

The overlooked women who saved the Big Basin redwoods

BY KATE BRADSHAW , JANUARY 13, 2022, 1130 VIEWS

Driven by tales from her family history, Traci Bliss quit academia to document the overlooked female activists behind the founding of one of America's most iconic parks.



New growth on trees in Big Basin Redwoods State Park one year after the CZU August Lightning Complex fire burned through the park. (Photo by Magali Gauthier.)

Traci Bliss, whose family has for generations called the Santa Cruz area home, was an education professor at Idaho State University when a story she'd heard as a kid lured her back to Santa Cruz. Her great-great-aunt, nearly a centenarian when Traci was a child, had told her that women had been heavily involved in the work of advocating for the creation of Big Basin Redwoods State Park, established in 1902. However, none of the official

narratives she could find about the park's history bore that story out — many credited the redwoods' preservation primarily to photographer and activist A.P. Hill. So she decided to retire to pursue the story full time.

What she learned involved a far broader cast of early preservationists than was previously acknowledged and a compelling and timely narrative about how a wide range of civic groups exerted their influences to protect a remote **redwood forest** on the California coast from being logged and transform it into the beloved home it became for recreation and respite.

In a recent interview, Bliss told The Six Fifty about the fascinating history of California's oldest state park, and how she dug past the existing scholarship to find a much richer history of the park's origins. She talked about how women — many of whom still lacked the right to vote — Stanford and Santa Clara College faculty and a wide range of civic groups and institutions became involved in the campaign. In the aftermath of the 2020 CZU wildfires, she also reflects on what's next for the park.



(Photo courtesy Traci Bliss.)

Next Thursday, Jan. 20, Bliss is scheduled to talk in more detail about the topic through a Zoom webinar organized through the Bill Lane Center for the American West at Stanford University. Get more information [here](#) or register [here](#).

Here's an excerpt from our Q&A with Bliss. Responses have been edited for length and clarity.

In the promotional information about your book, it says that you began your research based on a story you heard from a great-great-aunt. I was curious about what that story was and how it triggered your curiosity.

My great-great-aunt Jenny Bliss Jeter was 98. It was her birthday, and she wanted to tell us the story of how Big Basin was saved because her husband was one of the key leaders of the Big Basin movement.

All I ever remembered growing up from that story was how essential women were. But then, later in life, when I was an adult, whenever I'd go to Big Basin or look at any of the literature, it was a "one great man" story about saving the park. Women were never mentioned. I mean, they didn't even get a nod. And that just continued on and on. ...

I just felt, 'I have to retire so I could pursue this story.' I was a professor at Idaho State University. My colleagues would say, 'You're taking such a risk. How can you do this?' But I felt the greater risk would be not to pursue it. It hounded me out. And so that's when I decided in 2008, that I needed to move back to my roots in Santa Cruz and begin this journey.

There was such a small amount of scholarly research that had been done on Big Basin, that I kept finding these major surprises as I would dive into the research. And one of the gratifying parts, but also a major surprise was to see that not only women had equal roles in the movement with men – this was 11 years before they won the right to vote – but women led the publicity arm of the entire movement.

They produced 90% of all the publicity around Big Basin, and they took the movement statewide, mobilizing women's groups all over the state. And

those women's clubs all over the state were essential to getting the legislation [to create the park that became Big Basin Redwoods State Park] passed.

Why do you think women were so successful in doing this, and what inspired their groups to take on this advocacy?

This is what I think happened. In 1896, women were mobilized around California to win the right to vote, and that effort failed. But they had this huge statewide network of women who were suffragists and were really fighting for it. So when they lost the right to vote, and three and a half years later, there's this opportunity to save the redwoods, all the women of California came together...

All of these different women's groups – not all of whom had been in favor of suffrage could say, 'Well, we may have lost our fight to get the right to vote, we will not lose our state's trees.' I'm sure that because of that earlier loss, they were so highly motivated.

What role did Stanford play in the effort to create Big Basin?

I was so just amazed and excited about the essential role that the Stanford community played in saving Big Basin. In 1889, Leland Stanford was our California senator. He was also the president of the Southern Pacific Railroad, and he called for Big Basin to become a Grand Park and Southern Pacific Railroad owned the Big Basin land.

The head of the botany department, a professor named William Dudley ... was the leading expert on Big Basin. His data convinced all these other academics around the Bay Area and businessmen of the fact that Big Basin was in imminent danger of being logged, how extraordinary the forest was, and that it needed to be preserved.

In 1904, three months after (Big Basin) officially open to the public, there was a horrendous fire. It had very similar characteristics to the CZU 2020 fire that destroyed 97% of Big Basin. The minute Dudley heard about the fire, he recruited 12 Stanford undergraduates, all athletes, members of the DU fraternity. One of them was his nephew. One of them was President (David Starr) Jordan's son. And the undergraduates didn't hesitate. They were all

immediately on board. They took all these supplies to the firefighters who were...in the mountains in Big Basin, and as soon as they had delivered the supplies, they then went to Pescadero and literally created the firewall...that saved Pescadero.

How did you dig past all of the official narratives to figure out the real history?

The only way I could do the research and really make sure I was doing justice to the whole was, I took about 15 different individuals. I think it's like seven women and eight men. In each case, I just focused on that individual person without contaminating my research with any of the other people. Each person got their own individual biography. And then (it was a matter of) putting them all up on a storyboard, and looking at all of the ways they connected with the park.

What was the game changer in terms of research is within the last six or seven years, digital newspapers coming online. By having this huge collection at newspapers.com, I could take someone who may not have showed up in biographies or second-person accounts.

What surprised you most in your research for this book?

It's such an inclusive story that men and women really had such equal roles. But more importantly, it was totally nonpartisan. And the leaders of the movement made sure it stayed nonpartisan. I think that's such a relevant message. This is such a great model for the environmental challenges that we face today, that you have this extraordinary first-of-its-kind statewide movement, but there were no partisan politics involved in the creation of the park.

I guess the biggest surprise I had overall was that this very narrow telling of the story in the past, that appeared in almost all of the state parks literature [which left out women, Stanford and the role of Santa Cruz].

I think that the problem with that is not simply that all these people were left out, it's much more than it so diminishes the magnitude of the accomplishment.



Gov. Gavin Newsom and EPA Administrator Michael Regan listen to Chris Spohrer, superintendent for state parks' Santa Cruz district, discuss how the CZU August Lightning Complex fire damaged Big Basin Redwoods State Park. (Photo by Magali Gauthier.)

What do you think is going to happen to Big Basin as it builds back from the CZU fires?

I think there's an exceptional commitment. (The state, governor and the director of state parks have) allocated a huge amount of funds to the re-creation of Big Basin. Evidently by summer, there will be very specific parts of the park that can be reopened to the public, but public safety comes first, so it has to be very gradual. I think it will be years before any of the buildings are put back...

My hope is that there will be a lot of consideration to 'What does it mean to put the health of the forest first?' One of the areas that I'm most interested in personally, because I've been a docent for Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park, is how we interface with the public going forward. In the book, I go into some detail about the indigenous people who had been stewards of the

Big Basin land for thousands of years before it ever became privately owned. I think it's essential going forward that the presence of indigenous people, as co-partners with us, are telling their stories. I have not encountered any docents or interpreters who do come from a Native American background. So I think really opening up those doors and those opportunities ... should be one of our goals going forward.

While Big Basin is recovering, what trails or hikes should people seek out elsewhere?

The Rancho del Oso is actually open. I really encourage people to check out... the wonderful nature center there and experience the marshlands. When I do history tours at Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park, I always tell the Big Basin story because for Santa Cruzans, the story of the saving of Big Basin and the saving of Henry Cowell is one continuous story. There are plenty of wonderful trails at Henry Cowell.

More information

"Big Basin Redwood Forest: California's Oldest State Park" by Traci Bliss is published by The History Press and available online at arcadiapublishing.com, Amazon.com or at Kepler's for \$21.99.

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