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WEEKEND BREAK



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Photos by Ron Baldwin/For The Daily Astorian

WHERE ARE THE MONKEYS?



By RON BALDWIN
For The Daily Astorian

When I was a boy, there was a monkey puzzle tree in a yard that we passed when my father drove my mother and I from our farm near Mayger to Longview, Washington, to see my grandmother. The conversation went something like this:

“Wow Dad, look at that crazy tree, what kinda tree is that?”

“That’s a monkey tree, son.”

“But where are the monkeys?”

“Look really hard.”

“Dad I’m really looking hard, and I don’t see any monkeys.”

“You’ll just have to look harder next time,” he said as the tree faded in the distance.

The monkey puzzle tree, *Araucaria araucana*, is an evergreen conifer native to central and southern Chile and western Argentina. It’s the National Tree of Chile and a symbol of pride in the population. The tree can grow to 8 feet in diameter at its base and 170 feet in height in its natural state, but in its home range, it is threatened by logging and poor forest management. Increasingly, the greatest threat to the species is volcanic activity that triggers catastrophic fires in the protected stands of the Corporación Nacional Forestal (Chile National Forest Corp.). Many of the biggest of these trees are 1000-plus years old.

Named for a comment by a Victorian matron benefactor of the British Royal Botanic Garden: “To climb that, would puzzle a monkey,” the stately tree, with its strangely whorled, pointy leaves and distinctive bark is widely

distributed across Northwest neighborhoods. It has become a Northwest nursery staple.

So, how did these trees become so ever-present in Northwest yards?

The 1890s saw a “rash” of “World’s Fairs,” not the least of those being in Chicago and St. Louis. This, quite understandably, created some civic jealousy among emerging American cities of the time, and Portland was certainly one of those. The economic depressions of the 1870s and 1880s were over, the railroads came to town, the mills were hiring, and Portland’s ascendant merchant class was ready to showoff its shiny new city. A partnership was formed, and shares were sold in what was to become the “Lewis and Clark Centennial and American Pacific Exposition and Oriental Fair.” That being a real mouthful, journalists of the time began to refer to it as the “Lewis and Clark Exposition.” Thankfully, that stuck.

According to newspaper accounts of the time, the Exposition Commission leased most of what is now northwest Portland, and broke ground in 1901. The transformation of the site was massive. An artificial lake and



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