

Scotts Valley Famed 'Tree Circus' Lives On

For more than a year, Nob Hill has been the custodian of a piece of Scotts Valley history. It's the famous Tree Circus, which was once a roadside attraction on the edge of the community but was acquired by Nob Hill and moved to Tree Haven Park on Hecker Pass Highway near Gilroy when it was threatened with destruction by development.

The 29 or so trees moved from the Scotts Valley property eventually will become a centerpiece of the Tree Haven Park being developed by Nob Hill President Michael Bonfante and which will be opened to the public in about two and a half years.

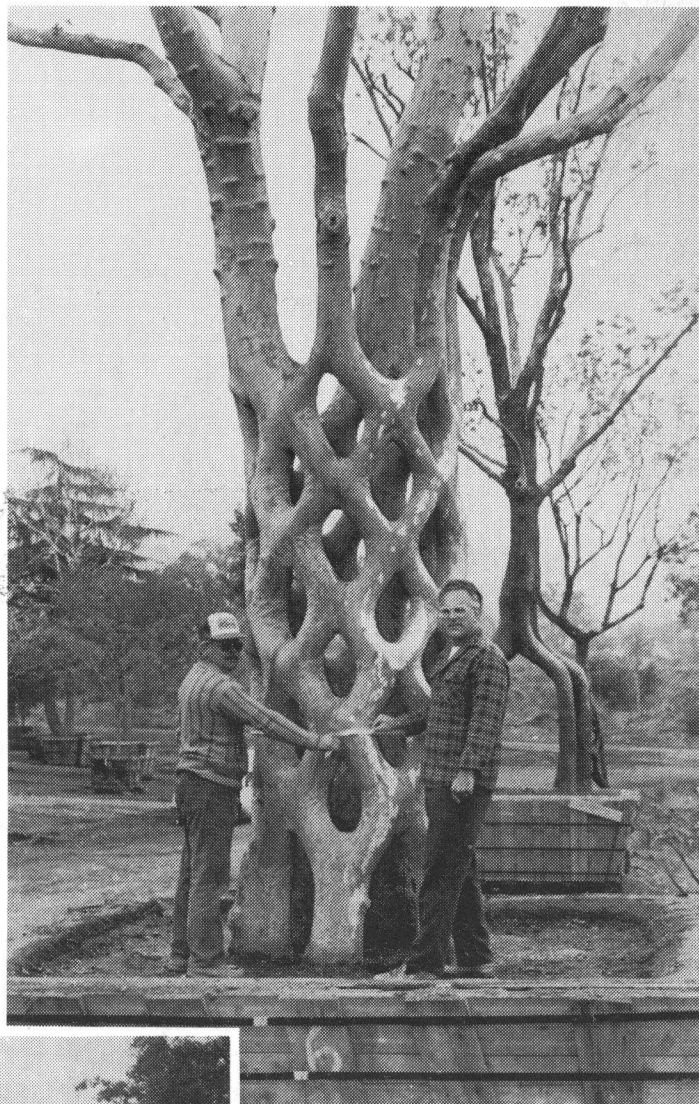
The Tree Circus is the handiwork of the late Axel Erlandson, a bean farmer from Turlock who 60 years ago started grafting the limbs of sycamore trees out of curiosity. He found that as he stripped the bark and tied the trees together, they would grow in almost any shape he wanted.

Some accounts say Erlandson visited Santa Cruz in the 1940's and saw the Mystery Spot, where hordes of tourists were paying money to see a place where a "mysterious force" supposedly defied the laws of nature.

Inspired by that example, Erlandson moved to Scotts Valley in 1946 with eight of his twisted trees on what was then the Los Gatos Highway. A sign hung over the entrance announcing "The World's Strangest Trees."

Erlandson continued to develop his tourist attraction, twisting trees into contorted curlicues, zig-zags, loops, ladders and other whimsical designs. After his death, the curious cluster of trees sat neglected for years until the property was purchased by a contractor.

Michael Bonfante saw the trees and bought them and began the delicate process of boxing the trees and moving them. Wooden crates were built around their bases and they were nurtured for a year until strong enough to be moved to Tree Haven Park near Gilroy.



Most of the trees formed into peculiar shapes for the Tree Circus had names. Above, Gilbert Hernandez and Michael Bonfante show the "Basket Tree." Others were called Watertower Tree, a Country Boy's Slingshot, the Boa Constrictor and the Four-Legged Giant. Movement of the largest trees required cooperation between local police, Highway Patrol, Cal Trans and the efforts of more than 100 volunteers. At left, the storm-soaked volunteers pose for a final photo after the largest tree was moved.