

## The Tree Circus

*By Sharon Yamanaka*

The Tree Circus started as a tourist attraction in Scotts Valley in 1947. It featured sculpted trees, their trunks shaped into curlicues, hearts, diamonds, squares and zigzags. The trees had names that included the Oliver Twist Tree, Needle and Thread Tree, Double Corkscrew, and Cathedral Window.

Axel Erlandson was the creator of these tree trunk topiaries. He was born in 1884, the son of Swedish immigrants. In the early 1900s his family moved from Minnesota to a farm in central California. In the mid-1920s, Erlandson started grafting and shaping tree trunks as a hobby. He primarily used sycamore and box elder for his sculpture but also included willow, poplar, ash, birch, alder, loquat and apple.

Erlandson crafted about 28 sculptured trees at his farm near Turlock, California. By the mid-1940s, Erlandson was ready to retire from farming and concentrate his efforts on his trees. He purchased a parcel on Scotts Valley Drive and transplanted about a dozen of his living trees, some were over 20 years old. In 1947, the Tree Circus opened for business with a 25-cent admission fee. The Tree Circus appeared often in Ripley's "Believe It or Not!" during the late 1940s and 1950s. It also appeared in Life Magazine and other national and international publications.

In the early 1960s, Erlandson tried unsuccessfully to have the state parks take over the management of his enterprise. In 1963, due to poor health, he sold the property along with the trees. Axel Erlandson died in 1964. At that time, about 74 of his arboreal sculptures remained. During next twenty years the property changed hands and the trees suffered from neglect.

Mark Primack, a Santa Cruz architect became a knowledgeable authority on the Tree Circus and the life of Axel Erlandson. Through his efforts many of the trees were saved. His campaign to save the trees caught the attention of Michael Bonfante, a nurseryman, tree lover and owner of Nob Hill Foods. In 1984, he purchased the collection of 25 circus trees.

By the mid-1970s, Bonfante had created a park for Nob Hill employees in the Gilroy Area. He envisioned expanding it into a garden theme park open to the public. After selling Nob Hill Foods to Raley's in 1998, Bonfante turned his complete attention to creating the Bonfante Gardens Theme Park on the Hecker Pass Highway. The Park opened in 2001 with the living sculpted trees as one of the attractions. In March 2007 the Park reopened with a new name: Gilroy Gardens Family Theme Park. Gilroy Gardens is "a 501(c)(3) non-profit educational institution whose mission is to educate and inspire families, especially children, to appreciate horticulture and the importance of trees in our lives." The legacy of Axel Erlandson lives on.



*Photo of one of the original trees*

## Sources

- *Gilroy Gardens Family Theme Park Website (gilroygardens.org) visited Feb 1, 2009*
- *Hilgers, Laura. "Out on a Limb" Via. March–April, 2001. pp. 46-49.*
- *Reames, Richard. How to Grow a Chair. Williams, OR: Arborsmith Studios, 1995.*
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