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Small Town

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OLD OAK CHARMS SMALL TOWN

By Ellery Butler

Gina Bingham, a reference librarian at Safety Harbor Public Library, excitedly tells patrons about the historic Baranoff Oak that stands tall right outside the library. She even writes a blog about this tree, the oldest living oak tree in Pinellas County.

People wonder if the Baranoff Oak was a sapling when Ponce De Leon arrived in Florida.

"The tree is a fascination for everybody that comes into the area. It’s very iconic for Safety Harbor," Bingham said.

The oak, which is estimated to be between 300 and 500 years old, is featured in the town’s business directory.

"They’re not actually sure how old the tree is. People ask that all the time," Bingham said.

The increasing number of questions about the Baranoff Oak has made the need for more information immediate.

It used to be known as the Safety Harbor Oak, but was renamed in 2004 in honor of Dr. Salem Baranoff, the owner of the nearby Safety Harbor Spa. He helped establish the first public library in Safety Harbor, Bingham said. Portraits of Baranoff hang in the library.

"The place where the tree is is actually owned by UCITA Properties, Inc., so it’s corporately owned land," Bingham said. "They entered into a partnership with the city in 2003 and they planned this passive park space around the oak, so that now it’s protected."

The plans were created in May of 2003 and the park was completed in 2004.

The tree’s impressive size, at 20 feet around, and its age make it a big attraction for more than just the citizens and the visitors. A pencil artist, Stephen Malkoff draws for the National Register of Historic Trees. He’s earned the nickname “Tree Man” for his works. The Baranoff Oak was his subject in 2006.

Dee Dokumaci, owner of Rose Garden Boutique, said the oak will always be a part of Safety Harbor. If the city contemplated cutting it down, Dokumaci says she thinks there would be big protests.

"I hope they never, ever chop down that beautiful tree. I doubt they will. I doubt that," Dokumaci said.

The Baranoff Oak, library, safety harbor

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