

THE BIG NEWS

Happenings in the World of Texas Champion Trees

April 1, 2013

"Well, It's Been A Quiet Week..."

Outside of a few new state champions crowned (yaupon, anacua, blackjack oak), there hasn't been much activity in the Big Tree Program so far in 2013. However, we did receive the following account from the local paper in Utopia, TX....

Champion Tree Found, Lost on Same Day

"One day it was here, and the next it was just gone, up in smoke" said Utopia rancher, Xerophilous X. Hunter, who, for a short time this month, owned the largest prickly-pear cactus in Texas—and quite possibly the world.

On the same day the tree was measured as the largest of its kind, the great tree was struck by lightning and burned to the ground.

"They came out to the ranch in the morning," said Hunter, "did their thing with their fancy measuring tools, and told me it was biggest one they'd ever seen. Then the front came through that evening and I guess that's when it got struck." Lightning was reported in the area by local weather spotters.

"It sure was a whopper," said Champ Hunter, the rancher's son and big tree expert, who nominated the giant cactus. "I talk about big trees in Texas on my Facebook page all the time, and when dad showed me this one, I knew it was special," said the younger Hunter.



As unofficial photographer, blogger and promoter for the Texas Big Tree program, Champ Hunter knows a big tree when he sees one, having assisted the Texas A&M Forest Service (TFS) on many trips across the state to verify the largest trees. "I hope TFS will honor it by listing the tree in the next Big Tree Registry – even if only for a short while, now that it's dead," said Hunter. The Texas Big Tree Registry catalogues the largest of 320 species in Texas and can be viewed at <http://txforestservicetamu.edu/main/article.aspx?id=1336>.



Officially named Wrighting's gigantic prickly-pear (*Opuntia wrightingii*), the species is nicknamed the "onion tree" for properties that make cattle tear up when they eat the cactus leaves, or pads. Unlike other species in the same genus, the Wrighting's species loses its pads in winter. "That may be a characteristic that actually allows this species to grow to such a tremendous size," said Hunter.

The 640-acre "X-Square" ranch, located near Utopia, TX, is one square-mile of rocky hills, wooded ravines, stunted live oaks, and this odd species of cactus, which is endemic to this small part of the Edwards Plateau.