

KEEPING AMERICA NATURAL¹

by Charles R. Montgomery

I think, quite frankly, that when laymen hear that utilities employ and rely frequently upon arborists, some eyebrows probably go up and people ask themselves what in the world a gas company, electric or telephone company need with men and women in that profession.

But if the layman thinks about it for a moment, he will conclude that arborists play a very important role in the business of delivering gas, power, and communications services to their homes and businesses. For what all of you do has a very significant impact upon the way the general public views the utility company.

People driving along highways or strolling the neighborhood on a warm summer night never see those buried gas lines and pay scant attention to the electric lines overhead. But they do notice whether the gas company crew working up the block might be disturbing their favorite maple tree. And they do pay attention to whether the crew that just put in the pipeline along a roadway restored the land properly and replanted trees and shrubs where needed.

And believe me, if that land isn't restored and replanted and if that maple tree is damaged and not repaired or replaced, the public, our customers, do indeed get upset. And that, of course, is where all of you come in. You see to it that as few trees as possible are disturbed when excavation work is done in residential neighborhoods and assure that the right kinds of trees and shrubs are planted in areas where major utility construction projects have disturbed large areas of land.

I think this facet of your profession is one of the most important you perform for the companies you are affiliated with. It is important because it is a high visibility task. The public seldom sees and is barely aware of most of the hundreds or even thousands of persons employed by a utility. What they do see and are aware of are the meter readers and linemen and the crews out on

the streets and in the fields each day. That is the public's basic impression of a utility company.

And so whether you have thought of it or not, you are performing important public relations functions for your companies in the jobs you do, jobs that take you and your staffs outside the office to perform tasks literally under the public's nose.

I want to discuss some of the programs Michigan Consolidated is involved in that rely upon the expertise of our own arborist, Mr. Norbert Karmann, and his staff.

The storage fields we maintain are depleted oil and gas fields and although we rent some of the surface land to farmers for agricultural purposes, many hundreds of acres of our nearly 10,000 acres of storage-field properties are only minimally productive.

The soils, basically in the north central part of Michigan, are of marginal quality and although most farm crops do poorly on them, trees do very well.

For some time we have been involved with tree planting programs at our storage fields to improve the esthetics of the land, create cover for wildlife, and help retard soil erosion.

In addition to tree plantings on large parcels of storage field land, Mr. Karmann and his staff are also involved in planting projects around company buildings and in the development of greenbelts to screen from public view facilities such as compressor stations and other equipment used both at storage-field sites and at producing wells.

One of our latest major greenbelt plantings was completed just this past spring around the perimeter of our 100-acre West Columbus storage field, about 40 miles northeast of Detroit. Under the direction of our arborist, 1000 ornamental trees and shrubs were planted and will serve to screen wellhead facilities and other equipment at that field from public view.

¹Keynote address presented to the Utility Arborists Association at the International Shade Tree Conference in Detroit, Michigan in August 1975.

You may be interested in a new cooperative program that began some time ago in this state by Michigan State University, the University of Michigan, Michigan Technological University, the State Department of Natural Resources, and the U.S. Forest Service. The program is called MICH-COTIP, an acronym for Michigan Cooperative Tree Improvement Program. It is run basically by members of the forestry schools of the three universities and the foresters of the state and federal agencies. Its purpose is to establish a genetic approach toward the improvement of forest trees in the state. Michigan Consolidated became one of the cooperators in the venture when it was organized last year.

We're glad we did, for several reasons. Because we have hundreds of acres of storage-field property suitable for forestation, we made several acres available to the cooperative for a series of experimental hybrid plantings of both Colorado blue spruce and aspen. Foresters at MSU, working with our arborist, selected several sites for plantings of both the spruce and aspen early this spring at our W.C. Taggart storage field, located in central Michigan near the village of Six Lakes.

The MSU geneticists will monitor the growth of these thousands of seedlings, each with its own pedigree, over the next few years and from those studies will have a better idea of how well these selections will grow in the soils and climate of central Michigan.

I am sure it is apparent to all of you how important these kinds of projects may eventually become to the state's economy. If MSU determines that you can plant superior seedlings in a suitable pattern, and finds that they will grow to harvestable size in a much shorter period of time than others common to the state, the impact in time on the lumbering industry and all industries in Michigan using wood and wood products will be an im-

portant one. It will improve the lumber industry and create more jobs not only in that industry but also in related ones.

Although we at Michigan Consolidated do not have any firm plans to grow and harvest large-scale forest crops on our storage field properties at this time, the potential for that kind of a program nevertheless exists.

From the standpoint of a utility company, it is good business because any project, such as this one, that may in the future improve the economic conditions and living conditions in this state is going to be good for everyone, including the gas company.

At the beginning of this talk I said I would bet that the eyebrows of many persons might go up when they learn that a utility company employs arborists. Well, the kind of programs we are engaged in at our storage fields, I believe, is a good example to use in explaining why a utility needs people with the kind of expertise you possess.

I suppose it is by now a cliché to say that this country is in the midst of a green revolution. But it is. People who never gardened before have gardens now, people who didn't know a poinsettia from a pansy have house plants in every room. And whenever Michigan Consolidated Gas or any other gas utility goes out to drill a well or build a pipeline, there is going to be more and more concern about what we are doing to the trees and the shrubs and land, to the total environment.

And while we in the utility industry will continue to rely on our engineers to plan our projects and get them built, we will also, more and more frequently, be relying upon arborists to assist us in making sure that we do the best job we can in keeping America natural.

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