

The story of Old Man Cedar: A model of strength

by [Gordon Atkinson](#) in the [October 18, 2005](#) issue

In the latter years of the 19th century, an ashe juniper sprouted in a thicket near the Camino Real, the King's Highway, just north of San Antonio, Texas.

Ashe juniper, *juniperus ashei*, normally grows with multiple trunks in a short, squatty fashion, so it looks more like a bush than a tree. In this case, the little juniper sprouted in the middle of a dense grove of live oak and mountain laurel. Desperate for sunlight, the tree grew straight upward, reaching always for the abundant light above. Within five years, its slender trunk burst through the canopy, and it began to spread its greenery above the oaks in the nursery where it had been born.

For the next 30 years, as San Antonio grew from a sleepy town to a city of commerce and influence, the juniper waged war with the plants around it. The first battle between plants is always for light; the second and longer battle is for water. The rocky soil above the Edwards Aquifer is stingy and does not like to give up its precious liquid, but *juniperus ashei* is uniquely suited for this kind of warfare. Its powerful roots can leech gallons of water from the ground each day. Eventually, the live oak and mountain laurel around it began to wither. The mountain laurel adapted quickly, growing sideways and pulling the generations of laurels that followed away from the juniper, where sunlight and water were more readily available. But the live oak had no such ability. In time the trees that first shaded the powerful juniper died, and their decaying trunks enriched the soil and added strength and mass to the victor.

By the middle of the 20th century, the old Camino Real had been renamed Nacogdoches Road, and the juniper had become the undisputed king of the grove. All other plants had to make do with very little water and only the glimmers of sunlight that dodged the juniper's limbs and made it to the ground. The undergrowth also disappeared from beneath the tree, leaving smooth, cool earth scented by a carpet of decaying needles.

During the 1970s, housing developments sprouted along Nacogdoches Road. Cars whizzed by daily, unaware of the drama taking place only 200 yards from the new asphalt road. Six upstart live oak trees, descendants of those under whom the juniper had first sprouted, rose to challenge the tree that had killed their parents. But over the next two decades, the juniper sucked massive amounts of water from the ground, thickening its trunk and increasing its height until it was one of the tallest junipers in all of south Texas. It starved the oaks until their growth was stunted. Huge juniper branches broken off during rare ice storms became weapons, battering the oaks into submission. Finally, the oak trees gave up the battle and settled for a dwarfed existence at the base of their master.

In the early 1990s, the land containing the mighty juniper was sold to a small Baptist church. Cactus, tangles of vines, and native shrubs made the land almost impenetrable. The new owners held onto the deed, hoping to build a church there someday.

One afternoon in 1994, the pastor of this church decided that he wanted to see the land for himself. Wearing heavy clothing and gloves for protection from the thorns and brambles, he stooped and crawled his way from the back of the property to the front. Somewhere near the middle he stumbled upon the largest juniper he had ever seen. Its trunk was so big that he could not stretch his arms around it. Six cowed and withered oak trees at its base bore testimony to a battle that had raged for generations.

The man loved live oaks and was grieved to see the broken juniper branches that had fallen across the oaks, warping them and twisting them into odd shapes. Locals consider the Ashe juniper—commonly called cedar—to be a nuisance, much like an overgrown weed. They spend thousands of dollars trying to rid their property of these trees.

And yet the man felt a deep admiration for the power of the giant before him, and decided to give the tree a name.

“I shall call you Old Man Cedar,” he said aloud.

For the remainder of the 1990s the pastor kept the existence of Old Man Cedar a secret. Some people knew that he loved trees, but he wasn’t sure how they would react to his desire to cherish and nurture a cedar, especially one that had almost destroyed a grove of live oaks.

In 1999, the church finally built a small worship center on the land. The next summer, the pastor took a machete, cut a crude trail to Old Man Cedar and started taking a few people to visit it. Soon most church members had heard of the “giant cedar.”

In 2003, the church cleared another portion of land and built a cottage that provided classrooms and could also be used as a retreat center. The edge of the clearing was only a few feet from Old Man Cedar. One day, a path leading to the great tree was carved out of the brush and lined with stones by the fourth-, fifth- and sixth-grade Sunday school class.

Behold, the first prayer garden of Covenant Baptist Church was born.

The broken branches were removed from the oak trees, the ground around the cedar was cleared, and a little girl named Anna painted her name on a stone and placed it lovingly at the base of the ferocious giant. From that moment on, no one could think of the tree as a warrior. Old Man Cedar became a covering for children and for those who came to pray.

The pastor was sitting on the back porch of the retreat building, enjoying the peace and quiet, when he saw Anna skip along the path to the tree with a rock in her hands, then skip out again a few moments later, dancing a little Anna dance. He went into the shady grove and found her stone and a little carpet for kneeling. He lay his hand on Old Man Cedar, prayed for peace and then spoke to the tree.

“Behold, the limbs that were your sword and hammer are gone. We have turned them into ploughshares of peace. Children and painted rocks now sit at your feet. You will be loved and cared for, for you have earned the right to exist. What was a battlefield is now a place of prayer. May your story be an example to us all.”

The tree, of course, said nothing.