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The Tale of the Lonesome Pine

When I was a teenager in Dallas, I came across a book named *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*. I remember very little about it except for its atmosphere and the mountains in which the tree grew. The title has remained in my memory and forgotten parts of the story may well be responsible for my having always felt at home in the mountains of North Carolina and Virginia. Now that I have my own "lonesome pine," I must go back to read that book for its story, which is quite different from the story of my pine.



Among the attractive groups of trees in our back yard in 1972 were two tall pine trees about seven feet apart midway down the slope behind our house. The first year we planned a garden, Paul put several tomato plants between the two pines.

The tomatoes thrived, getting the benefit of morning sunlight and a bit of afternoon sun, too. In July, my sister and her husband visited us from Dallas. Charles observed from his bathroom window that one of the pines looked dead. We had already met a tree man, Eugene Fleming, who had cut down some of our dead trees very reasonably with the help of a fascinating crew of children who scaled the trees in a seeming swarm, fastening ropes that they would then pull to guide the trees down safely. In fact, he continued to help us rid our yard of potentially dangerous dead trees. Since he often came around in the winter and pointed out "dead" trees, a few of which we reluctantly allowed him to fell, he became as much a story to us as has the saga of our dead pine.

When Eugene came to remove the dead pine, he promised me that he would not disturb a leaf or bloom of the tomato plants, of which we were immensely proud. With the aid of his growing young helpers pulling the ropes to help guide the tree, he was able to fell it exactly where he intended, and our precious tomato crop was safe. Paul had asked him to cut the trunk into fireplace lengths but to leave them in order to give Paul some exercise splitting them. Eugene, however, was skeptical that Paul, whom he knew to be a professor, would know how to split wood, so he began showing me how I should explain to Paul the proper splitting technique; suddenly the entire tree lay on the ground split in proper form. At least Paul got the exercise of stacking the wood. Moreover,

the tomatoes were our first successful gardening attempt in Virginia. We were new-parent-like proud of them and savored each one.

Several years later, after the other pine tree had crashed harmlessly during a storm, we became aware of a volunteer pine growing near the tree we'd lost. It was a pretty little thing, about head high, giving promise of a tall, graceful tree in just a few years. Alas, a spring storm toppled an oak on the edge of the yard, causing no damage except to the baby pine -- it lost its central branch and one of its lateral branches. It was such a pitiful, misshapen-looking thing that I thought we should remove the tree and start over. Paul, however, a born conservator, chose to experiment, trimming the remaining limbs so that they more closely resembled the conformation of a real, healthy pine. It looked much better, despite not having a true pine symmetry. As the years passed, my baby pine began looking healthier and more promising of a straight maturity. In the meantime, we transplanted two wild azalea bushes to a spot near the pine. The grouping was pleasing, with the spring blooms of the azaleas lending bright red and yellow colors to the area. The pine tree, now in what we might call its adolescent years, has a sturdy, straight trunk with a properly straight canopy. If you look closely, you will notice that the shape of the top is not quite the same as the adult pines in the woods, but the tree has an individual attractiveness that defies classification as a handicapped plant.

My single twenty-some-odd-foot tall pine tree stands alone and proud as a guardian of the wild azaleas - my lovely lonesome pine. Now I must reread that original *Trail of the Lonesome Pine* story.