

Wisconsinite Among the Palms Says

LET'S PUT THE CARE BACK INTO TREE CARE

By LOU SPEER

A TRUE ARBORIST has his client's welfare at heart." Thus Bill Johnson sums up the success behind his Phoenix-based Badger Tree Service.

The brown-eyed, sun-bronzed, former Wisconsinite is now at the height of his zesty 25-year career in arboriculture. He is a champion of the artistic concept of tree trimming, an adventurer among new ideas, and a kicker of tradition.

To him, tree moving should be done as beautifully as possible. This means no topping, no "chopping" back. The arborist who isn't willing to seek out the experts and experiment a little isn't worth his saw. Each tree trimmer should consider the pruners in his hand akin to the paint brush in an artist's, trimming neatly and purposefully, leaving the tree in lacy character.

"I'm trying, perhaps, to impress the fact that an arborist, in the true sense of the word, is an artist," Johnson says, "or a doctor, or designer. When he goes to his clients' homes he helps them design their trees, and sees to it they remain in the best of health and are kept as pretty as is possible to do—with the help of God."

This, he states, is his primary objective in business. Parallel to it is his life's goal: To be of some good to those he serves, to feel worthwhile.

With his own ideals set so high, it is little wonder then, that "Badger Bill" as Johnson is often affectionately called, gets short-tempered when watching some tree service companies.

"Many seem to be in the business because it is the easiest thing they can do," he says bluntly. "But they don't know **why** they are doing it. They don't seem to care. They don't even take time to read a book to see how to do a good job. The only thing they think about is topping—whack, whack, **whack!**"

Of course, Johnson is the first to admit not everyone might possess this innate sense of tree artistry he seems to have. "But they can learn!" he says. "Beauty is beauty. It



William (Badger Bill) Johnson moved his tree care business from the cold of Wisconsin to the sunny and warm palm-lined streets of Phoenix, Ariz.

doesn't matter what part of the world you're in, a tree is a tree. Each has its own personality, its own characteristics. Good, basic pruning is the same the world over. If you're an arborist or a man who knows how to trim trees at all and have any artistic sense, you can tell right away how to trim a tree."

Badger Bill should know; he has been doing it long enough, and also training his own men to know what he is talking about.

In addition to proper trimming (topping is a bad word to Johnson), he stresses that good tree care includes up-to-date methods of cabling, bracing, surgical work, storm restoration, and spraying for insect and disease control.

"We have saved many trees," he says, "that have split asunder, yet haven't separated from the root system. We have pulled them together and "sewn" them with rods, so that today they are very beautiful with little, if any, sign of previous repair methods."

His passion-like persistence for quality service has led him to the successful extension of systemics to include silk oak trees, ash and citrus trees. Lowell True, Maricopa County Agricultural Department, credits Johnson with having been the first to suspect verticillium wilt might exist in Phoenix olive trees and to collect samples proving it.

Johnson's special niche in the arboriculture world has been arrived at the long way around. During his



He turned green blobs on a trunk into attractive olive trees, convincing Arizonans there was value in having a real arborist in town.



early years, he wanted to be a forest ranger. After eight years in the Marine Corps and two more learning to fly, though, he decided to stay on the commercial end of things. He spent four semesters in an Iowa landscape school. He didn't cotton to this angle as well as he thought he would. Immediately after graduation, he entered the tree profession by attaching himself to a line crew in Rockford, Illinois. Next, he joined an ex-Davey man in trimming trees.

"But he did so many things that seemed wrong," Badger Bill recalls. So Bill looked around. No arborist seemed to be doing ornamental work, as such. They were cutting deadwood out of trees and that seemed to be all. He chose to strike out on his own, and began developing what he considered the artistic way of trimming ornamental trees. As his proficiency grew, so did his business.

Through the years, however, one thing still bugged him: "Burr-r, I hate the cold." He disliked seeing his equipment bog down, laying his men off in November, and himself sitting idle all winter.

One day in 1959, as the snow drifted sill-deep to his office in Beloit, Wis. he hopped a jet to Phoenix. There, in the Valley of the Sun, he located his own particular kind of gold mine.

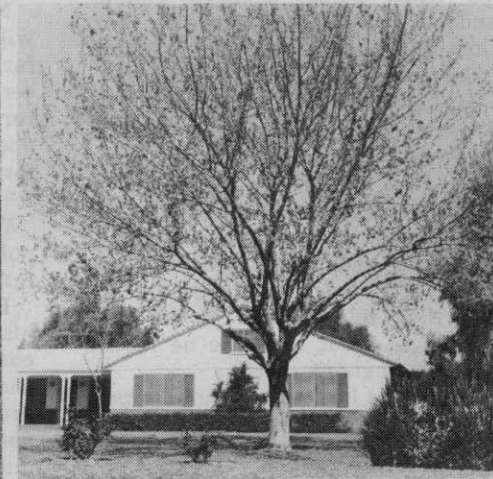
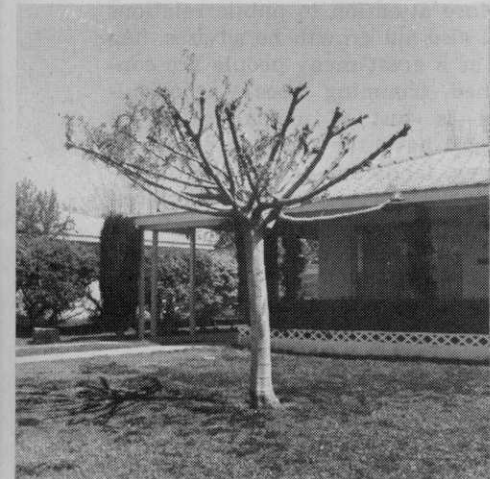
"Fantastic," he describes it. "From mountain to mountain you could see the word 'opportunity' To my amazement there were no arborists in Phoenix. No one knew what the Shade Tree Conference was. No one had heard of the National Arborist Association. No one seemed to know anything about arboriculture!"

He soon found, though, he had some ground work to do before he could stake his claim. Those leathery-cheeked Arizonians figured they had been doing pretty good so far. Who needed an arborist, what ever that was? Besides, they didn't trim olive trees; they didn't trim citrus trees; they didn't trim—

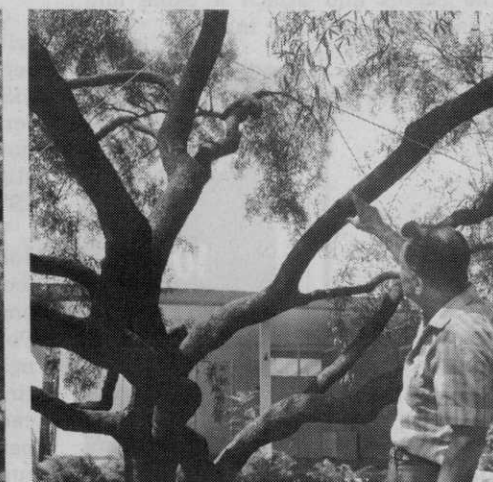
"Poppycock!" Bill interrupted. He flew home, brought back his family and part of his equipment, determined to prove himself.

The late Frank Wales, nurseryman, gave him his opportunity. He led Bill to a swarthy-headed giant. "We want you to trim this eucalyptus."

The eucalyptus was a new kind of critter to the Badger Bill. He squinted at the long rambling limbs, up the shaggy-barked trunk. "Is this the characteristic of the



"They just chop them off and end up with a green blob," Johnson says of many homeowners' pruning, pointing to the maple leaf mulberry. Another mulberry exhibits Johnson's trimming artistry.



Trees with a great deal of lateral branching are strengthened with cables. Johnson treats all wounds with tree dressing. You'd be surprised how much native trees respond to good care," he says.



Good care is emphasized for all equipment and employees, also. Employees have uniforms of levis, yellow T-shirts and yellow helmets. Equipment is kept nearly spotless. Johnson is talking with Carl Raw, spray division supervisor.

tree? Is this the way it normally grows?"

"Yes."

"Then that's all I have to know."

It took Johnson a day-and-a-half to do the job, but it proved the merits of his artistic concept. Wales promised if he chose to move the Badger Tree Service permanently to Phoenix, he would never be out of work.

Johnson made the move the following fall. He arrived in Phoenix with three old trucks (including a sprayer), and expected to have a little time to get his equipment in shape and family settled. But true to his promise, Wales already had more work lined up for the Badger Tree Service than it could handle.

Most of the new work, Johnson found, involved no more than he had been doing in Wisconsin. The names of the trees were different but the general techniques of good care remained the same. Except for one or two little things, that is.

Bill grins as he remembers the day he scaled his first palm tree. "It was a complete mystery to me. That winter I was here, one tree man had shown me how to scale one. But in the months I was back in Wisconsin I more or less forgot.

Lordy me! One day I got a job to scale some palms. I couldn't remember how they did it. I went deeper and deeper and deeper. I had a big shelf on it. I knew that wasn't right. I quit!"

He wasn't giving up though. As persevering as the furry little creature he'd chosen for his trademark before leaving Wisconsin, Bill drove his truck home, changed clothes, and got out the family car. A short time later he parked near a fellow palm scaler.

He sauntered over to the man. "Say, I'm from Wisconsin. It's interesting the things you are doing here. How do you do that?"

Unaware, his competitor gave him his much needed free lesson. Johnson drove back and finished his job.

Equally amusing to Johnson is the one they tell on him at arborists meetings, about the time he moved his first saguaro cactus.

Again, he had no idea how to proceed. So he and his helper put a four-foot ball around the six-foot prickly plant and burlapped it from top to taproot. Deciding he didn't dare put a strap around the soft flesh, he chose to nail boards around the cactus and attach a cable and finally managed the move.

Later, after joining the nurserymen's association, he related his prickly experience to his brother members. They roared with laughter. That's when Badger Bill learned the "B & B" method was totally unnecessary for saguaros or cacti of nearly any specie.

Today, the Badger Tree Service operates four trucks and has from five to eight employees.

New techniques in horticultural spraying have led the company to expansion in that direction. A recently created Spraying Division, headed by Carl Raw (another imported Midwestern arborist, from Ohio), is currently performing services in ornamental pest control, weed control and experimental growth retardants.

"There are many promising opportunities in horticultural spraying that should prove worthwhile in any part of the country," Johnson says. "Other tree service companies, hoping to increase their own business, should investigate this field."

More attention to public relations will also aid growth he advises. "As far as a great many people are concerned, trimming trees—arboriculture—is just a menial thing, it doesn't have the prestige of an attorney, landscape or building architect. This is wrong," he declares. "We're not just tree cutters. We're not just tree hackers. We're a profession to be proud of."

He stresses this idea first among his own men. Badger Tree Service employees report for work clean-shaven, with hair trimmed. They dress uniformly in blue clothing and yellow helmets. Courtesy is a must at all times.

Johnson's frequent press releases and garden club lectures are helping, he believes, in upgrading the image of arboriculture in Phoenix.

On the national level, he has contributed considerable time to the International Shade Tree Conference (ISTC), Western Shade Tree Conference (WSTC), and National Arborist Association (NAA). He investigated the Western Chapter of ISTC in Arizona.

With characteristic enthusiasm, Johnson is eyeing the future. "I'm looking forward to the day my second son, Tim, graduates from Cal Poly Tech and takes over the business," he says. "Then I'm hoping to find time to write a book on the care of Arizona shade trees, and perhaps start a school for arboricultural and horticultural maintenance. This way, maybe, I can see to it more people receive the quality service in tree care that they deserve."

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