

Nothing characterizes a southern swamp more than a giant moss draped cypress tree standing knee-deep in a backwater slough. Technically known as baldcypress, these survivors of ancient life forms once found across North America and Europe are now greatly restricted in range. In the United States, they are native to river bottoms and swamps in the Deep South and along the Eastern Seaboard north to Delaware. In Louisiana, although the last large virgin stands are gone, cypresses can still be found in every parish.

Cypress trees once grew to seventeen feet in diameter and 140 feet in height. They were the largest trees in the south and lived to be four hundred to six hundred years old. A few were estimated to be more than one thousand years old. Even though cypresses commonly grow in wetlands, their seeds cannot germinate under water and young seedling die very quickly if they are overtopped by flood waters. This means that the trees growing in Cheniere Brake in west Ouachita Parish, Bayou Desiard in Monroe, Walnut Bayou in Tallulah and other similar areas began life on dry or muddy ground which was not flooded during the growing season for at least a couple of years. Older trees can adapt to intermittent flooding regimes and usually develop fluted trunks, but permanent flooding will eventually kill the trees. A steady decline of cypresses in Bayou Desiard is quite evident.

Scientists have often pondered the functions of the unique root-like growths commonly known as cypress knees. Once thought to be structures to help the tree breathe, knees are now believed to be storage areas for starches needed for growth.

Historically cypresses have been very important to man in Louisiana. The wood is easy to work and very attractive, the heartwood having a reddish hue. The most famous characteristic is the durability and resistance to decay that develops in the wood of trees several hundred years old. Native Americans were the first to realize this and in northeast Louisiana, as elsewhere, routinely used cypress for dugout canoes. Early colonists were quick to discover this trait. In 1797, Don Juan Filhiol described Fort Miro, the first sizable colonial structure in the Ouachita Valley, as "an enclosure in posts of tipped cypress...in an area which is found the principal house...covered in cypress shingles." In the late 1800's the demand for cypress lumber for boats, furniture, pilings, trim, shingles, siding, and coffins was great. It was during this period that the vast virgin stands were logged over. By 1925 the once thriving cypress industry was in a spiraling decline as the last of the raw products were exhausted.

Most cypress stands today are second growth, but there still remain a few giants among us. They exist because they are hollow and thus not merchantable or because they grow in an area so remote as to make harvest unfeasible. They tower one hundred feet above the earth and laid down their first annular rings during the classical period of the Mayan culture. They germinated and grew into seedling as Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman emperor. They were sound and mature when the sun gleamed from the swords of Hernando DeSoto's men as they marched across northeast Louisiana in a fruitless search for gold. It is possible that their limbs were once laden with the weight of a thousand passenger pigeons and that their bark was probed by ivory-billed woodpeckers. Cougars and bears may have sought refuge in their hollows. It is likely that a few of these will still be greeting each spring with a fresh feathering of needle-like leaves in centuries to come. Editor's note: The preceding is the text from a program on KEDM 90.3 Public Radio, Monroe, called "Bayou Diversity." It is written and presented each Friday at 12:10 & 7:05 pm by Kelby Ouchley. Kelby is employed with the La. Wetland Management District by the USFWS, Darbonne NWR, at Farmerville.