

TREE CIRCUS: Alive and well in Gilroy

Except soon it will be known as the 'Enchanted Forest'

NEARLY LEFT for dead, the once-famous Scotts Valley Tree Circus has found a home in Gilroy. Yes, this southern Santa Clara County city known best for garlic, has come out smelling like a rose with the acquisition of more than two dozen of the strangest, most-twisted trees in the world.

The trees — some of which got their contortionist-like start back in the 1930s — came from the imagination and grafting skills of the late Axel Erlandson, a former Turlock bean farmer.

The former Scotts Valley Tree Circus won't be known by that name any longer, however. Gilroy businessman Michael Bonfante will use the trees as part of the "Enchanted Forest" in his planned Nob Hill Family Park.

Even now, the trees are being nursed back into health at

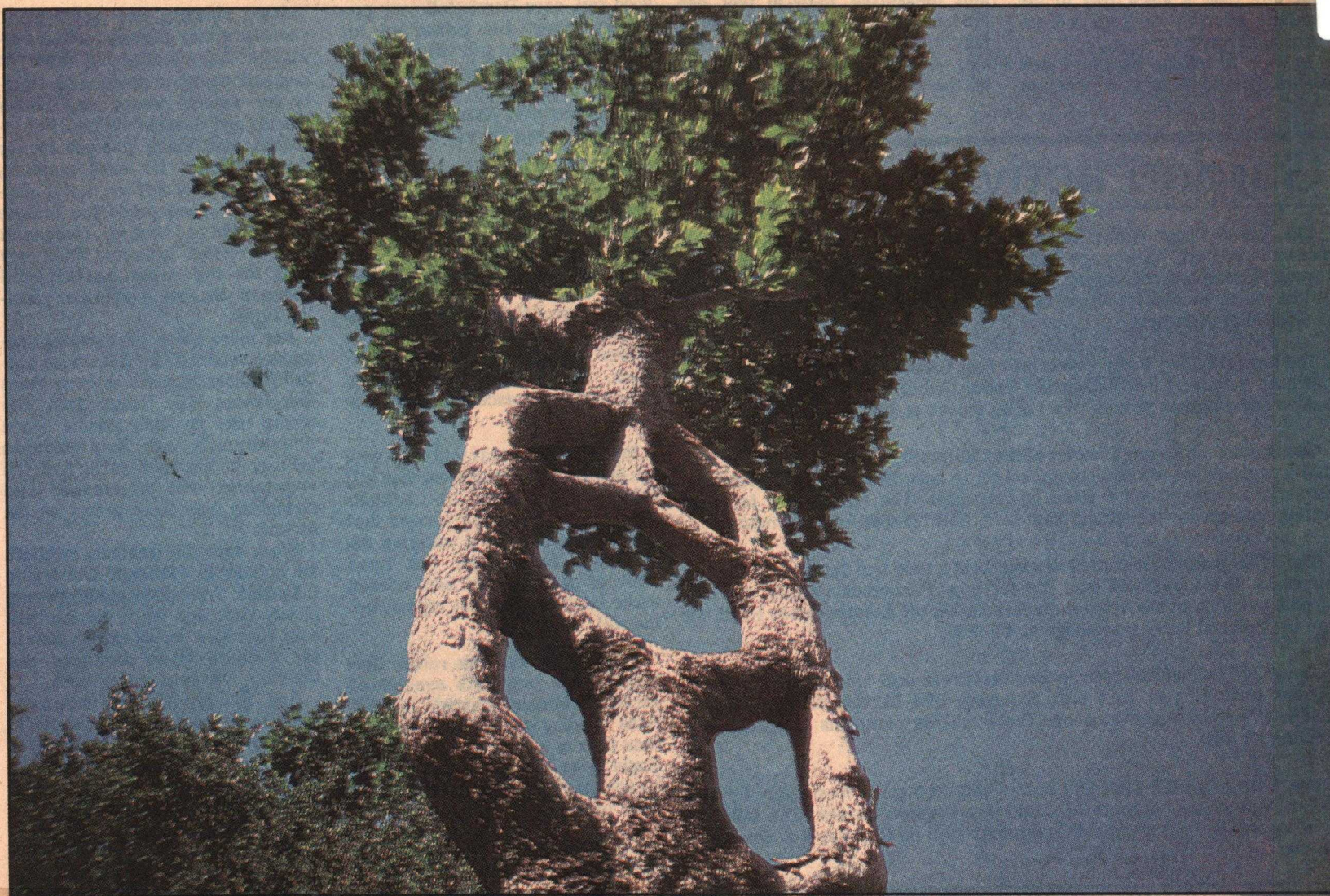
branches were grafted to the trunk or to some other part of the tree. For some specimens, wooden towers up to 35 feet high were needed.

"You would think that as the trees grow, the formation would change," Erlandson was quoted as saying in a 1955 Sentinel story. "But, they don't. Branches will get larger in circumference, but the shape will remain about the same."

THE AMAZING 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.

Ah, if only Lost World were still around today. With the popularity of dinosaurs with the younger set, you know the attraction would be making it.

Yet, in the '60s — despite the notoriety and uniqueness of the trees — the attraction went under. The



Keith Muraoka/Sentinel



Keith Muraoka

One out of some 30 former Scotts Valley Tree Circus trees recovers nicely at a 65-acre Gilroy tree farm.

Mulching it over

Bonfante's 65-acre wholesale tree nursery off Hecker Pass Highway. Sitting in huge, six-foot diameter boxes, the trees' trunks and branches have been white-washed to protect from sun-scald.

The trees are getting the upmost care, recuperating from years of neglect. In the hot sun and garlicky-scent of Gilroy, birds chirp sarcastically overhead as if criticizing what man has done to their nesting places. No one could blame the birds if they're more than just a little confused.

For Erlandson did quite a job changing what Mother Nature planned.

A native of Sweden, Erlandson — who died in 1964 in Scotts Valley at the age of 79 — painstakingly shaped, molded and grafted trees into the unbelievable forms, beginning more than 40 years ago. The living poplars, elms, sycamores, maples, oaks and birches were transformed into ladders, chairs, knots, hearts, slingshots and spiral staircases.

Their names tell something of the shapes they permanently hold — the watertower tree, a country boy's slingshot, the lightening tree, the boa constrictor and the four-legged giant.

Erlandson's trees were once world-famous, having been featured in Life magazine in the 1950s. His work was listed in Ripley's Believe It or Not some 10 times, as well as the Guinness Book of World Records.

Erlandson developed his fanatical displays with the help of wood, steel and wire guides. In the developing stages, he once referred to them as resembling "hospitalized victims with broken bones."

To make circles, he fastened young branches to heavy guides until they completed a circle. Then, the

trees, in particular, suffered after Erlandson's death. They passed from owner to owner and, unfortunately, were neglected in care. One by one some trees died, depleting in number from what once was 65 to less than 30. Periodically, however, interest in them would crop up.

In 1979, the trees were to be sold to Southern California landscaper Joe Cahill, whose garden designs graced the estates of Bob Dylan and Herb Alpert. That deal, like others before it, also fell through.

The trees made news again in 1983 when volunteers, led by Santa Cruz architect Mark Primack, illegally entered the Scotts Valley Drive property to water and restore the remaining trees. In 1984, Ripley's Believe It or Not in San Francisco expressed an interest in buying the trees, but that, too, never came to pass.

Enter Bonfante, who as early as 1984, thought the trees would fit nicely in his Gilroy amusement park, which — up to then — was only a dream.

Bonfante, who owns the 21-store Nob Hill grocery chain, has a reputation for getting things done — for turning dreams into reality. He did the same with the Tree Circus.

Sealing a deal with then-owner Robert Hogan, Bonfante began the painstaking task of moving the trees. A 12-man crew from Tree Haven, his wholesale tree nursery, took several weeks to safely dig and box those trees they felt would be able to survive the move.

The trees then sat in Scotts Valley until the fall of 1985 when they were moved — one by one — on huge flatbed trucks to Gilroy.

"I can even tell you how many power poles there are between Scotts Valley and Gilroy — 237,"

says Bonfante, smiling. "I counted every one, measuring the height underneath those lines the trees would have to pass."

Bonfante says the move cost between \$75,000 and \$100,000. Since then, the trees have been getting top-notch attention and expert care at the nursery.

Jerry Tracey, corporate landscape architect for Nob Hill, says, "We're still in the process of bringing them into healthy condition."

That has included some "bridge grafting" where trees have lost a branch or two, as well as treatment against common problems like scale and mildew. One tree was lost when it came down with a terminal case of heart-rot, says Tracey.

AMONG THOSE saved were Erlandson's very first attempt. It involved four sycamores that were originally planted in a six-foot square. When the young tips reached about 15 feet high, Erlandson startled his family and friends by bringing the tops together and grafting them into a miniature cupola. The tree became known as "the four-legged giant."

Another old-time favorite that was saved was a strange planting of eight sycamores. Planted in a circle, when they came together, Erlandson began grafting away until the trunk was a mass of open triangles.

A willow tree, meanwhile, forms the shape of a heart, waist-high on the trunk. Another willow has two hearts, side by side.

Tracey's crews also have separated one specimen, which actually had been three trees grafted together, when tissue was damaged. "We've separated them and will be re-grafting them together," he says.

The trees aren't just watered on a regular basis, but "spit irrigated." Crews monitor the soil, using soil probes. The trees are then watered with "spitters," similar to drip-

irrigation, where the trees are getting a constant, low level of water and liquid fertilizer.

As mentioned earlier, the trees eventually will grace the "Enchanted Forest" portion of Bonfante's planned amusement park. The project has been described by some as "part Disneyland and part Casa de Fruta."

Vice President/General Manager Bill Ayer says, "It won't be like Disneyland, per say, where there are roller coasters and rides like that. There will be two major themes — trees /horticulture and California history."

The \$30-million, 75-acre park is earmarked to be fully in operation by 1992. Already, a man-made lake, complete with rock waterfalls, has

The twisted, contortionist-like trees are slowly being nursed back to health in the hot sun and garlicky-scent of Gilroy.

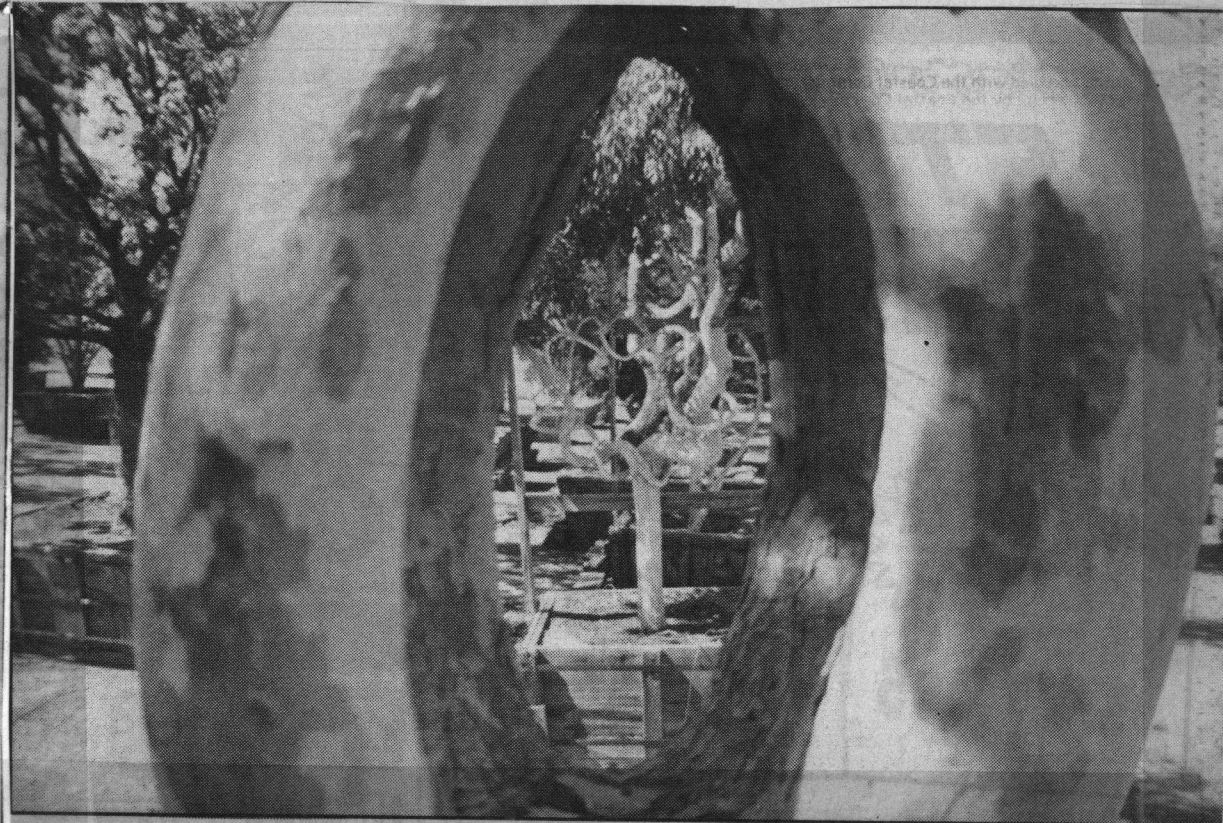
been built, along with a miniature railroad. Five miniature trains are planned to bring visitors into the park from the parking area. A 350-seat outdoor amphitheater is being dug now. A restaurant is expected to open by 1989.

"The former Tree Circus is expected to be one of our horticultural attractions," says Ayers. "Everybody who sees them

are just wide-eyed with amazement."

Bonfantes hopes the trees will form the base of "one of the most memorable garden experiences in the West."

"Enchanted Forest" notwithstanding, though, Erlandson's famous trees will always be the "Tree Circus" to locals.



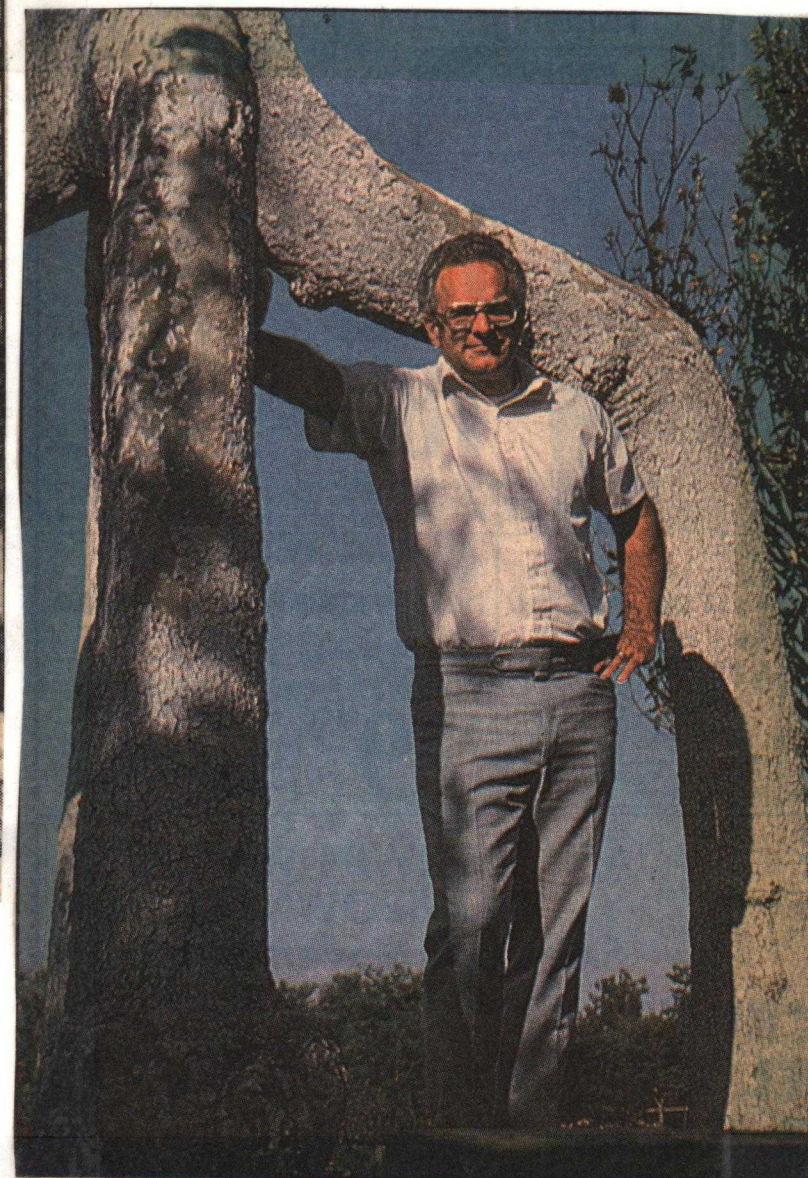
A spiral-shaped tree is viewed through the hollowed-out portion of another tree.



The twisted trees line a row at the tree farm, recovering and gaining nourishment in the huge containers.

REFERENCE

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Gilroy Tree Haven tree farm owner Michael Bonfante.