



MONTEREY NEWS

December 2021
Est. 1970 Vol. LI • Number 12



Our White Pines

These trees have been called “the redwoods of the east” because they just keep on growing upwards. Look out at any wooded ridge or hill crest and you will see dark green giants reaching above the rest. This is not to say that we don’t all “keep on growing” as long as we live, and maybe longer, it’s just that we may not go right on up and up like the redwoods and the white pines.

Why do any of us go up? It’s the sun. We are headed for the life-giving light and warmth of the sun. I go uphill to the top of our garden and orchard, the only real clearing we’ve got, and watch for the sparkle of live fire through the trees of the horizon, when the sun speaks to us all. This time of year the leaves are gone from the deciduous trees, letting through more sparkle than ever, and every day this first spark comes a bit farther to the right, a bit later by the clock. We once made a drawing of the horizon line and every morning put a mark where the sparkle popped up. This way we could tell when things turned around. We noted the spark time by the clock, too.

Our white pines are sun catchers, just like all of us. When Henry Thoreau was twenty-three years old in January of 1841, he wrote in his journal: “Every needle of the white pine trembles distinctly in the breeze, which on the sunny side gives the whole tree a shimmering seething aspect.” To get this light show, you have to be closer to the tree, or take along your binoculars.

These needles or leaves are three to five inches long, slender, three-sided, and occur in bundles of five. They are flexible and blue-green. So writes Julia Ellen Rogers in her 1905 *The Tree Book*, which was later published by Doubleday as part of the ten-volume set called *The New Nature Library*. This came out in 1926 and my grandmother McAllester, who wrote nature articles for the newspaper in Boston, had it. So now I do, and in some of its venerable pages are the flattened leaves of the pertinent kinds of trees being described, leaves put there before I was born. I never met “Mothie,” as she was called.



Seal of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy

She died suddenly the week I was born. But I have her books, and some leaves, and the family stories.

We do have other sorts of pines in these parts, and they are splendid trees. Julia Ellen Rogers gives descriptions and photographs of them all in her book. But here is what she says about the white pine, *Pinus strobilus*.

“The soft white resinous wood is remarkably easy to work and was used in all kinds of construction, from masts to matches. Quick growing, symmetrical, and handsome in its early years; later it becomes more irregular, but full of character, and beautiful, in clean limbs and plume-like tufts of blue-green leaves. The tree is picturesque, even in decrepit age, towering in stately dignity over the heads of neighboring trees, adding distinction to all sylvan scenery. A white pine grown in the open has a broad crown that often keeps its lower branches, and these are borne to the ground by their own weight. Such a tree is a joy the whole year through to all tree lovers, including people and birds and squirrels.”

White pines are a joy. They are also a symbol for the Haudenosaunee people, who call it the Tree of Peace. With its five needles and five-budded growth pattern, the pine resembles the coming together of the five nations of the Iroquois Federation: Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca. These neighboring groups, in the Great Lakes region, were antagonistic, but

they were brought together by the legendary peace-maker called Dekanoweidah. The chiefs of the five nations met under a white pine in the Onondaga territory, as did their successors over the generations, joined as one people or confederacy. Weapons were buried beneath the tree and can be seen on the seal of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. In the center of the seal is the white pine, with an eagle at its top. All around the tree are birds, fish, mammals, amphibians, and in an outer ring are about fifty people, all holding hands at the outer edge of the seal. There are four main roots of the tree, around the buried weapons. There are the white roots of peace, reaching out in all four directions to other people to join in “good mind” and justice and peace.

Here are the words of John Muir, encouraging anyone who may feel uncertain about trees. Julia Ellen Rogers starts her first chapter, *How to Know the Trees* with this:

“And surely nobody can find anything hard in this; even the blind must enjoy these woods, drinking in their fragrance, listening to the music of the winds in their groves, and fingering their flowers and plumes and cones and richly furrowed boles. The kind of study required is as easy and natural as breathing.”

— Bonner McAllester