

## TREE CIRCUS

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By Geoffrey Dunn

On January 14, 1957, the pages of *Life* magazine—then the most popular weekly news periodical in the world—carried a two-page photo spread set in Scotts Valley, of all places, then an unimaginably remote and isolated burgh nestled at the base of the Santa Cruz Mountains along what is today known as Highway 17. A few months later the community would be best known as the home of Santa's Village, the small, Christmas-themed amusement park replete

with reindeer from Ukaleet, Alaska.

The subject of *Life* magazine's attention, however, had nothing to do with Santa, but was a small roadside attraction called "The Tree Circus," opened a decade earlier by an immigrant from Sweden named Axel Erlandson, who had grafted and trained trees displayed on the site into an assortment of fascinating configurations.

"The thousands of motorists who daily whiz along Route 17, six miles north

of Santa Cruz," *Life* declared, "hardly ever notice a cluster of plain signs marked 'Tree Circus.' As a result, they miss seeing a display of tree culture which beats anything in the gardens of Versailles. The display belongs to Axel Erlandson, a retired bean farmer and self-taught hor-

(Above) In 1945 Swedish emigrant Axel Erlandson, inspired by a visit to the Mystery Spot, purchased a parcel of land along the main highway which became known as the "Tree Circus."



ticulturalist, whose hobby is twisting and grafting trees into fantastic forms."

The two-page spread included four images of Erlandson's unique botanical work, including "Lover's Heart" (created by splitting the trunk of an elder tree); "Twin Pretzels" (formed by a single sycamore); "Basket Tree," (a cylindrical lattice cross-grafting six sycamores); and what was one of my favorite of Erlandson's creations when I was a kid, "Double Corkscrew" (a box elder shaped by wire and electrician's tape).

"The trees... must be corseted up to seven years," *Life* noted, "and often braced for several years more before they can stand unsupported."

Scotts Valley—and its eccentric adopted son, the 71-year-old year old Erlandson, who was apparently blessed with the patience of a saint—had hit the big time. For the next few years at least, attendance at the "Tree Circus" picked up considerably.

**T**he enigmatic Axel N. Erlandson was born in Hallands län, Sweden, on December 15, 1884, and, when less than two years old, immigrated to a small farming community in northwest Minnesota with his parents and two older brothers; a sister was born the following year. His father, Alfred, farmed the barren land for barley and other grains, and also worked



(Above) Master arborist Axel Erlandson stands aside his "Chain Tree" in his Tree Circus located in Scotts Valley.

as a carpenter. The family further engaged in lime production, running a small lime-kiln on their property.

The Erlandson's were a close-knit family. The four siblings lived at home well into their twenties and early thirties, while their mother, like many immigrant women of their generation, never learned to speak English.

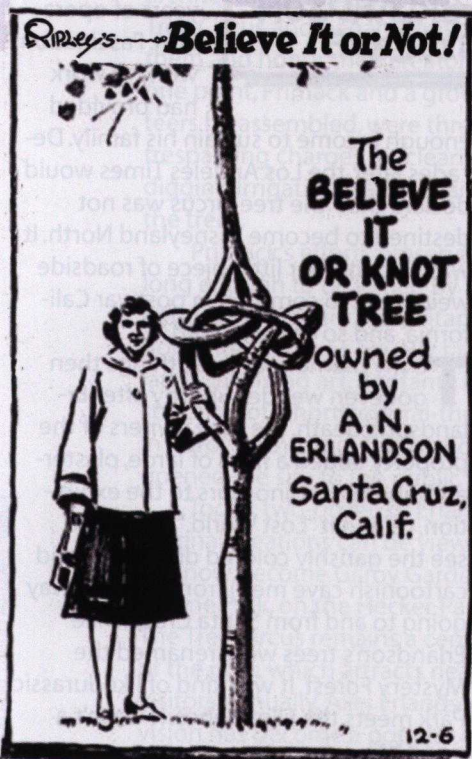
In 1902, the Erlandsons rented a railway boxcar and relocated with several other Swedish families to the far more hospitable climes of the San Joaquin Valley, where an Evangelical Covenant Church colony promised irrigated for farming operations in Hilmar, a few miles south of Turlock. It wasn't quite the Eden they had anticipated. Moreover, an innovative threshing machine that the young Axel

had developed in Minnesota was left behind because of the move.

Axel's father Alfred died in 1915. In 1924 the 39-year-old Axel married Leona Bobbett, originally from Missouri and 11 years his junior, and they eventually had a lone daughter, Wilma, born in January of 1928.

It was in the mid-1920s, even before his daughter was born, that Erlandson began experimenting with trees. He noticed that some sycamores on his 40-acre bean farm grew together at their trunks or branches. The phenomenon—called "inosculation" by botanists—fascinated Erlandson, and he began experiments with various deciduous species on his property. Like an architect, he planned his designs on paper and then grafted, pruned, bent, wired, and taped the trunks and various branches to his perceived vision.

Erlandson kept his hobby largely to himself. He considered his methods as



(Left) The "Tree Circus" trees captured the attention of Robert Ripley and he included the curious trees in Ripley's Believe It or Not! numerous times.





something akin to "trade secrets." When those who saw the trees marveled at his handiwork and asked how he did it, he responded mystically by declaring, "I speak to them."

While vacationing in Santa Cruz at the end of World War II, the Erlandsons visited the Mystery Spot, which had opened in 1939 and drew large crowds of curiosity seekers. Thinking that people might be interested in seeing his remarkable living configurations (and willing to pay a small price to do so), he bought a three-quarters-of-an-acre property on the San Cruz-San Jose Highway, just west of Carbonerra Creek.

Originally advertising the roadside attraction with a sign that read "See World's Strangest Trees Here," Erlandson opened his botanical exhibit in the spring of 1947. In an article entitled

"Strangest Trees on Earth," Santa Cruz Sentinel reporter Frank Jones dubbed Erlandson's collection "a nurseryman's nightmare" with trees that grow "in a most weird and fantastic way."

Jones described Erlandson himself as a "quiet, friendly man," but when the reporter asked the amateur botanist how he shaped his trees, Erlandson demurred. "One day, years ago, I suddenly got the idea," Erlandson asserted. "It seems that it was from some intelligence other than my own." He acknowledged that about half of his experiments ended in failure. Several of his trees had also died on the move from Turlock and others had been

(Above) Axel Erlandson climbs the rungs of his amazing "Ladder Tree."

damaged during the process of transplanting them.

According to his daughter Wilma, Erlandson changed the name of his attraction to "Tree Circus" at her suggestion in the mid-1950s. The admission price, at that time, was 30 cents a head.

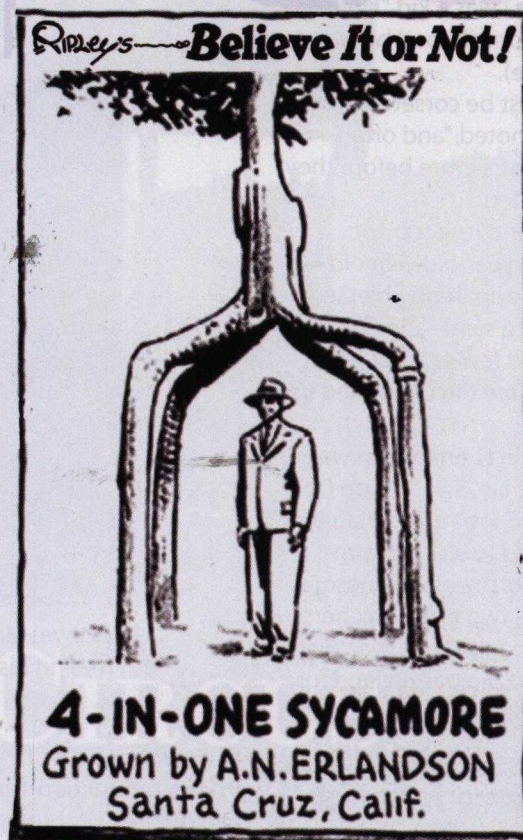
After receiving a considerable amount of publicity during the calm of the Eisenhower era, by the early 1960s,

the novelty of Erlandson's artistic creations had worn off. Business declined, as did Erlandson's health. In 1963, saddled with a failing heart and unable to care for the trees properly, he sold the attraction, trees and all. He died the following year.

According to records Erlandson kept, some 24,500 visitors had paid to see the trees in the 16 years of operation. Fascination with his work had provided

enough income to sustain his family. Decades later, the Los Angeles Times would declare that "the tree circus was not destined to become Disneyland North. It was just another little piece of roadside weirdness, so common in postwar California, and so easily missed."

To my memory, at least, things then got even weirder. Shortly after Erlandson's death, the new owners of the property added a herd of large, plaster-and-fiberglass dinosaurs to the exhibition, calling it "Lost World." You could see the garishly colored dinosaurs (and cartoonish cave men) from the highway going to and from Santa Cruz, while Erlandson's trees were renamed the Mystery Forest. It was kind of like Jurassic Park meets the Flintstones. It wasn't a good fit.







(Above) Axel Erlandson fine tunes this "Double Corkscrew" tree while one his many cats enjoys its curling trunk.

A decade later, Lost World was closed down—and Erlandson's carefully crafted creations were threatened by neglect and ultimately destruction. Intrepid young architect Mark Primack, a native of Rhode Island who had studied botanical architecture in England, discovered the Tree Circus and began a mission to save them and honor their creator's legacy. At one point, Primack and a group of volunteers he assembled, were threatened with trespassing charges for clearing weeds, digging irrigation trenches and watering the trees.

Primack's efforts preserved the Circus long enough to be joined by another tree enthusiast, grocery store titan Michael Bonfante, who was equally taken by Erlandson's living art. Bonfante began construction of a horticultural-themed park in Gilroy in the mid-1980s and eventually opened the site to the public in 2001.

Today, two-dozen of Erlandson's original creations can be viewed at what has now become Gilroy Gardens Family Theme Park, on the Hecker Pass Highway. The Tree Circus remains a central focus of the park, which attracts nearly 500,000 visitors annually. Axel Erlandson's private vision has become a popular cultural

phenomenon. In many respects, he was simply ahead of his time.

Several preserved dead trees from Erlandson's collection reside at the Museum of Art and History in Santa Cruz. One was loaned to the World Expo 2005, Aichi, Japan, for display in the Growing Village pavilion. Still another, "The Telephone Booth Tree," prepared by Primack, is located at the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore.

And I have discovered one last remnant of Erlandson's creativity on what was the original site of the Circus, at the northwest corner of the Bustichi Building, on Scotts Valley Drive in Scotts Valley.

Axel Erlandson's legacy, like his Tree Circus, lives on. 🌳



(Above) Axel Erlandson's daughter Wilma, with the "Heart Tree." It was at her suggestion Erlandson change the name of his attraction to "Tree Circus."