

Kissing, lightning, lighting: Sequoias are stars at WU



KOBBI R. BLAIR | Statesman Journal

The Star Trees were planted more than six decades ago on the Willamette University campus, a gift to the school from the class of 1942.

The quintet of giants still grows on the Willamette campus

BY CAPI LYNN
Statesman Journal

Five giant sequoias were planted 63 years ago on the Willamette University campus.

Since then, students have fallen in love beneath the boughs, a bolt of lightning has stunted one of the trunks, an old beer bottle has banded a broken limb and Christmas lights have decorated the branches.

The Star Trees — so named because of the star-shaped view of the sky from the center — are a campus landmark and a community treasure.

“It’s amazing to think they would become this,” said Margaret Ringnald, a former drama teacher at Willamette who attended the tree-planting ceremony in 1942.



Margaret Ringnald attended the planting ceremony of the Star Trees at Willamette University in 1942.

By the numbers

1,750: Estimated number of lights decorating the Star Trees.

125: Height of the tallest tree, in feet.

63: Age of the trees, in years.

24½: Circumference of the largest tree, in feet.

The 100-year-old Salem woman remembers the five trees when they were just “feathery little twigs.”

Today, they are about 125 feet tall and provide a stunning backdrop for about 1,750 multicolored lights

each holiday season.

Sunny Van Wyngarden of Salem never imagined the trees would reach such majestic height.

“I marvel when I go by and see

Star Trees

Continued from 1A

all the lights," said Van Wynn-garden, a member of the class of 1942 at Willamette.

The trees were a parting gift from her class, the school's centennial graduating class.

Then-university President Dr. Carl Knopf is said to have brought the saplings back from a trip to California, and they were planted just before graduation day.

Ringnalda said that perhaps a couple of dozen people, including her husband, Murco, who also was a faculty member, gathered on the north side of campus along State Street for the planting of the trees originally referred to as the "Cathedral of the Centuries."

"Murco muttered to me how these were going to get awful big and that they shouldn't be so close together," Ringnalda said.

Years later, the trees became known as the Star Trees because when one stands in the middle and looks up, the interior pattern forms a star.

"I don't know that they knew it would form a perfect star," Van Wynn-garden said.

It is doubtful anyone knew the trees would become such a beloved place on campus, either.

Campus lore says that if two people have their first kiss under the trees, they are destined for true love.

Ben Fennimore, a sophomore at Willamette, heard the story the first time he visited.

"When I took my tour here, the tour guide explained whoever you kiss under the trees, you will fall in love with," he said.

He and his girlfriend, Laura Payne, also a sophomore, didn't share their first kiss under the trees, but they have shared others there.

Fennimore has heard stories of couples who have had picnics and young men who have sung to their girlfriends under the Star Trees.

He understands why it's a romantic location.

"It's kind of hidden," he said.

The young trees were much too small to provide a secluded hideaway for Bill Habernicht, class of 1946, but he is well aware of the tradition that later transpired.

"I understand it's quite a deal to have your girl in there, under the trees, smooching," Habernicht said.

His memories of the Star Trees are more innocent. He and his college buddies played

Star Trees lighting

The public is invited to attend tree-lighting festivities Saturday at Willamette University. For information, call (503) 375-5304.

5-6:30 P.M.: Family holiday dinner, Goudy Commons, \$6.75 all you can eat, \$3.50 children younger than 6.

6:30 P.M.: Star Trees lighting, State Street (behind south entrance to the Capitol), free hot chocolate and cookies.

7 P.M.: Holiday concert, Smith Auditorium, Willamette University band, university chamber orchestra, chamber ensembles, free.

leapfrog over them many times.

"Just goofing around," Habernicht said. "College kids have got to have something to do besides chasing girls. At that time, that was it.

"They weren't very big then, but boy, they sure are big now."

Elwood Newhouse of Elwood's Tree Service estimated that the trees are 130 feet tall. Jim Anderson, a campus groundskeeper, said no one has measured them recently.

"They're still growing, probably putting on three to four feet a year," Newhouse said. "I wouldn't even call them mature yet.

"This is an extremely fast-growing tree. If you planted a Douglas fir in 1942, it would

probably be half that size."

The height of the trees makes it a challenge to install the lights. It takes his crew of eight people about six hours to hang them, with help from Willamette staff.

The crew straps a fabricated steel frame on each trunk and then uses pulleys to hoist 14 heavy-duty strands of lights on each tree.

One of the first times an Elwood's Tree Service employee scaled the trees — the university started illuminating them during the holidays in 1997 — an old beer bottle was discovered near the top of one.

"Someone had broken a branch off and slipped the bottle over the branch," Newhouse said.

No one remembers what type of beer bottle it was, but Newhouse wishes they had kept it as a memento.

Jeremy Eucken of Scio works for Newhouse and has helped install the lights the past four years.

He said that the trunk of one of the trees, near the top, is split into four trunks and is about 15 feet shorter than the others. He was told by a former groundskeeper that it was hit by lightning about 20 years ago.

*clynn@StatesmanJournal.com
or (503) 399-6710*