



The Drink Tank

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Bonfante Gardens: Where the Weird Trees Grow...



I love amusement parks and I love trees. There's a place in Gilroy that combines the two in a way that I am just fascinated by. The place is called Bonfante Gardens, and it features some great botany. You see, Bonfante Gardens is really based around one guy's lifetime of work with trees. But these are not ordinary trees. These are Circus trees!

In the 1920s, a fellow named Axel Erlandson started working with trees. His technique, which is still not totally understood, was to get trees to meld, to make strange shapes and forms. His first attempt was to take four separate trees and graft them together into a single tree. That was in 1925 and the tree is still alive and thriving today. Axel first started his work in Hilmer, CA, nearish to Fresno. He then moved them to a parcel of land in Santa Cruz County's beautiful city of Scott's Valley. There was an amusement park there called Santa's Village and another called The Lost World, or so such and the Circus

Trees fit right in on Highway 17. Sadly, after Axel's death in 1964, the trees were abandoned and many of them died. This led to a grass roots effort to save them, which included trespassing to water and feed them, and eventually got them purchased by Michael Bonfante for his planned theme park

My mom said she wanted to take me, The Little One and Gen out to see the place. We got our passes and headed in, passing the first of the Circus Trees, simple hearts and loops. The main entrance took you through a thick grove of Sycamore Trees that grew over the walk way. Like most amusement parks, the first thing you see when you've made it through the entry is the Carousel. This was a small one, brought up from LA, but it's beautiful. The other thing we noticed, pretty immediately, was that there was a huge event where all the Mexican radio stations around San Jose came up and had music and did live broadcasts. This was odd, though I was hoping that I'd get to hear some Mariachi. Alas, this did not happen. I've always said that my wedding and my funeral will have one thing in common: Mariachis playing Jethro Tull's Aqualung. Happily, neither of those days was that Sunday.

Evelyn, being five, instantly wanted to go on the rides. Most of the rides are agriculturally themed, so she wanted to ride the Strawberry Ride first. Gen, a strawberrhollic, seemed to be dreaming of what she could do with a berry the size of the ride cars.



Top Photo: The Four-Legged Giant
Middle: The Carousel (Evelyn is wearing the pink sweats)
Bottom: A Dance Contest at one of the Mexican Radio booths



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Surrounding the rides were huge numbers of plants. Flowers and shrubs and trees and you name it. There was a ride where you went into an artichoke and there were artichoke plants outside. A garlic ride had garlic growing around it. The entire park incorporated the horticulture instead of just making it dressing for the rides. The effect was quite beautiful. After we rode the Strawberries, we headed in and found the first amazing Circus tree. This one was called The Basket Tree. Basically, it was six trees made into one with 42 separate connections between them. This was a marvel. Evelyn, far more interested in the ride beyond it, didn't even look at it. Gen, who thinks my tree love makes me a dendraphile, looked



briefly and wandered on. I stared at the thing for a long time, walking around to see all the different connections. This tree was probably the most impressive in the park when it came to placement (in the middle of a circle in a high-traffic area) and very close to that level in complexity. As you can see, the tree is supercomplex and took nearly 10 years to complete as he had several failed and half-succeeded attempts that were impressive in their own right. We ate (deep fried foods that did a number on my stomach) and then went on the water ride that did nothing but take you past beautiful flower beds and topiary work. This was gorgeous, but I think even I had a hard time accepting that we waited 30 minutes to ride.



As we got off the boats, we walked around. There was a beautiful pond with a series of waterfalls. The whole thing made me wonder which was bigger: this pond with its four waterfalls or the pool at the Daugherty place in Henderson! It's gorgeous, and Evelyn didn't much like it. In fact, she got grumpier and grumpier the longer we kept looking at the landscaping, as you can tell in the photo below. This is a place designed for kids that can be difficult to take kids to.

The most interesting tree has to be the Oil Rig tree. It's in a bad location, and it's not nearly as large as the Basket tree, but the number of loops, grafts and the precision of it really made it my favourite. As you look at it, it changes as you get different sides of it. The tram ride around it gave the best look at the tree and the intricate work that went into it. Sadly, only one of my photos of it came out. I wondered if they ever did walk-throughs for the seriously interested so that they could get up close and personal with the tree and perhaps talk with a Tree Curator (is there such a thing?). I'd have loved to gotten a ten minute talk and up-cloe look at this one, but it wasn't in the cards.



Top: Evelyn and Gen on the Strawberries
 Below that: The Basket Tree with my Mom and Evelyn
 Left: The Oil Rig Tree
 Right: A Grumpy Evelyn ('Stop looking at that tree!' she said)



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We walked around and looked at things. Their tropical greenhouse, called the Monarch Garden, was very nice, though I've been to far more impressive ones, even this close to home. They did have a number of butterflies in a cage, along with a few caterpillars that were about to start their chrysalis development. They would be released into the garden at the end of the day. They were really beautiful, though they weren't monarchs.



The best ride had to be the train that took you around. Evelyn liked it and I got my chance to look at a couple of trees that were only visible from the train and all the other plants. My mom liked it because she didn't have to walk. After we got off again, I went around and checked out the trees again. I had no idea these were as cool as they turned out to be. I had seen them on TV once, back in 1997, but seeing them was 100 times better.



We headed out right as The Little One hit her wall. I was amazed by the trees and Evelyn had a good time, even if she bratted-out towards the end. I highly recommend taking in Bonfante Gardens if you're in San Jose with a day to do nothing but look at trees.

Follow-On: ArborSculpture

Now, Bonfante Gardens claims that the process of growing trees like Erlandson did has been lost. I figured that was a load of hooey when we drove out and there were small trees growing tied to an arch of steel, forming a small tree arch. I started looking around and there are a number of people working on tree sculptures around the world.

Probably the best known of these ArborSculpturalists is Richard Reams. He's an Oregonian who was inspired by a visit to the Tree Circus as a child. In his spirit, he began creating trees in various shapes. The trees that most impress me are the chairs and benches. His works are amazing, and he seems to make works that are more elegant than many of the Circus Trees, which are grand scale events. It's like the Circus Trees are The Phantom of the Opera while Reams' work is an Ibsen play.

The two most impressive international works seem to be from Australia and Israel. The Australian trees are quite beautiful, right up there with the Reams' stuff, but they also have a better eye for decoration. Peter Cook has been growing trees like these for years and has several pieces at the World Expo in Japan. Aharon Naveh does pieces that are cruder in Israel, but they are also larger. His works most remind me of the Circus Trees.

I'm impressed with all the work these folks have done. I hope I get to see more of them over the years. I almost wanna go out and start planting myself. I said almost.





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COMMENTS AND COMPLAINTS
SENT TO GARCIA@COMPUTERHISTORY.ORG
BY MY GENTLE READERS

Eric Mayer- <http://www.journalscape.com/ericmayer>

Hi,

Wow, I keep overlooking these Drink Tanks they pop up so fast. Some great stuff, particularly in issue 15, the mythical comics fanzine and your dad. (A carny? Really? Sounds very interesting - particularly if you aren't doing it probably...) As for him and Niekas...I'm not surprised someone could think so highly of a particular fanzine. During several years of my life Donn Brazier's TITLE was hugely important to me. I was variously aimlessly drifting through school and out of work, with no discernable future, obviously out of step with the world (which had as little use for me as I for it) but when TITLE arrived every month, filled with folks who seemed to value creativity and literacy and shared my curiosity about things...not to mention didn't treat me and what I had to say like dirt...well, that helped me get through some hard times.

Such is the joy of fanzines. It's odd, since my Dad was never closely involved with the editors of fanzines or fanzine fandom, I didn't expect him to have formed such close ties with a title. Then again, with my Dad, nothign is shocking. And he has some great stories about his days with the games tents and almost getting fired for not using the 'fixes' on his games more often.

Our society concentrates so much on whatever is *BIG*. Whatever appeals to the most people, sells the most, is read by or watched by the most.

But the most important things in our lives are not measured that way.

Obviously people you know, for instance, however limited their fame, are more important to you than celebrities. But the same can be true of art. Things that appeal only to a few may appeal much more strongly to those few than any mass appeal stuff ever could. So to a few people a fanzine can be a lot more important than the latest bestseller is to anybody.

Amen. There are some fanzines that will always have a place in my heart, Granfalloon for example, and those places aren't really held by many books (though there are a couple of novels that I can truly say helped change my life). A fanzine can be a powerful tool, effective in a way most other media isn't due to the personal feel.

As for baseball...when I was a kid the most exciting day of the year (outside of Christmas) was when the new Strat-O-Matic cards arrived in the mail. I have pretty much avoided computer baseball games as potential time blackholes. One thing I have noticed when I've sampled them is that at a certain point accuracy of simulation starts to detract (for me) from the fantasy quality. It becomes a little too real somehow.

I love Stat-o-Matic cards. I have a bunch of them. There are a few really good simulators, my fave being Baseball Mogul, but I can see what you're saying.

Have you run across SBS baseball?

<http://sbs-baseball.com/>

Very simple but cool freeware with practically every team, going back into the 1800s, plus a growing library of minor league teams, Japanese teams etc. Not nearly as accurate as commercial games but lots of room for imagination.

Eric

I can see that I am going to be spending a lot of time with this one. I love Japanese Baseball, so this one is just about perfect.