

Looking back (and forward): The Columbus Day storm

BY BOB ZYBACH
For the Sentinel

Fifty years ago this week, on Oct. 12, 1962, Cottage Grove's Harrison School was let out early due to news of an impending storm.

Seven-year old third-grader Shellie Snook remembers that day well:

"I had to walk from the school on 10th Street to my home on Van Buren, including a trail through a group of trees on the way. As I entered the woods, trees began falling. I became scared, but also excited, by the warm air and heavy winds."

Part I. The Big Blow

The Columbus Day Storm (also known as the Big Blow) began as "Typhoon Freda" in the Tropics, north of Bikini Atoll, and technically became an "extratropical cyclone" as it rapidly traveled northward through northern California and western Oregon and Washington.

Winds reached more than 145 miles per hour along the Oregon Coast and more than 110 miles per hour in many locations in the Willamette Valley, Portland, and southwest Washington. Because

of the strength of these sustained wind gusts, the Columbus Day Storm is often termed a "hurricane" — but just the fact that it traveled 1800 miles in less than 36 hours is one reason it is considered a cyclone (hurricanes travel much slower).

The Columbus Day Storm caused an estimated \$230-280 million (in 1962 dollars) in damage and blew down an estimated 11 billion to 15 billion feet of timber—both figures generated mostly in western Oregon and

southwest Washington.

Storm damage was far worse than the only previous historical windstorm of similar magnitude in the region — the Jan. 9, 1880 "Great Gale" — and greatly exceeded the November, 1992 "Friday the 13th Storm," which many local residents still recall.

For the Pacific Northwest, it was truly the "Storm of the Century" for the 1900s.

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photo courtesy the Cottage Grove Sentinel and CG Historical Society

Among the most damage done to any business in town was the loss of a roof and several new cars at Keith Roberts Ford.

STORM

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At least 46 people were killed during the storm, and hundreds more injured. Telephone, television, and electrical services were eliminated for tens of thousands of families (sometimes for weeks) and hundreds of miles of roads and streets -- and rivers and creeks -- were blocked by downed trees and wires.

Cottage Grove was lucky. Five people died in neighboring Eugene, but no one was killed -- or even seriously injured -- in Cottage Grove. The local paper said this was a "miracle" and it was, at least, extremely fortunate.

Jim Peterson survived being "blown about a 100 feet" when the roof blew off the Keith Roberts Ford Building on 9th and Main, but he escaped with only a "floor burn and a bruised shoulder." Only one ambulance call was made during the storm, and that was to "rush five construction men, all out-of-towners, to Sacred Heart Hospital for treatment of injuries received when the storm demolished a shed they were constructing" north of town.

Several close calls were encountered at the Evergreen Motel, where "one tree crushed three trailer homes owned by Harold Owens, Mr. And Mrs. Leonard Closner, and Mr. And Mrs. E. H. Hughes," all of whom, fortunately, were away at the time. "Other trailers as well as several small houses" in the complex were also damaged or destroyed by falling trees, including one home in which the two renters, Gene DuCharme and Harold Gilstad, had left just moments before.

However, local police were overwhelmed by "a group of organized looters" and Governor Mark Hatfield agreed to order 20 National Guard troops to patrol downtown Cottage Grove until order could be destroyed. On an Oct. 19 visit to Cottage Grove to survey the storm's damage, Hatfield offered the services of the state's highway department and department of forestry to help restore damaged trees and roads, but Mayor Wilbur Workman rejected the offer because he "felt there was no need for it" -- local residents were "handling the tree situation" fine.

Local Weyerhaeuser and

Georgia-Pacific tree farms experienced millions of feet of timber blowdown caused by the storm and began salvage planning and operations within hours and days. Many of the unimproved backcountry roads used by hunters, recreational enthusiasts, and loggers during the past 50 years -- both locally and regionally -- were put in place during salvage operations related to the Columbus Day Storm. In further support of the idiom "it is an ill wind that blows no good," timber salvage and processing jobs and businesses boomed in Cottage Grove in the years to follow.

Local orchardists lost thousands of trees, including George Ross, who lost 300 trees in just one location. Miles Wicks suffered a badly damaged orchard and lost a barn. At the Van and Erbine Grousebeck place the walnut and apple orchard was "totally destroyed."

Several other local barns were also destroyed, killing cows and bulls and exposing tons of hay to the weather -- including the Ralph Benter dairy farm and the Harry Simmons and Dave Eckhardt ranches.

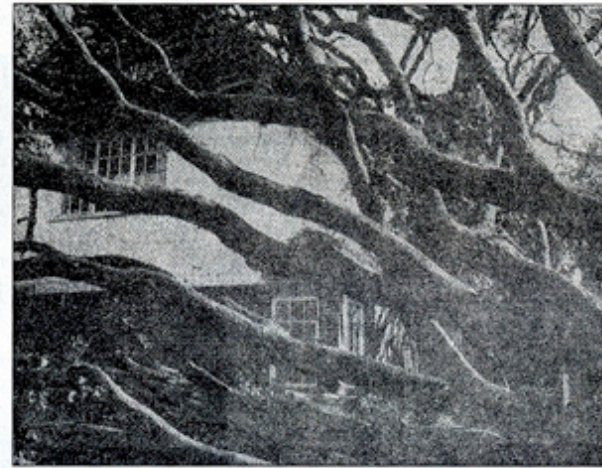


photo courtesy CG Sentinel and Cottage Grove Historical Society

A large tree in the backyard of Dr. John Petty on N. 9th Street blew over, causing extensive damage to the family's home but no injuries.

Other notable storm damage in Cottage Grove included:

The "city park was a shambles," as play equipment and the new tennis courts experienced extensive damage due to at least 65 fallen trees;

Summary: Cottage Grove was very lucky during the Co-

lumbus Day Storm, compared to many other western Oregon cities and towns. Still, there was extreme danger and significant damage caused to the community by this event, albeit with some short- and long-term benefits to the local economy.

Whether it was trees falling on houses or cars, across powerlines or roadways, or into creeks

and rivers, a common denominator with much of the danger and damage associated with the Columbus Day Storm was directly related to falling trees -- typically large and poorly located -- and that is without considering the thousands of fruit and nut trees and billions of board feet of timber also blown over and otherwise damaged by the wind.

What have we learned in regards to growing trees in urban environments and developments in the fifty years since the Columbus Day Storm? All evidence seems to say: "not much."

Dr. Bob Zybach is a forest scientist with a PhD from OSU in the study of forest history. He is a fifth-generation Oregonian and currently a Cottage Grove resident.

Part II. What did we learn: The 'Next Big Windstorm'

Ggravity works. Hurricane-force winds demonstrate that fact. The following photographs, taken in and around Cottage Grove during the past week, show typical areas in which our town's homes, lives, automobiles, utilities, sidewalks and historical resources are most likely to be threatened by falling trees and limbs during future windstorms.

The intended audience for these photos is our community's young students and families: they are not old enough to remember the Columbus Day Storm, but they will be forced to deal with its lessons regarding the future role of large trees in urban settings during their lives. McKenzie Mark, a lifelong Creswell and Cottage Grove resident and a 2008 graduate of Blue Mountain Charter School on Mosby Creek Road, provides a human scale for some of the most potentially dangerous and destructive trees in town.

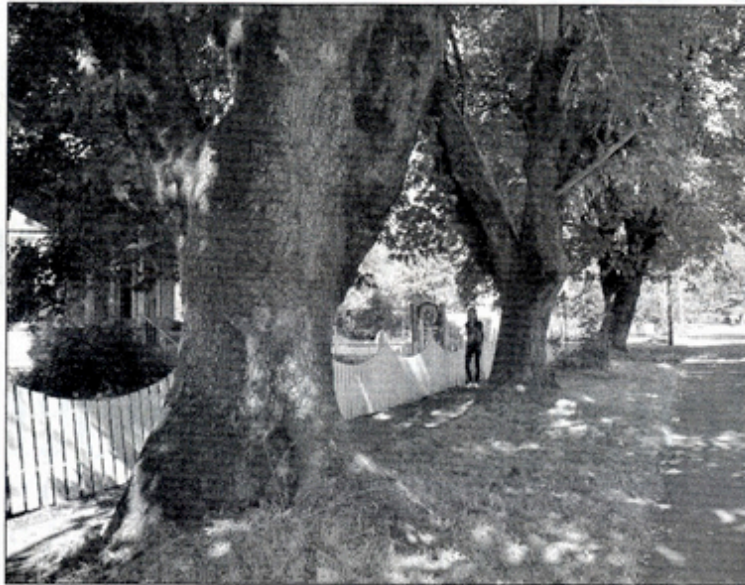


photo by Bob Zybach

These bigleaf maples were probably planted as decorative street trees in the late 1800s to accent homes being constructed in the neighborhood at that time – several years before telephone poles and electrical lines were strung along the same streets. One tree has already died and been removed, but the others are also dying from rot and age, their roots doing heavy damage to adjacent lawns and sidewalks and their great bulk, dead limbs and overgrown suckers posing a constant risk and maintenance problem to nearby roofs, homes, utility lines and residents.

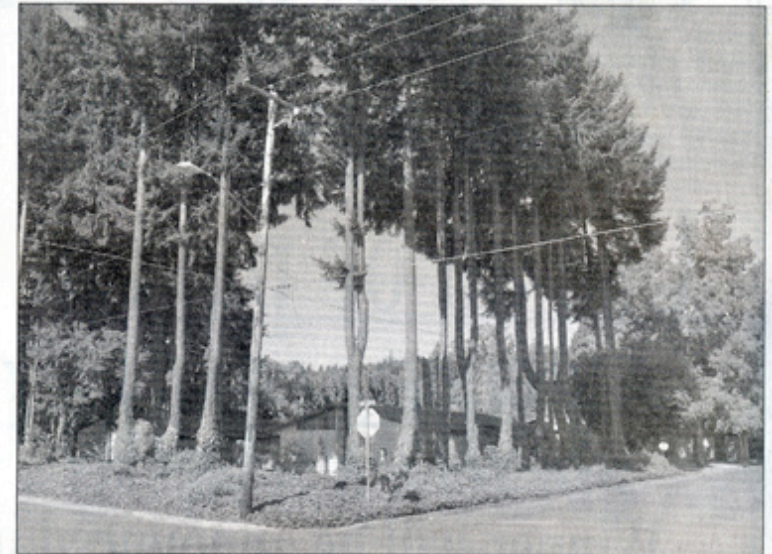


photo by Bob Zybach

Straight rows of conifer trees were routinely planted along property lines in the 1950s and '60s as Boy Scout projects or local Arbor Day events throughout much of western Oregon. For whatever reason, they were often planted directly under power lines and/or adjacent to sidewalks and homes – which they quickly outgrew. These trees are a good example of too-large conifers planted in urban spaces, with years of costly pruning efforts resulting in dangerous, top-heavy trees being undermined by a carpet of English ivy – which acts as a parasite to the trees they occupy and makes them even more susceptible to wind damage.

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Cottage Grove

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Photo by Bob Zybach

This incense cedar is growing within the historic McFarland Cemetery, where it likely began as a seedling more than a century ago – perhaps at a time when the pioneer graveyard was not being actively cared for. Now there are several cedars of similar size within the boundaries and around the perimeter of the burials, including numerous invasive Douglas-fir of lesser size and age. These trees are growing into and over many of the pioneer gravesites and headstones, creating a major restoration problem — and their damage will become far greater to the cemetery and possibly to nearby homes if these trees are allowed to continue growing until they fall or are blown over.



photo by Bob Zybach

The owner of this large cottonwood tree believes it is a Lombardy Poplar, planted at the same time as the adjacent home was constructed, more than 130 years ago. Damage to the adjacent sidewalk and to the roof of the home by the tree's growing roots and falling leaves and limbs is obvious. If left untended, the tree will continue to damage adjacent structures, including telephone and power lines, until it falls – at which point residents directly across the street from this house will most likely be in the greatest danger.