

YOUR FUTURE IS STILL IN SCHOOL¹

by Robert Felix

Abstract. Personnel availability and crew stability have always been a problem for commercial arboriculture. With declining numbers entering the work force a greater effort must be made to make more potential employees aware of careers in arboriculture. The implementation of a career awareness program among high school students and Guidance Counselors is a possible solution.

"We need a few good men!" So says the recruiting poster for the United States Marine Corps. So does the tree care industry.

The tree care industry needs more than a few—and we will, and do, take women and children as well. In my conversations with arborists from all over the country I hear the same story over and over: "I'm shorthanded." "Do you know where I can find some good people?" "I have spent a fortune advertising in the local papers and I have hardly had any response." "Last year I had 15 people working. This year I have more business and fewer people." At the University of Massachusetts there are 5 or 6 job offers for every student.

Several months ago I received a copy of a letter written in the mid-1920s by Doctor Francis A. Bartlett, Founder of the F. A. Bartlett Tree Expert Company. In essence, he said all of the very same things.

The situation hasn't improved in the last 10 years and, based on the latest unemployment data as well as the projected numbers in the labor force to be available in the next 10 years, the situation isn't going to get any better.

Keeping in mind the fact that most new employees in the tree care industry are in their late teens or early twenties, consider the following.

In 1980 9.4 million teenagers entered the labor force. In 1985 the number was down to 7.9 million. The projection for 1995 is 7 million. That is a reduction of total entry level employees of thirty percent which means that many fewer will be available to the tree care industry.

Just a few years ago unemployment in this country was in the double digit range. Now the national average is about 7%. In the northeast unemployment is closer to 3%. If our economy continues to be strong the unemployment rate will continue to stay low and competition in the labor market will remain as tough as it is now or get worse.

For a small, 2 plus billion dollar a year industry, our personnel needs are disproportionately high. In addition to the new personnel we require to handle growth, our labor force is very unstable. People come to work, decide they don't like tree work, find better opportunities or for whatever reason, they leave.

As a consequence, the turnover rate in the tree care industry is unbelievably high. A recent survey taken by the National Arborist Association indicates that we hire 1.82 people annually for every person in the field force. For example, in 1985 there were approximately 26,000 people engaged in line clearance tree trimming. In order to maintain that number in the field force, over 47,000 were hired. Even that number is misleading in that, obviously, a large nucleus of the field force is stable which means that many jobs were filled several times as people passed through the ranks to maintain the 26,000 level. Our survey suggests similar numbers for the rest of the tree care industry.

High turnover is a very costly and dangerous problem. New people need to be trained and not only technically but in safe practices as well. This takes production time away from qualified people and, of course, new people can't produce as much.

New people are not as safety conscious as trained people. There are more accidents.

New people are not equipment trained. There is more equipment abuse and more breakdowns, more production time lost.

1. Presented at the annual conference of the International Society of Arboriculture in San Antonio in August 1986.

The problem is further complicated by additional circumstances. Tree work is hard work under all kinds of weather conditions. Why would anyone want to work hard when they can work easier or smarter for the same or more money?

Money is another factor. The average hourly rate for a tree service foreman in the United States is about \$10.30 per hour. The high is on the West Coast where foremen average \$11.47 an hour, and the low is in the Rocky Mountain states where foremen average just under \$8.00 per hour. Climbers and ground personnel earn disproportionately less. Ten dollars and thirty cents per hour equates to \$21,245 per year. In today's society, that is not a great deal, especially if that is the maximum one can aspire to, particularly in an industry where benefits are few. Entry level wages range from a low of \$4.00 per hour to a high of \$7.00 in the Northeast. We barely compete with Burger King.

What kind of people can we possibly attract at those wage levels, particularly in a highly competitive labor market? As a result, the quality of new personnel has deteriorated. This is particularly true in the line clearance tree trimming industry where bidding practices are such that it is very difficult to maintain a well-trained, highly skilled labor force.

All of the above notwithstanding, we are also invisible! Hardly anyone knows who we are. You know and your clients know. A few others may find out but most people don't have a clue, particularly those still in high school beginning to consider a career. Being invisible to the public isn't necessarily all bad at this particular time.

Suppose everyone knew how important it is to have an arborist care for their trees? If those who could afford it wanted work done there wouldn't be anywhere near enough qualified field people out there to do the work and do it well. In these days of economic prosperity, with increased disposable income in the private sector and more campus-like settings for industry, that is a distinct possibility.

Our invisible image has provided us with another benefit, temporary as it may be. Most legislators and regulatory officials and particularly the press don't have a clue as to who we are. If they did you can be certain that the lawn care industry wouldn't

be standing alone in the face of public pressure and media scrutiny. We should be right there if not out in front but because no one knows who we are, we have avoided all the notoriety that should have befallen us. Those of you who saw ABC's "20/20" in early July know what I refer to.

In the opening minutes of the show when a child was asked what caused her medical problems she responded with one word, "Chemlawn." She might very well have responded with the name of a tree service firm which had applied pesticide to her parents' or a neighbor's property.

Think about the amount of pesticide that drips onto a lawn under a tree, certainly far more than that which is intentionally applied by a lawn applicator. No one has picked up on that yet and I hope they never do.

However, what goes around comes around. The fact that the public in general doesn't know who we are is one of the basic reasons that we have personnel problems. High school students and their guidance counselors are part of that public.

Unless they are particularly aware of arboriculture or urban forestry, students have no reason to think of careers in arboriculture. Why should they? Guidance counselors have no reason to suggest careers in arboriculture, much less pursuing arboriculture or urban forestry on the college level. For the most part, they don't even know who we are.

As a consequence no one is knocking on your door seeking employment. When you advertise in the classified section of the newspaper, no one looks under the listing of tree surgeon or tree expert because they have no idea what such employment entails nor do they have any idea what a career in arboriculture can offer.

Existing college level arboriculture programs are suffering from lack of enrollment.

The arboriculture programs at Lake City Community College in Florida, Hocking Tech in Ohio, and the State University of New York at Farmingdale have been terminated.

Both the two- and four-year arboriculture programs at the University of Massachusetts are undersubscribed, too. I am told that most urban forestry programs across the country are suffering the same fate.

For years we have begged, cajoled, and cried for new arboriculture programs on the college level. Now we have several new programs coming on line and there are insufficient students.

Over the years many have said, "Arboriculture can't even be found in the dictionary or an encyclopedia. ISA and NAA had better do something about that. Arboriculture should be a household word." If you took the combined annual income of ISA, NAA, and ASCA, you wouldn't have enough money to do an effective advertising and public relations job to accomplish that end.

In my opinion, the responsibility for making people aware of arboriculture is a local responsibility. You have to do it for yourself in your community. Nobody can effectively do it for you. The place to start is not with a news event that may get two lines and a picture in the local newspaper or 10 seconds on a local T.V. station. News events are important and that kind of exposure doesn't hurt. You should still seek that kind of exposure although I think in some cases such exposure does more for the ego than it does for the perpetuation of arboriculture.

The real place to start is in the high school. That is where your future is. That is where your future employees are. Guidance counselors need to be told about the excellent career opportunities in arboriculture. They need to know that jobs are available for high school graduates that can lead to very satisfying careers. They need to be made aware of colleges and universities that have arboriculture and urban forestry programs.

Neither ISA nor NAA can do that for you. You are there. It is very easy for you to do it for yourself. Find out if your high school has a career day. Get together with your colleagues and have a booth at the career day or do it on your own. You need to communicate with the students. Expose them to arboriculture. You might even want to invite any that show an interest to your shop and show them field operations.

NAA's foundation, the Paul Tilford National Arborist Foundation, a resource for commercial arboriculture, has provided the funding and the NAA staff is in the process of putting together a canned program that arborists will be able to take to their high schools for this very purpose.

The program will include a poster for the guidance counselor's bulletin board, a video tape about careers in arboriculture, handouts for students describing opportunities for high school graduates as well as a list of appropriate colleges and universities.

We had hoped to have a prototype ready for this meeting but other priorities have set back our schedule somewhat. Certainly the program will be ready by January 1, 1987. It must. You aren't professional recruiters and are not expected to be. This NAA program will make your recruiting job easier.

There is one other aspect needed to make such a program a success. The starting wages must be competitive in the labor market and the career must offer sufficient financial remuneration and benefits over the long term to be attractive.

If we don't reach the potential labor market before it graduates from high school we will never have another opportunity to reach so many potential employees at one time. If we don't make an effort to influence the career paths of these high school students, we only make the recruiting job more difficult, more expensive, and less productive. If we don't make careers in arboriculture more attractive and more financially rewarding, no matter what you do, what we all do, tree service firms will remain understaffed.

Your future, my future, the industry's future is at stake and our collective future is still in school!

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