo Alto to bolster challenges to proposals such as an expressway along San Francisquito Creek, and, more recently, California High-Speed Rail. In general, though, Stanford and Palo Alto transformed in the Cold War era from a place enchanted with a quaint Spanish past to a place obsessed with a high-tech global future. The symbolic initial point for the information age is

**Figure 8. El Camino Real (State Route 82).**

Screenshot taken by author from <http://maps.google.com>, May 2010.

This view shows the eucalyptus grove that hides El Palo Alto.

not Portolá's tree but the nearby "HP Garage"—California Historic Landmark #976 ("The Birthplace of 'Silicon Valley'"). The orchards of Santa Clara County, whose water needs once competed with El Palo Alto, have been replaced by technology campuses. One of the largest is Googleplex, headquarters of Google, the all-powerful Internet search engine founded by two Stanford alumni.

Not surprisingly, Palo Alto was one of the first cities that Google comprehensively photographed at street level as part of its controversial mapping program, illustrated in Figure 8. Company vehicles equipped with wireless GPS units and hood-mounted digital cameras take rotating 360-degree pictures, capturing life on the street, unbeknownst to people at the time. Figure 8 has since been captured from the Web as a computer screenshot. It shows the busy intersection of El Camino and Sand Hill Road looking toward El Palo Alto.

This Google Maps image is noteworthy for what it does *not* show. El Palo Alto, a landmark of the railroad age, is invisible to automobilists, blocked from view by a grove of younger, taller trees. The tallest is a Tasmanian Blue Gum (*Eucalyptus globulus*) planted in the late nineteenth century—part of a phenomenal afforestation campaign in California using Australasian species. Now widely maligned for being "invasive weeds" and "fire bombs," Blue gums used to be favored for their supposed anti-miasmatic properties and their undisputed ability to grow fast. Figure 9 shows two of the gums circa 1900 before they

**Figure 9. Two Young Specimens of *Eucalyptus globulus*.**



Courtesy California Room, San José Public Library.

In front of El Palo Alto, circa 1900.

overtook the redwood. Compare this image with Figure 2 and Figure 8 to get a sense of the growth trajectory. In California, introduced gum trees once grew preternaturally fast; they benefited from ecological similarities and dissimilarities—a familiar Mediterranean climate without the insects, birds, mammals, and diseases that fed on antipodean eucalypts. Not until the 1980s did gum-eating insects find their way to the Golden State—another consequence of globalization.<sup>5</sup>

The eucalyptic screen in front of El Palo Alto represents a habitat revolution. In its quest for landscape gentility, Palo Alto—a “Tree City USA”—has converted the historic piedmont grassland into a leafy suburban landscape. The water required to sustain the street trees through the dry months comes from Yosemite National Park via the unseen, underground Hetch Hetchy Aqueduct. In this new ecological context, El Palo Alto is not so special. A redwood that used to be unmistakable as the one tall plant for miles (or leagues) is now merely one of thousands of area trees from hundreds of species from all over the world. Many taller, healthier redwoods can be found lining the city’s parks and playing fields.

**Figure 10. The Tree Talks to the Athletic Ticket Office, 2007.**

Photograph from <http://www.flickr.com/photos/cantoni/1569929367/>. Some rights reserved.

At this point, El Palo Alto has more visibility as a simulacrum than an organism. Graphics of it appear on Palo Alto's seal and Stanford's registered trademark—a block “S” with a redwood—as well as the university's seal. More impressively, or absurdly, a 3-D embodiment of Stanford's signature tree can be seen in action at university athletics events. The marching band's costumed performer, The Tree, typically takes the form of a dancing redwood—a kinetic version of a graphic design of an organic landmark.

Figure 10 shows The Tree talking to the stadium box office. With its “face” (usually made with ample lips and googly eyes) out of view, it looks guileless, almost ordinary. The nearby fans seem unsurprised. Stanford has naturalized this strange arboreal mascot because its *de jure* mascot is amorphous—a shade of red. (The Cardinal was a compromise choice after the university in 1972 disowned its controversial nickname, The Indians, as well as its living mascot, an actual member of the Yurok tribe.) Outside “The Farm,” The Tree is derided as the worst mascot in collegiate sports. Berkeley rivals have accosted the dancing redwood on numerous occasions, and stolen the costume three times. After one such incident, band members ritually fed the “contaminated” costume to a wood chipper. On its own, The Tree has got into trouble for fighting, illegal dancing, and public drunkenness. But Stanford alumni still display

their loyalty to The Tree by purchasing its likeness in the form of paraphernalia such as T-shirts, golf driver head covers, bobbleheads, and musical mobiles for infant cribs.

Ultimately the “tree-ness” of El Palo Alto transcends the organic. This lone tree, which used to be a double tree, also exists as graphics, memorabilia, and mascots. In one form or another, El Palo Alto will continue to live long after the redwood at San Francisquito Creek no longer responds to life support. (Nothing is stopping people from cloning the plant.) For now, the best vista of the “original” tree, cemented in place, comes from a pedestrian and bike bridge—new green infrastructure for outmoded-cum-alternative transport. Looking down into the arroyo, where the roots of the tree do their best to draw moisture, you might see empty bottles and toilet paper littering the undergrowth. Since at least the 1960s, this shady spot below El Camino—just across the street from the posh Stanford Shopping Center—has sheltered the homeless of Palo Alto. Now look up: this conifer, which may or may not have shaded Portolá in 1769, appears timeworn but not time-honored. Unless you knew better, you’d never reckon it has been around since the tenth century. It would look like any old tree.

*Jared Farmer, Department of History, Stony Brook University, is the author of Trees in Paradise: A California History, forthcoming from W.W. Norton.*

## NOTES

1. Recent noteworthy English-language works on trees include Stephen A. Spongberg, *A Reunion of Trees: The Discovery of Exotic Plants and Their Introduction into North American and European Landscapes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); Allen M. Young, *The Chocolate Tree: A Natural History of Cacao* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994); Charles E. Little, *The Dying of the Trees: The Pandemic in America's Forests* (New York: Viking Adult, 1995); Laura Rival, ed., *The Social Life of Trees: Anthropological Perspectives on Tree Symbolism* (Oxford: Berg, 1998); Michael P. Cohen, *A Garden of Bristlecones: Tales of Change in the Great Basin* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1998); Gayle Brandow Samuels, *Enduring Roots: Encounters with Trees, History, and the American Landscape* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999); Ian Tyrrell, *True Gardens of the Gods: California-Australian Environmental Reform, 1860-1930* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999); Peter Thomas, *Trees: Their Natural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Robin W. Doughty, *The Eucalyptus: A Natural and Commercial History of the Gum Tree* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Judith M. Taylor, *The Olive in California: History of an Immigrant Tree* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2000); Tom Griffiths, ed., *Forests of Ash: An Environmental History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World* (New York: Random House, 2001), chap. 1; Robert Van Pelt, *Forest Giants of the Pacific Coast* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001); Owain Jones, *Tree Cultures: The Place of Trees and Trees in Their Place* (Oxford: Berg, 2002);

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2. See Gabrielle Barnett, "Drive-By Viewing: Visual Consciousness and Forest Preservation in the Automobile Age," *Technology and Culture* 45 (2004): 30-54; and David Louter, *Windshield Wilderness: Cars, Roads, and Nature in Washington's National Parks* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006).
  3. See E. P. Meinecke, *A Report upon the Effect of Excessive Tourist Travel on the California Redwood Parks* (SPO, 1928); idem, *Camp Ground Policy* (Ogden, Utah, 1932); and Linda Flint McClelland, *Building the National Parks: Historic Landscape Design and Construction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 276-85.
  4. These and subsequent quotes are from clippings in the "El Palo Alto" vertical file at the Palo Alto Historical Association Archive, located in Palo Alto's Main Library. See also Guy C. Miller, "Palo Alto," *Western Folklore* 7 (July 1948): 284-88; and Pamela Gullard and Nancy Lund, *History of Palo Alto: The Early Years* (San Francisco, 1989), 20-23.
  5. See Tyrrell, *True Gardens of the Gods*; and Peter Coates, *American Perceptions of Immigrant and Invasive Species: Strangers on the Land* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 123-50.