

The man who loved trees

Al Carder, at 95, has just had his second book on trees published. It took him 20 years of research, the help of a loving family — and the support of his very understanding wife.

BY LAUREL BERNARD

Al Carder's history is so ordinary, it can be told in two paragraphs. He was born in 1910 in Calgary, moving a year later to a little town called Cloverdale. He started work in 1935 at 16 cents an hour, 10 hours a day, six days a week and, aside from five years' war service, worked for the same employer — the federal Agriculture department's research station in Beaverlodge, Alta — for the whole of his career. He met his wife, Mary, when she was driving a Sunday school bus in northern Alberta. They got married in 1954 in England, Mary's birthplace, and after 51 years of marriage have three children, Judith, Andrew and Mary-Clare, and two grandchildren. Now long-time residents of Victoria, they have an apartment in a pleasantly homey building near the Legislature and reliable pensions that, since Al's retirement 36 years ago, have allowed them to enjoy decades of golden-age years.

In other words, Al's history is so ordinary, so decent, it's unique. Meeting him and Mary is like stepping back in time to an era when people were salt of the Earth and British Columbia's untouched forests were full of ancient giants. These are true old-growth lives, as deeply rooted as any Sitka spruce in Carmanah Valley and as extraordinary as a 250-foot Douglas-fir rising alone out of the younger growth around it.

So perhaps it's appropriate that Al Carder has spent 20 years researching and writing about notable trees — the trees that stand out for their age or their incredible height or for the massiveness of their trunks and canopies. Last month, at 95, Al saw his second book, *Giant Trees of Western America and The World*, come out with Harbour Publishing. It was partly based on research for *Forest Giants of the World Past and Present*, which was published in 1995 by Fitzhenry & Whiteside.

His interest in trees had little to do with his work, although he spent a lot of his career out in the wild. As a researcher with three degrees in Agriculture, it was his job was to test what crops would grow best in newly opened-up northern territories. In 1967 his contribution to



Al Carder of Victoria has devoted his retirement decades to the study of trees.

Darren Stone/Times Colonist

agriculture was recognized with the Canada Centennial Medal.

Then he retired and he felt, considering his educational experience, he should be doing something. Then he remembered his boyhood outings on a rail handcart with his father, who worked for the Great Northern: "As we went along, pumping along, father would wave and point out these giant Douglas-fir trees and occasionally they stood right near the track, some of them. Tremendous things. And that's how I got interested."

When he did some reading, he felt the books were "haywire in what they said, because when I was a child I had seen much bigger trees than they ever wrote about. And I thought, well, I'll get into that and bring out the truth."

One of the trees Al found when he started to look for the trees of his youth was the Koksilah Tree in the Vancouver Island valley of the same name. A retired old-time logger, Gordon Baird, led him to it in 1977.

Left exposed by logging, the great Douglas-fir was 320 feet tall — 97.6 metres — before its top and, finally, the whole tree blew down.

The hard part for Al was not finding and listing existing notable trees. It was tracking down the historical giants and separating genuine records from apocryphal tales — the big fish stories of the tree world. The authentic forest kings became the focus of his books, along

with existing remarkable trees and tree species. He created scale drawings of many of them and often photographed the still standing ones, using Mary as a handy measuring stick to show size.

"That's how we sell the book to our friends," she says, referring to the first book. "I say, 'there's 21 pictures of me in there.'"

We should spare a moment here for Mary, who has shared her husband with many mistresses, a grove of sylvan beauties whose vital statistics Al knows better than any human being's. "Some men have an eye for women, but I had an eye for trees," he says, and she adds, "If you were a tree, he would remember your name and your measurements."

Mary has spent her holidays trekking to trees in Washington, Oregon, California, Australia (twice), Tasmania (twice), New Zealand and England. Al may not have a mistress in every port, but he has tree in every wood. In fact, he still spends time admiring the measurements of a giant sequoia he can see from his bedroom; he believes it may stand as high as 170 feet — 52 metres — making it the tallest tree in Victoria.

And Mary has shared in Al's research battles and work, including a correspondence of more than 1,600 letters. When he wrote his first book, she typed the manuscript before passing the torch to Mary-Clare, who computerized Al's

longhand work.

"I've had a lot of help in this work," Al says. "Particularly my family, Mary and the kids. And I've had a lot of help from other people, too, outside. The whole thing would be impossible if you didn't get this help."

Family is important to Mary and Al. And faith — perhaps particularly to Mary. She admits she is not as keen on trees as Al. In person, he has a roguish twinkle and an air of stubborn determination. No doubt he has needed both qualities to cope with his now almost total deafness. Mary, 80, is so organized and quick she could probably run a country or two, but she seems the embodiment of a sweet soul.

Al, too, conveys a sense of spiritual belief that comes out when he is asked what's so compelling about trees. He finds it hard to articulate but is so affected, he is moved to tears.

Finally, he quotes Henry David Thoreau, "With all your science can you tell how it is, and whence it is that light comes into the soul?" and adds: "Science can't. It's limited. And I've often wonder how light enters the soul, and it does."

And pressed about how he feels when he looks at a tree, he says simply:

"Overcome by wonder."

Laurel Bernard is a Victoria writer and editor.