

✓ Tree Circus

Architect rescues famous tree

SV Tree Circus once drew crowds

By ROBIN MUSITELLI

Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — The once-famous telephone booth tree, a member of the Scotts Valley Tree Circus, has moved at least temporarily to Santa Cruz.

And if Santa Cruz architect Mark Primack has his way, it may wind up in a Baltimore museum.

The tree was part of Axel Erlandson's collection of living trees that had been grafted into contortionist-like shapes — ladders, chairs, knots, hearts, slingshots and spiral staircases.

The once world-famous collection was featured in Life magazine in the 1950s, in Ripley's Believe It or Not and in the Guinness Book of World Records.

The trees eventually became a part of Scotts Valley's Lost World attraction, where they sat amid larger-than-life fake dinosaurs in the early 1960s.

The dinosaurs departed in 1977 and the trees, after years of neglect, in 1985 when Nob Hill founding owner and horticulturist Michael Bonfonte moved 30 of the trees to his property just outside Gilroy.

The telephone tree was left be-

hind.

Planted in 1950 or 1951, the tree is actually 10 poplar trees planted in a 4-foot diameter circle, said Primack.

As the trees grew, they were grafted into a weave, leaving a door opening. At about 8 feet, the tree closes back into a single trunk.

Primack had led the campaign to save Erlandson's trees in the years before Bonfonte moved them. He succeeded in having one tree moved to the McPherson Art and History Center on Front Street and a half-dozen more, all dead, are in storage with Santa Cruz Parks Department.

After receiving permission from the property owner, Robert Hogan, Primack returned to the old Tree Circus site last week with builder Bill Schultz, crane operator James Savattone and arborist Mark Thomas to move the telephone tree.

The tree is dead now, and was beginning to rot, said Primack.

Primack hacked his way to the tree with a machete. Schultz braced the tree to keep it from compressing. Savattone operated the crane to lift the tree, and Thomas cut the top of the tree that had grown about 20 feet high, and again at the roots.

The moving job took about six hours, not including the planning.

Primack said the operation was a success. "It's gorgeous," he said.

The tree is now at Primack's home. He has stripped the bark to allow the tree to dry and is discussing a permanent home at the American Visionary Art Museum, under construction in Baltimore.



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Mark Primack hopes the telephone booth tree will find a home in a Baltimore, Md. museum.