Three years ago, Smith Lawn & Tree Co., Inc., Kansas City, Missouri, was awarded the grounds maintenance contract for everything but the mowing at the Harry S. Truman Library and Museum at nearby Independence, Missouri.

"Not only because it's a big-money contract, we were happy to land this job for several reasons" said Jim McGee, president. "One, a job of this size puts us on our mettle to perform at peak levels of skill. In gunning for the ultimate in results, we must use the best materials and our best people. Two, it's the kind of prestigious showplace-type grounds maintenance project that is a feather in the cap of any maintenance outfit. You say a lot to a prospect when you tell him that among your jobs is the Truman Library.

"In all phases — lawn, trees and shrubbery — the library job must be first-class," he explained. "Yet the problems are sometimes unreal. For one thing the library is open seven days a week and tourists are constantly strolling the grounds. That means we must exercise care in spraying. We have to spray on a piecemeal program, hitting the areas where there are no crowds when we can.

"In a job like this, as in all others, you follow safe spraying practices, putting materials on the grounds with minimum harm to plants, human beings and animals. We're a safety-oriented company and we've worked hard to earn a reputation for proper spraying."

In a discussion of the Truman Library account, which embraces seeding, spraying, fertilization, aeration and trimming on the 15-acre site, McGee stresses that, in the struggle to get everything ship-shape, sometimes something gets overlooked. His briefings to employees who work the library jobs stress the need to keep on the alert for any special problems, to employ preventive medicine.

But every-now-and-then something slips up and gets even a well-established 32-year-old company in a pickle. What happened at the Truman Library was that one day checking out the trees McGee spotted a heavy infestation of bagworms on a set of 40 foot Locust shade trees in...
"It is very essential to eliminate any communication gap between us and the customer"
or shrubbery. This applies to both commercial and residential customers. We want them to know exactly what materials we’re using, why we selected them, any special problem they entail and, most of all, we want them to understand their role in achieving optimum results. That means making any followups that will help results.

"It is very essential to eliminate any communication gap between us and the customer," he believes. "We try to lay everything possible on the line to the customer. The tendency with some companies is to go out and lay down a spray, take off and then bill the customer. That’s it. Sometimes they leave a written message in the mailbox giving brief information on the treatment. We want more than that — we want verbal dialogue so we can answer any questions the customer may have."

A stock of chemicals is purchased in the spring to kick off the season and the remainder is purchased on an as-needed basis for the rest of the year. Though he agrees he could achieve economy in buying by placing large pre-orders, McGee doesn’t capitalize on it because he doesn’t care to maintain large back-up inventories. The products are bought from four suppliers in Kansas City and any items needed can be delivered within one or two days or picked up in 30 minutes. The products are stored in a dry room with a locked door with warnings to stay out and "Poison" posted on it. "We don’t want to experience any problems with fire or break-ins by keeping large stocks of chemicals," McGee said.

Both commercial and residential customers are billed once a month. Though some customers are serviced once a week, only monthly billings are made.

In pricing and estimating jobs, McGee says he simply computes the amount of space involved with the materials and arrives at what he feels is a reasonable fee. In many instances, he is able to eyeball the site and determine whether it runs 5,000 or 10,000 square feet. He points out that the space involved isn’t always the key in estimating the price of a commercial job. Whether large equipment, which will permit handling the project more efficiently and quickly, can be moved in is a big determining factor.

Regular attendance of employ-
ees at seminars, schools and other symposia designed to further their education is a key element in the McGee success formula. Four members of the organization, including Keith Hubbard, foreman, and Bill McGee, son of the owner, received schooling in arboriculture sponsored by Kansas State University. This qualified them as certified arborists in that state.

Test plotting is one of several services which has enhanced the firm’s reputation with both commercial and residential customers, says Hubbard. He’s a staunch believer in the value of marking an area off in squares, measuring them carefully, treating each with a different chemical, leaving one square untreated, and then making comparisons of the results obtained. He makes careful notations of the results, takes photographs at various stages and assembles a file on the plotting. It’s a routine he follows frequently on both residential and commercial grounds.

A one-word sum-up of the potential for business in the Kansas City market, says Hubbard, is “fantastic.” He added, “It keeps zipping up.” The company’s ability to perform comprehensive lawn tree and shrubbery care on residential and industrial sites offers a bit of one-upmanship over others in the field, he feels. He points out that the big tree trimming, removal and spraying equipment enables the firm to tackle jobs others lack the capabilities to handle.

“Word of mouth advertising helps keep the machinery busy for us,” he said. “We got a new apartment customer the other day, we did his work and then a few days later received a call from another apartment owner who had been referred to us by the first one. A beautiful chain reaction is triggered when you do quality work.” “The potential in this area is unlimited,” Hubbard says. “We haven’t started to scratch the surface.”

Problems? One big one looms up prominently, says Hubbard. It centers on a labor situation. It isn’t so much the shortage of good help that bothers him, he says, because he feels he could hire top professional people if he could afford to pay them decent wages. The problem he says, focuses on the matter of customer resistance to a level of fees that permit paying salaries to topnotch people.

“This is a hassle,” laments the still-young Hubbard. “To stay competitive, we have to price competitively. That seems to mean we can’t charge high enough fees to pay for good labor. That means we settle for something a bit under the best and that, in turn, means we have to do one helluva job of training our people. And that sure doesn’t make this business any more fun. It’s one of the big challenges, buddy, it really is.”

The words get around that the firm is equipped with that big aerial platform rig and this leads to calls ranging from rescuing cats from the tops of tall trees to replacing light bulbs in the ceiling of the American Royal Building, one of the city’s auditoriums. Answering these calls has made the company many friends.

“You’d be surprised how many city jobs dropped in our laps because we used that big giraffe to replace those light bulbs in the towering ceiling of that building,” Hubbard smiles.