

Evolution Through Revolution

Robert Phillips

Photos Courtesy of Robert Phillips

Tree work is one of those professions where haste definitely makes waste by creating a more difficult task at hand. Trying to finish first can often lead to an accident or worse, an injury. One of the first and most important lessons I learned in the world of tree work is there is rarely such a thing as an unavoidable accident. If work is carefully planned and executed, almost all accidents can be avoided. It is when we take short cuts or skip a safety requirement that we find ourselves paying for it. I've had many near misses in my career and each time I've learned a life changing-or-saving lesson or skill.

I've had several friends who were not so lucky. They died with their boots on, had a serious injury, or caused major property damage. Material items can often be replaced but bodily harm can be permanent. Nobody is perfect, but the main goal is to live to see another day. Taking the necessary precautions to eliminate or avoid catastrophic incidents should always be our number one goal whenever we are on the job.

Having worked over fifty years in the field doing tree work I can confess to several injuries because I didn't follow the rules of safety first. I've broken several bones and bled many a time. Each time I look back and reflect on what my father would have asked, and that is how could this accident have been avoided. In retrospect, it was easy to see how it could have been avoided every time. Most of the time it was simple things like two hands on the chain saw, or don't cut pieces of wood above you that can swing back and hit you. Other times it was a learning experience, like cutting smaller pieces or putting in a proper face cut. The most useful aspect of having an on-the-job accident is to learn preventive measures to avoid a repeat of the same accident, and to inform your fellow workers so they don't have to suffer the same fate.

When I began my career I was lucky to have several mentors with considerable experience. Each one had a different approach to getting a task completed. Some thought that getting everything on the ground fast and in a big heap was the quickest way to get the job done. Others took a different tack and cut one piece at a time, processing it as it hit the ground. Both techniques got the job done and whether it was right



Caption?

or wrong was determined afterwards. As I got older, I realized that there was a place for each method; you just had to choose the right one for each job.

Learning the way each foreman got the job done was key to survival from day to day. You learned to adapt or soon found another job. Orders came down from the top and you had little to say on how things got done: never question the authority of the foreman. I had lots of time to think about this - I was fired six times from the family business for insubordination. Luckily, I was hired seven times.

When industry equipment began to evolve I had my biggest challenges. First it was the newest chainsaw (the Stihl 020) then it was the Echo PB400 backpack blower. Then it was longer handled loppers, six tine pitch forks, longer pole pruners, Hobbs log lowering device, stump grinders, disc chippers, aluminum blocks, arbor carts, etc. New techniques were being developed too, like foot-locking on rope or using a throw-line. When I brought these tools or techniques to the job site I had to prove their worthiness. Sometimes I was met with opposition; I had to put the tool back in the box and do it the way the foreman told me to. But once in a while I would align with a progressive (or lazy) foreman who told me to try that new tool or technique.

Each day was a learning experience and I gradually worked myself up to the foreman's position with a

great deal of perseverance and fortitude. I was finally in control of the outcome of a job! What I had learned during all those years of being a ground person was to first have a discussion with all the personnel on the job and arrive at a consensus of how the job should be accomplished. Once I have everybody's input, I then put a plan in place with everyone on the same page and in control of their workload. When I got my start in the business such collaboration did not exist, but through shared management everyone gets their say and maybe introduces the next new tool or technique.

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