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Historic Tree Loses a Few Of Its Limbs

Damage may jeopardize Christmas light tradition

Terry Webster

By Terry Webster
Staff Writer

One of the oldest residents in Highland Park has taken a fall, threatening a long-standing town tradition.

About one-third of the canopy of the 75-foot pecan tree at Armstrong Avenue and Preston Road fell down last week, and it may not be safe to decorate the tree for Christmas, officials said.

A large limb filled with water came loose and took three major limbs with it as it cascaded down the side of the tree, a town landmark dating back to the Civil War.

“It was like seeing a family member who’s hurt,” said Parks Director Ronnie Brown, who has cared for and decorated the tree for 31 years. Town officials and an arborist are unsure whether it will be safe to string Christmas lights on the tree this year because such a large chunk of it is missing.

“It’s still up for debate,” said Alan Johnson, owner and vice president of Holcomb Tree Service in Dallas.

The tradition of stringing Christmas



lights on the tree, known as the Million Dollar Monarch, has been in place since 1927. Only twice has it not happened: during World War II and in 1973 during the energy crisis.

Staff Photo: Chris McGathey
The 75-foot pecan tree at Armstrong Avenue and Preston Road may not be safe to decorate this Christmas after limbs fell.

Town officials have saved the fallen branches and plan to make commemorative plaques or perhaps a gavel for the mayor out of the wood.

“The tree is such an important part of history, and that’s why we decided to save that,” said Brown.

After examining the tree, Johnson said it should survive the damage.

“It’s an old tree, but they have really taken care of it,” Johnson said.

The recovery plan includes replacing a cable wiring system that helps support the tree.

“Right now there are cables up in tree that are 20 to 30 years old,” Johnson said.

The cables stabilize the tree and help to keep it flowing smoothly in the wind, he said.

The tree does not appear to be diseased, but it will likely require some additional trimming to weed out a few pockets of decay.

The biggest concern may come next summer. The tree risks being “sunburnt” because leaves and limbs that protected the trunk are missing on one side, Johnson said.

According to legend, Civil War veteran Joe Cole accidentally ran over the tree while plowing a field on family property. He promptly straightened the tree up and pledged to save it, saying he had seen enough of death and dying in the war.

In the early 1900s, as Highland Park was being settled, developers preserved the tree as the focal point to the entrance into town, officials said.

In 1983, the pecan tree survived a lightning strike. Town work crews installed a metal rod system to ground the tree from future lightning strikes, Brown said.

The pecan tree is so steeped in town tradition that it is painted on a mural in the Mitch Gray and Kay Harrington Gilbert children’s room at the town library, said Bonnie Case, library director. The mural was installed last spring, as part of a \$2.5 million renovation project funded through donations.

“If people don’t know anything else about Highland Park, they know about the pecan tree,” said Case.

Staff writer Josh Hixson contributed to this report.

E-mail terry.webster@peoplenewspapers.com