

# Axel Erlandson's Tree Circus

by Sarah Weston

Tree Circus

Grand obsessions grow from chance encounters. For bean farmer Axel Erlandson, it was noticing how two sycamore trees naturally grew together at his farm in Hilmar, in the San Joaquin Valley. In a process called inosculation, gentle abrasion will cause limbs of two individuals to merge as one. A curious man and a tinkerer by nature, Erlandson planted four trees in a square and tied their tops together. Now, almost 50 years later, the "Four Legged Giant" survives as a single tree in the form of a cuboid. As Erlandson's interest grew from hobby to passion, so did the number of ever more complex experiments he undertook. The result was the famous Tree Circus, which for 17 years drew curious motorists to stop in Scotts Valley.

In all, Erlandson coaxed more than 70 trees into the shapes of ladders, valentines, honeycombs, spirals, zig zags, bird cages, phone booths and more. They went by names like "Hourglass Tree," "Needle and Thread" and "Lightning Bolt."

When asked how he did it, his standard reply was "Oh, I talk to them." He also at times claimed to be divinely inspired. Perhaps he was, but his tech-

niques were a good deal more intricate than just talking. They involved wire, tape, steel and guides, and his trees took as much as 40 years to assume their finished shapes.

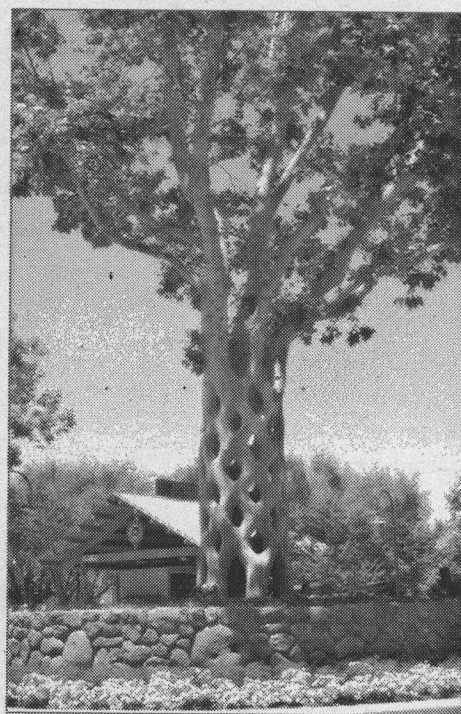
In later life, he grew to regret never having taken on an apprentice, so some of his more elaborate effects still defy recreation.

## A Journey of Rediscovery

To some extent, Erlandson's was a journey of rediscovery. Since Roman times people have created archways and lattices by a process called pleaching, the interweaving of branches. Sometimes this included small cuts to encourage grafting. In recent centuries living furniture and even whole barns have been created using the techniques. However, no one seems to have ever taken it to the level of art that the self-taught Swedish immigrant did.

In 1945 Erlandson's wife and daughter visited Santa Cruz, reporting back to him what a tourist attraction the Mystery Spot was. Perhaps his trees could do as well, they suggested. Axel was enthusiastic. Retiring from farming, he purchased a ¼-acre lot in Scotts Valley. Laboriously, over the course of three months, he prepared and transported four truckloads of his trees to their new home.

The exhibit opened in 1947 with a



sign, "See World's Strangest Trees Here." This was later changed to the Tree Circus at the suggestion of his daughter. A 1957 article in *Life* magazine made the trees world famous, full-ly praising a "tree culture which beats anything in the gardens of Versailles."

## The Tree Circus an International Destination

The Tree Circus became a favorite of *Ripley's Believe-It-or-Not*, appearing there at least 10 times. Erlandson

received inquiries and correspondence from all over the world, to which he meticulously responded in hopes of promoting his venture. He almost never left the property, fearing visitors would find it closed. Yet in the end it never made much money.

With his health failing rapidly, he sold his beloved creation in 1963, dying a year later.

The attraction was bought by Larry and Peggy Thompson and renamed "The Lost World." They outfitted it with huge multi-colored plastic dinosaurs and promoted it by driving around Scotts Valley in a station wagon with a saber-tooth tiger fastened to the roof.

But Larry Thompson died before the venture got off the ground, and Peggy was unable to make a successful venture on her own. Like its predecessor, Lost World closed. Vandals ravaged the park, one dinosaur head turning up in a Palo Alto high school.

## Developer Sells the Trees for \$12,000

The trees began to die of neglect. The property was bought by Robert Hogan, a local builder who purchased it for its speculative value. Hogan called a landscape architect to see what might be done to restore the trees.

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By remarkable coincidence, one of the landscaper's employees was Mark Primack, a young architect whose thesis project had been entitled "Botanic Architecture," which envisioned a world where humans grew their own shelter. To him, the trees were a sort of lab experiment which vindicated his dream. He became an impassioned advocate for saving the trees, or at least a visual record of them before the site was leveled by bulldozers.

Meanwhile, another landscaper named Joseph Cahill took notice. Cahill worked for Bob Dylan and Herb Alpert, among other celebrities, and hoped to sell the trees to some of his wealthy customers. Cahill mortgaged his home and bought the trees (but not the land) for \$12,000, on the condition that he move them within two and a half years.

Cahill and Primack worked together to promote the trees, but faced an uncomfortable financial reality. Cahill put in another \$15,000 to prune and clean up the neglected trees, after which he was flat broke. Yet it would cost another

\$200,000 to move them. They offered to buy the land from Hogan, who would neither sell nor allow it to become an exhibition site once again.

Enter the Disney corporation, which wanted the trees for Disney World. Cahill responded that he was willing to sell 12 of the trees — for \$3 million. Disney closed their briefcases and stalked off, shaking their heads.

Various other ventures were floated to rescue the trees. Movie director John Huston got involved with an appeal to the governor, and the Oakland Museum wanted them. But nothing came of the former, and the museum did not have the funds for purchase. Ripley's in San Francisco expressed interest, but wanted them dead and preserved. The City of Scotts Valley passed a new tree protection ordinance, which some thought would extend to the Tree Circus veterans. But the city took a look at what it would cost and ruled that the ordinance was only intended for indigenous trees.

## Clinging to Survival

The trees clung to survival courtesy of Primack, who with a group of volunteers sneaked over fences on weekends to



above Axel Erlandson under the "Four-Legged Giant."

water and tend them. Finally, in 1984, a benefactor with the necessary cash reserves turned up.

This was Michael Bonfante, who owned the 21-store Nob Hill chain. Bonfante also owned Tree Haven, a nursery he originally bought to supply

large specimen trees for his grocery stores. Bonfante was building Bonfante Gardens Theme Park in Gilroy, and wanted a fun element for the children. Bonfante sealed a deal with Hogan, and began the months-long task of preparing the 29 trees that

were still healthy enough for transplanting, including the "Watertower Tree," "Country Boy's Slingshot," "Boa Constrictor" and the experiment that started it all, the "Four-Legged Giant." The move took the combined efforts of the CHP, Caltrans and a hundred volunteers.

"I can even tell you how many power poles there are between Scotts Valley and Gilroy," said Bonfante in a newspaper interview. "Two hundred and thirty-seven."

Today what has become known as arborsculpture has seen a minor renaissance of interest. Some people see it as proof that human beings can shape their environment for comfort and enjoyment without destroying it. Others, perhaps mindful of what Erlandson described as "hospitalized victims with broken bones," find it more than a little creepy.

But that is the nature of art, and several of Erlandson's deceased trees have found their way into art museums. Like them or not, we can only join with one of the Tree Circus visitors who marveled at the secret of Erlandson's success, a "patience beyond comprehension." ■