BALDCYPRESS

LOUISIANA'S STATE TREE

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Shreveport, Louisiana
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Essay/Poster Contest

Louisiana State Tree - Baldcypress

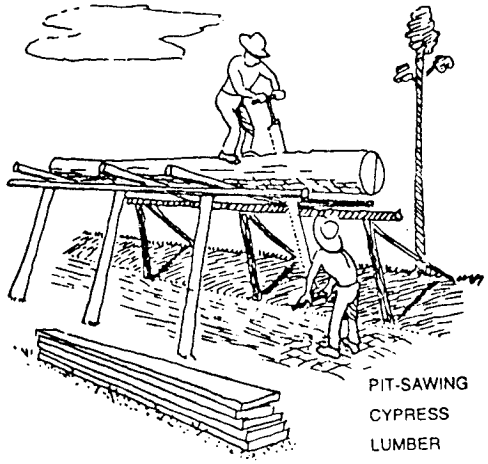
Cypress, long know as the "wood eternal" was officially proclaimed Louisiana's state tree - by the Legislature on Sunday, May 26, 1963.

HISTORY

Baldcypress, *Taxodium distichium*, is a tree of ancient lineage. Remains of prehistoric forests show that millions of years ago it grew in abundance within the Arctic Circle, together with the sequoias, incense-cedar, ginko and several hardwoods. Because of changes in climate, these species were driven south. The baldcypress found its way to the eastern and southern coast lines.

Cypress is the silent sentinel of the swamps. In the passing of the years, it provided a source of warmth, wealth and shelter for Louisiana's people.

Indeed, it was in 1699 that Pierre LeMoyne Sieur D'Iberville, charged by his king to search out the riches of Louisiana for the glory of France, found not gold and silver but vast, unbroken treasures of virgin cypress forests.



PIT-SAWING CYPRESS LUMBER

Long before the birth of the Southern cotton and sugar kingdoms, many of the inhabitants of the Old South had earned their living by manufacturing lumber for sale in the Caribbean possessions of England, France and Spain.

Farm workers were not needed in the field during late autumn and winter. They were employed in the cypress brakes felling timber and sawing planks for the growing export trade of New Orleans. Cypress boards and squared timbers were the principal cash products of the colonists until the mid-1790's.

Cypress was the staple commodity of the lumber industry of colonial Louisiana. The French soon discovered that it was exceptionally valuable as a building material. As they became familiar with the wood, engineers and artisans of the colony were especially pleased by its durability. In the course of experiments conducted during 1709, they learned that cypress was not attacked by borers or decay when immersed for long periods in fresh or sea water. On the basis of this evidence French provincial authorities recommended that it be used in preference to other woods as pilings and as planking for the hulls of ships.

Cypress also passed the acid test of experience. Builders of the colony concluded after several years that its timbers and planking were less apt to be damaged by weather than pine, oak or cedar.

Other qualities besides durability contributed to the popularity of cypress lumber during the colonial era. Pioneer sawyers could manufacture cypress boards easily because the wood was relatively free from resin and was almost as soft as white pine. For the same reasons carpenters found it easier to work with hand tools than other woods of the region. Furthermore cypress boards did not warp when used green and the straight-grained wood could be split into shingles by edges without difficulty. Because of these desirable qualities, cypress lumber gained steadily in popularity throughout the Caribbean area during the 1700's, and the lumbermen of Louisiana gained an expanding market for their forest products.

The overseas commerce of New Orleans in cypress timber and planking subsequently assumed impressive proportions under the stimulating effects of royal favor and prosperity in the international sugar industry.

WOOD ETERNAL HAS SERVED HISTORY WELL

ECOLOGY

BALDCYPRESS grows to be a tall tree. In virgin forests, it was not uncommon to find trees six to eight feet in diameter above the swell at the base of the tree and heights of 120 to 150 feet. Some of these trees were over 1,000 years old.

While baldcypress now grows mostly in the deep swamps, it could and did grow on the higher ground. It is probable that fire and the heavy competition of other trees "smothered out" the young cypress trees when they were seeded on the higher ground.

To establish a cypress forest, there must be: ample seed trees, a high degree of freedom from ground cover competition, freedom from browsing by cattle and wild game, and enough but not too much water.

Baldcypress develops a wide-spreading base and an extensive root system which gives it a firm anchorage even in soft, wet soils. Where the ground is covered with water, the tree forms peculiar growths, known as "knees." These extend up from the roots above the water surface. They give additional firmness to the tree.

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BOTANY

The leaves of the BALDCYPRESS are 1/3 to 3/4 of an inch long and are usually spread in a flat plane on feather-like branchlets. These branchlets are shed in the fall as are most hardwood leaves.

The tree flowers in the spring and has a delicate purple tinge. The fruit is a rounded cone or "ball" about one inch in diameter. It encloses little seeds with small wings.

The bark is reddish-brown, fibrous, thin and divided into small, flat ridges and shallow furrows.

USES

The wood of the BALDCYPRESS is known in the lumber trade as cypress. It is moderately strong, straight grained, and easily worked. Freshly sawn lumber has a sour odor but is practically tasteless. The heartwood is durable in contact with the soil and under other conditions favorable to decay. Sapwood is nearly white but the heartwood ranges from light yellowish-brown to dark chocolate-brown.

The wood is used for building construction, beams, shingles, posts, dock and bridge construction. Other uses are for window sash and doors, water tanks, and boats.