

# If You Don't Feel It's Safe, Don't Climb It

By Edward Kennedy

I met the client shortly after 8 a.m. as planned to estimate a removal job. What I saw I did not like and as we walked to the backyard area for a closer look at the large poplar, roughly five foot DBH, I had already decided that key leaders of the tree were structurally unsound, and would necessitate the utilization of a crane with a boom length of at least 150 feet.

The tree presented with a co-dominant structure of seven leaders, some dead, some dying and about half of them suspect as to structural integrity. The main crown extended over a primary supply line of at least several thousand volts, and a fence was located under the critical parameter area.

Most of us in the business have an instinct about trees, and although it is not nearly as acute as that of the intuitive awareness that women possess, I had an apprehensive feeling that put me on high alert with the client. He was a middle-aged male, with nary a care as to the danger factors I presented to him relative to this proposed job. His interest alone was with the bottom dollar line, and he nonchalantly dismissed my rough figure as too high.

I consider myself as a patient man, and this has improved over the years. However, I felt

irritation if not anger rising up and manifesting in my tone as he waxed on and on about cost reductions. I have found it a good rule to judge people by how they treat others, and this individual demonstrated no consideration for the safety of workers doing the proposed work, only for the thickness of his wallet thickness.

In all my years I have never "de-listed" anyone except a cranky, arrogant retired school teacher who refused to be confused by the facts and insisted that my trimming of her tree accommodate her unrealistic expectations. She had done so much instructing that she had lost the ability to listen, but that is another story. I felt so inclined with this individual standing in front of me, and concluded the meeting by curtly informing the client that I would not climb the tree, nor would any of my employees, and that if he refused my cost estimate for doing the job safely, he would be advised to find a "crazy" to do the work without the assistance of mechanical means.

My exit was blocked with a quick maneuver by the client, who redirected my attention to one particularly unsound leader over the wire, and asked for a cost factor for the removal alone of that member. Mentally cutting the whole removal price by 65 percent, the figure was dismissed instantly again as too high by the client, and I side-stepped him with a comment, "Good luck on finding a crazy," and exited the property.

Two weeks later I drove by the tree and was astonished to see the unsound leader gone. Out of curiosity I had driven by to see if anyone had in fact removed the member. Someone apparently had! For eight months after that, I occasionally thought about that dangerous tree, and in a meeting with another company owner, mentioned that situation. I was surprised to hear him reiterate two stories that satisfied my curiosity.

He knew the individual who had taken the unsound leader down. The climber had been hired by the client for a pittance and had climbed the suspect leader, sectioning the top down to the main trunk. He had used a gin point from the leader itself as it was an isolated member, and there was no other feasible way to remove it without a crane. He had played the part well, having his girlfriend take pictures of this daring feat, while he worked above the high-voltage supply line. But everyone did not exactly live happily ever after.

The company owner I had been talking to hired this individual that same fall to contract climb for him. While in the crown of the tree, he had fallen 20 feet. Landing upright, he shattered the bone structure in each heel and had been hospitalized. The investigation, reportedly, uncovered that he was not covered by compensation, and I am told, but have not verified, that there was a financial settlement with the worker.

The moral of this story is not that there are crazies around who will risk their health/life taking uncalculated and high risks to save some cheapskate a few damned dollars. The real moral is that sooner or later this type of irresponsible work lifestyle will catch up to anyone who practices it. As we all know, there are things that can happen to even the best in this profession, and the danger element is always high, necessitating mitigating work techniques and safety practices to reduce the element of risk.

Fortunately, in this case, the individual did not lose his life. Yet what kind of person would tempt injury, even death itself, for a few dollars? You may be interested to know that a suspected substance impairment was a contributing factor in the fall, and further, I personally suspect it was a substance impairment that allowed the hapless individual to climb a structurally unsound member, directly over a high voltage supply wire, in a structurally unsound tree.

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