

Retrospect/Mard Naman

# LIMBS IN LIMBO

*New West*  
 8/25/80

"... The Tree Circus was on the verge of being bulldozed when horticulturist Joe Cahill bought it. Suddenly local citizens were upset . . ."

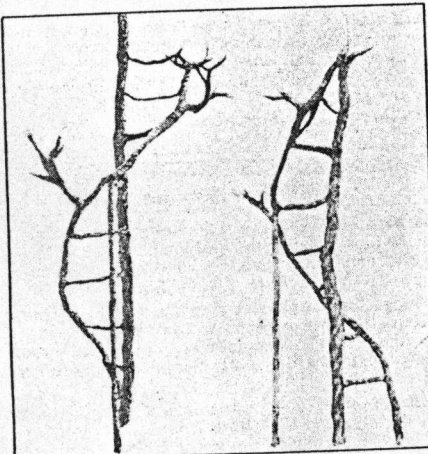
**F**OR YEARS the sign read simply SEE WORLD'S STRANGEST TREES HERE. Strange, indeed. They were straight out of the pages of *Ripley's Believe It or Not*—healthy trees growing into loops, ladders, zigzags, spiral staircases, cathedral windows and hearts. Back in the fifties, the Tree Circus, as the 66 specimens were called, was just another roadside attraction in Scotts Valley, a small town a few miles north of Santa Cruz. Passing motorists who stopped and paid a quarter were impressed by this beautiful grove, especially in winter, when the trees' stark, deciduous limbs jumped out against the sky. A person felt he had somehow taken the wrong exit and ended up in the Twilight Zone.

These twisted trees with limber limbs are the creation of a mysterious gentleman named Axel Erlandson, a bored bean farmer from Turlock who didn't care for farming. In 1931, at age 47, he began a hobby of grafting young trees together into various shapes. No one knows exactly how he did it, because Axel was a secretive man. He had moved out West from Minnesota as a young man, burying a model of a threshing machine he had built rather than leaving it for someone else to discover. When he died, in 1964, he took his secrets with him.

But his basic tree-bending techniques were probably not that difficult. He started with young plants no thicker than a little finger. Using a form of grafting called pleaching, he stripped the bark to expose the inner cambium layer. Then he'd tie the branches together with cloth tape and leave them for a year. These stripped areas became the points at which the trees would grow together as one.

Erlandson had been proud of his creations and kept a journal of comments made by curious passersby. He excitedly wrote in July 1952 that an Oakland woman had told him, "There is seven wonders of the world and this is the eight one."

After Axel's death, the property changed hands several times, and the



Take a bough: creator Axel Erlandson in his branch office; Mark Primack's scale drawing

trees suffered years of abuse. To attract customers, one owner tied huge plaster dinosaurs to the trees with wire (killing many of them) and renamed the place "Lost World." He strapped a plastic saber-toothed tiger to the top of his car and drove around for publicity. On the fence around the trees he painted cave-men dragging women around by the hair. People stayed away in droves.

By 1978 the trees were all but forgotten. The land had been bought by a de-

veloper named Robert Hogan, who was on the verge of bulldozing them so he could build something useful on the half-acre site. Part of the job was already done for him. At least one-third of the grove was already in the grave from neglect—for years, nobody had bothered to water the trees or care for them.

Just about the only one interested in the trees at the time was a young Santa Cruz architect named Mark Primack. Believing the trees would be destroyed and all record of them lost, Primack began quietly documenting their demise in 1977. He began with very little money but spent countless hours drawing detailed pictures, taking photos and writing the history of the trees. He knew that these beautiful specimens of what he calls "botanic architecture" would one day be hailed as

genuine folk art.

Then in September of last year, Los Angeles horticulturist Joe Cahill found out about the trees. "I've been salvaging stuff since I was a kid," says Cahill. He now develops private parks for the rich and famous, has landscaped a seven-acre plot of land in Malibu for born-again Bob Dylan and is currently working for Herb Alpert. Cahill gave the trees a new lease on life.

He paid Hogan \$12,000 for the trees but not the property. And as part of the deal he was given an ultimatum: Get the trees off the property in two and a half years. (At that time Hogan plans to build on the site.) This presents no small problem. The trees can be moved without damage, but it takes months of root preparation and about \$200,000—money Cahill doesn't have.

His first task, though, was cleaning up. "The place was a wreck," he says. "We hauled off four truckloads of junk before we could even get in there." Cahill proceeded to make plans to move the trees to a more peaceful site. "I wanted to build a park or arboretum. Right now they're on a half-acre lot—they need more space." The lot is not exactly conducive to the peaceful contemplation of nature's wonders. It's right next to a construction

site and a lumberyard.

The pruned trees on the cleaned-up site were impressive. People began to notice. And word got around that they had been purchased and were going to be moved. Suddenly the good citizens of Santa Cruz and Scotts Valley were upset. A committee called the Friends of the Scotts Valley Tree Circus was formed to keep the old trees put. Cahill wasn't quite ready for it. "People were screaming, 'This guy from L.A. is going to steal our trees! Stop him!'" Cahill remembers, "It was like trials for war crimes: 'Who let the trees go? Why were they sold?' It went on and on."

The whole thing reminds Joe Cahill of the story about the guy who finds an old rusty lantern that nobody wants. He cleans it, shines it up, and the thing turns out to have a genie in it. Suddenly everyone wants in on the action.

Cahill doesn't want to make enemies, though. In the world of the Tree Circus, he has been the tightrope walker. To placate the locals and get their support, he has promised to do everything he can to keep them in the area. If Cahill fails to raise the money or find a suitable site, he can still sell the trees off individually to his clients. Dead or alive. The trees could be cut into pieces, varnished and end up above someone's billiard table in the den like a hunter's prize moose head. Cahill, however, still thinks he can keep the grove together.

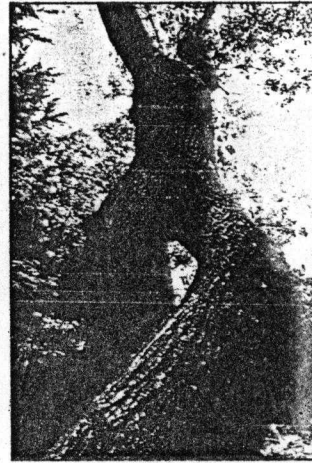
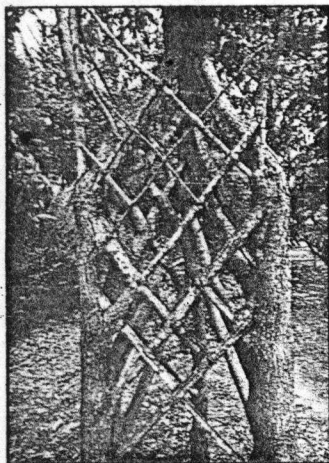
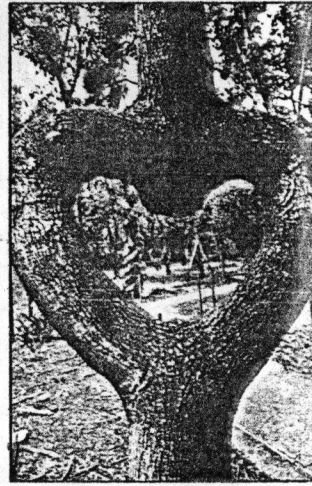
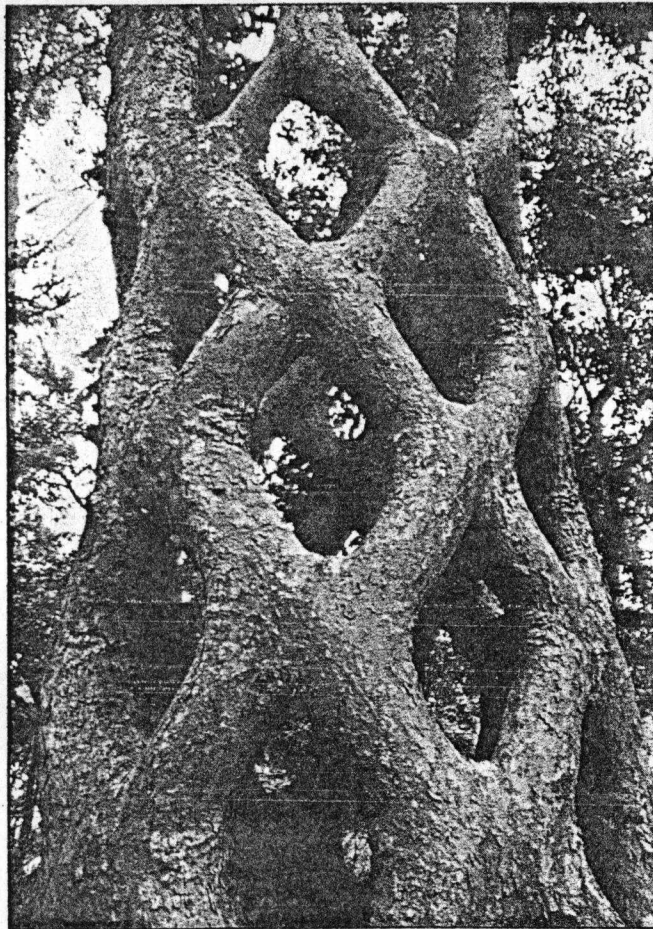
Earlier this year Cahill and Primack invited the public to see the trees for one day. The response was overwhelming: 15,000 people showed up. If Cahill could open the place on a regular basis and charge admission, he could make moving costs. Although Hogan won't allow that, supposedly for insurance reasons, he has agreed to let Cahill open the Tree Circus to the public for one last time August 30 and 31. But Cahill isn't out of the forest yet.

The locals say they are just trying to preserve their heritage. Further, says Friends of the Tree Circus spokesman Joe Cucchiara, Cahill needs help. Cucchiara, a candidate for supervisor from the district that includes Scotts Valley, says he could get the trees declared a historical resource to the city. He could get city or county funds.

But Cahill has spurned all advances. "I don't trust citizen groups. I don't trust bureaucracy. I trust myself," he states flatly. "Cahill," responds Cucchiara as though he were a dinosaur, "approaches this as a one-man, apple-pie, *God Bless America* thing. He's going to do it all by himself. That one-man hero trip is very limited."

And so it goes, round and round, with no resolution in sight. While the trees' roots remain firmly planted in the ground, their fate is still very much up in the air.





**Twist of fate:** *These hardy trees have survived years of abuse.*

