

## NEWS

# Full recognition for Half-Way Oak



Mark Hanna (right) uncovers a historical marker Friday in front of the Half-Way Oak in Stephens County. The tree was recognized as a Famous Tree of Texas by the Texas Forest Service.

## Stephens Co. adds to list of famous trees

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STEPHENS COUNTY —For the first time in 40 years a tree was designated as a Famous Tree of Texas. On Friday, the Half-Way Oak — at the midway point between Cisco and Breckenridge at a U.S. 183 rest stop — was given that honor.

Mark Hanna grew up in Breckenridge and lives in Austin. He led the effort to recognize the tree.

"There's a lot of history behind this tree. My mom was a Stephens County historian — and I'm sort of following in her footsteps. She died

a few years back," he said, adding her name was Betty Hanna.

The Half-Way Oak, a Texas live oak, has been estimated to be at least 200 years old. The tree shows up as a landmark on early maps of the area and served even then as a rest stop for travelers, perhaps even for characters like Doc Holliday or Wyatt Earp on their way to Fort Griffin.

"Back 100 to 200 years ago, there were no mesquite trees, just scrub oak. This could be seen (from a long way off)," Hanna said. "You can see why it was such a landmark then."

He first tried the Texas Historical Commission, but finding historical records for everything that might have happened under the tree proved to be impossible.

That would have been the end of it until he heard about the Texas Forest Service's Famous Trees of Texas program. Problem was, the forest service hadn't added a tree to the original list of 81 since its inception in 1970.

That has changed now.

The Texas Forest Service announced last week that with the inclusion of the Half-Way Oak, the agency plans to grow its list by at least 100 by 2015, the agency's centennial anniversary.

Courtney Blevins, a regional urban forester with the forest service in Fort Worth, said trees like the Half-Way Oak in a sense are much like people. The older they get, the more problems they might have.

"The problem with older trees — or one of the main problems — is internal structure. Even though it looks totally sound, these things are hollow; they're rotted out inside," he said. "That's normal for older trees."

Blevins said a hollow core is no cause for alarm. Most trees are only "alive" within the first few inches of the surface. Some research suggests that a hollow core for an immense tree like the Half-Way Oak actually allows the organism to be flexible and more resilient in high winds.

What makes the trees special — their historic nature — also is what puts them at the greatest risk.

Being so old and a witness to history, trees will naturally die of old age.

"I'm really glad our agency decided to get this program going again so that we can replace what we're losing," Blevins said. "On our current list, there is something like 80 trees, and a third of those are dead."

The Half-Way Oak has seen its share of misfortune but has proved itself to be fairly tough. It's survived herbicides, collisions, fire, ice storms and even the government, which threatened to remove the tree in the mid-1970s to widen U.S. 183. Residents of Breckenridge banded together then to save the tree.

Georgia Langford lives 10 miles east of the Half-Way Oak and brought her copy of *The Famous Trees of Texas* to the dedication. The book was last published by the Forest Service in 1984. There are no plans to reissue it; the Forest Service directs people to its website instead.

"It's got a lot of trees in here, and every time I see one I put a check mark by it, so I've got a lot of checks in here," Langford said of her book, adding she has visited about 20 of the Texas trees.

Ricky Taylor said his family used to stop at the tree to picnic when traveling to their grandparents' house in Cisco from Breckenridge.

"I used to play in the tree when I was a kid. I'm 55 now," he said. "It's a huge tree. In the heat of the summer, it's the best shade out here."

Mary Graves of the Dallas Historic Tree Coalition, which also recognized the Half-Way Oak, said her group was excited to see the community acknowledge the old oak and hoped it would serve as a catalyst for other communities to do the same.

"What I think a good old tree like this evokes in my mind is a lot of history. This is something that's lived through it all. It's been a place where people have gathered. It's a wonderful thing to celebrate," she said.

Graves lifted her eyes to the spreading canopy above her head.

"It's a living organism," she said. "It's something that our grandparents had a connection to, we have a connection to, and our grandkids can have a connection to — if we take good care of it."

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