

Climber Ed Hobbs' Contributions to the Arborist Profession

By Don Blair

We live in an age of technological wonders. Time moves so fast that we can easily lose sight of where we came from. My car is older than Google. I competed in my first "Tree Trimmer's Jamboree" 30 years ago. Attending the International Tree Climbing Championships (ITCC) in Pittsburgh in August, I realized that most of the competitors either hadn't been born or were not old enough to attend kindergarten in 1974. Once we embrace a new technology like remote control door locks we wonder how we ever managed to put a key in a lock or use a crank to roll a car window up and down. It's hard to remember a time when TV was black and white and you had to dial a phone number instead of pushing buttons.

1974. Thirty years ago. For young climber's, this would be the Pleistocene Era when dinosaurs ruled the earth. Well, it wasn't that long ago, but for those of us who were actually drawing a paycheck instead of drawing with crayons, things were certainly different then. We pruned with Fanno No. 8 push saws. Our chain-saws were Homelites and McCulloughs. Rope came in your favorite choice of Manila. The average charge in commercial tree care (San Francisco Bay Area) was \$10 per man hour. We were still in Vietnam. There was unrest in the Middle East. Fuel was in short supply, but the trees kept growing and somehow we kept working.

1974. The ISA was called the International Shade Tree Conference. There was no climbing competition at the annual conference. Since Al Shigo wouldn't speak to the Western Chapter of the ISA



Edwin Hobbs in a recent picture, with one of his falcons.

until 1976 in San Jose (California), we still took pride in the way we painted our cuts. Brush was loaded more often than it was chipped.

As long as we're thinking in time blocks of 30 years plus or minus, a simple leap back 30 years brings us back to World War II. Those young boys who scaled the cliffs at Pointe du Hoc and stormed the sands of Iwo Jima went on in the post-war years to make immeasurable contributions to the growth of this profession. Dr. Richard Harris had been a PT Boat Commander. Ed Irish was a Combat Engineer on bloody Omaha Beach. Dick Abbott and Bob Mazany were preparing for the airborne invasion of Japan when the war ended. Those young boys who stood in lines overnight on December 7, 1941 to enlist in the Army (the Air Force was in the army then), Navy, Marines and Coast Guard

were the same old men with canes and in wheelchairs pushed by their grandchildren that I saw with tears streaming down their cheeks at the dedication of the WWII Memorial this past May in Washington, D.C.

In 1945, as World War II ended, an 8-year-old boy began to rappel off sheer mountain cliffs in search of falcons. His love for falcons embarked him on a life-long avocation that influenced his career decisions, led him to arboriculture, and fundamentally changed a profession that for so many decades had upheld a proud tradition unhampered by progress.

Edwin Lancaster Hobbs started doing tree pruning and removal for friends and neighbors in 1949 when he was only 12 years old! He was the youngest person ever to buy a full set of climbing gear from Western Tool and Hardware in San Francisco, Calif.

While I was still in diapers, literally, Ed worked as a rigger and loader in the heart of the Redwood Empire. In the 1950s, while on the Logging Sports circuit; he set records as a competitive high climber that stood for years. Ed became a police officer in 1958 and spent the Kennedy years serving in the United States Army as a K-9 MP, providing security at a missile base. Honorably discharged, Ed returned to his career as a police officer and served a total of 14 years. In 1967, Ed Hobbs and Harry Brizee established B&H Tree Service in Moraga, Calif.

Although they offered a full-range of tree maintenance services – pruning, cabling, and pest control – B&H soon established a reputation for being masters of extreme tree removal. In addition to conventional methods, Ed used sign cranes, line guns, and hook-and-ladder



Named for his two sons, Brian and Daniel, Hobbs' revolutionary Bry-Dan saddle used separate, articulating leg straps. The system was so unique that Hobbs was granted one of the few patents awarded a saddle.

trucks to place his climbers in enormous eucs (eucalyptus) and redwoods. In addition to commonly accepted rigging practices, he used cranes and helicopters to move wood. Ed has never stopped thinking about, dreaming up and implementing improvements in tools and techniques.

In my opinion, Ed Hobbs is an authentic genius. Not only can he dream up an idea, he can mill it, lathe it or weld it into reality in his machine shop. Over the years he has patented climbing, rigging and rappelling inventions and has developed scores of other products to meet his own needs.

Husqvarna manufactures a motorized, tracked crawler for use on construction sites. About 10 years ago, Ed bought one and figured out how to stick a small brush chipper on it, converting it into a self-propelled chipper that would go through a gate into a backyard. It sure beats dragging brush!



The Bry-Dan saddle bag.

During the Vietnam War, Ed developed a rappelling kit for pilots who might find themselves stuck in the forest canopy. The prototype was a masterpiece, containing a miniature Figure eight, a carabiner and rappelling line packed into a self-deploying bag that strapped to the thigh of a pilot's flight suit. The war ended just as he had gotten the Pentagon interested in placing an order.

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Bry-Dan Saddle

Ed began his work in developing the Bry-Dan saddle in 1970. To truly appreciate how advanced the design of this harness was 35 years ago, many climbers were still tying a bowline on a bight into manila rope and climbing on bosun's chairs made from oak barrel staves. Named for his two sons: Brian and Daniel, Ed built a revolutionary harness out of Cordura and ballistic nylon cloth and padded the 6-inch wide waist belt with closed cell foam. Now, that's a long ways from a saddle made from a stave out of an old whiskey barrel tied together with a few feet of manila rope!

Using separate, articulating leg straps, the system was so unique that Ed was granted one of the few patents awarded a saddle. Also unique to the Bry-Dan at the time, was the incorporation of suspenders that made the belt a full-body harness. Primarily intended to help support the weight of a heavy chainsaw, the suspenders also prevented an injured climber from falling through the belt if he/she were flipped upside down. I first used a Bry-Dan in 1977 at the 2nd ISA Jamboree Finals in Philadelphia, Pa. People joked about it and said it looked as though I were putting on a parachute. I told them it had a Euc Man's

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Of all of Ed's inventions, the three that have had the greatest lasting impact on arboriculture have been the Bry-Dan saddle, Hobbs Lowering Device, and the Hobbs Block.

parachute built-in – one that opened on impact. Many of the Western Chapters' finest competitive climbers have prided themselves over the years as being "Bry-Dan Men" – Robert Hunter, Robert Phillips, Gary Abrojena, just to name a few.

Hobbs Lowering Device

In the 1970s we began to experiment with new-fangled synthetic lines. We quickly learned that friction heat that would merely char a 3/4-inch manila bull rope would melt clean through a three-strand polyester. We also learned quickly that although far stronger than manila, three-strand synthetic ropes streeetcheeed (stretched) a whole lot more than the manila lines we knew so well. Stretch and heat were two factors that kept us using manila when other industries were beginning to adopt nylon and polyester lines.

Arborists have been "taking wraps" around tree trunks from the very first time a line handler was jerked out of his boots and catapulted into the next yard. Basic, simple and effective, the practice can also leave friction burns on the tree and rough bark can cause premature rope wear or even catastrophic failure.

In the years before the Hobbs Lowering Device, arborists in general and Euc Men in particular would commonly replace the bumpers on their tree trucks with 4- to 6-inch round pipe. This pipe bumper made (and still does) a perfect snubbing post for anchoring a speedline or taking wraps on a removal. A limitation, of course, was access. It's pretty hard to drive a 1958 Dodge Power Wagon through a 30-inch gate into a backyard in the steep Oakland foothills.

Among tree companies with connections to the maritime industry, logging or utility line construction, it wasn't all that rare to see modified bits, bollards and cleats as rigging aids, but these were all truck-mounted as well.

The story of the tree-mounted lowering device begins with Ed Hobbs. Around 1974, Ed arrived at one of his B&H Tree

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Service removals just as one of his employees was being dragged around a big euc by the weight of a log that was too big for the number of wraps taken. Not too long after that experience, Ed was with a crew taking down a tree with some horizontal limbs at waist height. Ed left a protruding stub, took his wraps on that and the light bulb came on! Ed now had a choice: only take on removals that had horizontal limbs at waist

height or bring the stub with him to the trees that were lacking in such amenities. So began years of trial and error and design.

The earliest prototypes began with a fixed spool but there were limitations. Among the first arborists to experiment with synthetic line, Ed soon learned that he couldn't take the stretch out of the three-strand, 1-inch nylon or polyester ropes that

he needed for their strength. Six feet of stretch when you've only got 3 feet of clearance over a roof was not a good thing. Ed redesigned the fixed spool into a one-way ratcheting device that allowed him to winch the stretch out of the rope or even do some lifting.

In the research phase, Ed discovered that steel spools could get so hot under load that they could cause severe to catastrophic heat damage to the lowering line, so he changed the design of the spool from welded steel to cast aluminum alloy. In addition to making the device light enough to be practical, aluminum has something like four times the heat dissipation properties of steel.

In 1979, after five years of extensive testing and redesign, Ed created a sensation at the Northern California Tree Trimmer's Jamboree (Rengstorff Park, Mountain View, Calif.) when he gave the first public demonstration of the first commercially feasible, ratcheting lowering device in arboricultural history. I was there. My father, Millard F. Blair, was there. He was impressed. I was mesmerized. At subsequent demonstrations, in order to add drama to the lifting ability of the Hobbs Lowering Device, Ed would lift the front end of a truck into the air about three feet!

In my opinion, the Hobbs Lowering Device and the companion Hobbs Block set in place the elements of a rigging system that totally revolutionized arborist rigging and the way we would approach the challenge of tree removal.

Before the advent of technical rigging, we could approach removal with the following options:

1. Felling in one piece.
2. Dismantling in sections and pieces without rigging.
3. Roping down. With the exception of the aforementioned truck mounted bumpers and bollards, roping down usually meant wraps and natural crotches.

Old-fashioned wooden snatch blocks



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The earliest prototypes of the Hobbs Lowering Device began with a fixed spool.

would be lashed to spars when necessary.

Some “old hands” may still well remember an instance when either a lowering line or climbing line cut a groove through the bark and basically locked the rope up from free running. It was common practice to cut the bark out of a crotch down to sap wood to reduce the amount of friction and abrasion damage that rough bark could wreak on a rope.

4. Cranes, A-frames and gin poles were brought in as necessary, but none were of any use in restricted-access sites. Arborists who can drive into almost any backyard in the Mid-West or East can scarcely appreciate the challenge of having to take big oaks, redwoods and eucalyptus trees down in “postage stamp” backyards through a 30-inch gate at best – and through the house at worst!

With the Hobbs Lowering Device, Hobbs block, improved synthetic ropes being developed at about the same time, a systems approach to rigging became possible for the first time.

Hobbs Block

As a result of the problems associated with trying to rig through a natural crotch, Ed used his logging experience to design a scaled-down tail block for the specific purpose of arborist tree removal. Before the Hobbs block, we used wooden-sided

snatch blocks, single blocks and double blocks. Most had an open hook, a few had a spring-gate closure, but a prudent climber would wire the hook closed to prevent loss if the block jumped around enough to jump out of its lashing. As far as I know, Ed was the first to design an arborist rigging block that incorporated the features that have become the standard today: large diameter sheave, wide cheek plates that protect the rope from abrasion, an upper bolt and bushing so that a rigging rope for lashing the block in place became an integral part of the block.

With the combination of the Hobbs Block and Lowering Device, the first true rigging system was in place. Arborists could now place their rigging where it would be the most advantageous and not where the crotch was attached to the tree. With friction reduced by being reeved through the block instead of a natural crotch, unwanted slack could be cranked out of the rope with the ratchet mechanism built into the device. Words that we could never associate with rigging, such as control and finesse, became part of the same sentence and thought process. Instead of hoping there’d be enough clearance for the rope to finish stretching before the log punched a new skylight through the client’s roof, we could confidently work in zero-clearance situations.

Ed Hobbs changed the profession of arboriculture as surely as Dick Alvarez’s

founding of the Tree Trimmer’s Jamboree in 1973 changed the ISA.

When one attends a TCI EXPO or browses a Web site or peruses an arborist suppliers catalog, the choices for arborist climbing line and rigging rope, blocks, shackles, carabiners and lowering devices is staggering. Ed’s original work has evolved and been improved upon since its inception. Ed’s work has spawned imitation and innovation not just in this country but around the world. Speedline rigging techniques, false crotch rigging, deadeye slings and a whole new generation of rigging techniques compatible with lowering devices have evolved over the past three decades.

Climbers just starting out or even with five to 10 years experience might well take this revolution in rigging for granted, without giving a thought to fact that not too many years ago, the veterans of World War II loaded brush, used axes and handsaws every day, and thought nothing of rigging a 100-pound, two-man chain saw high up in a dead elm to save using crosscut saws.

It has often been said that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. In addition to being flattered, I would hope that Ed Hobbs can enjoy a deep sense of satisfaction that his pioneering efforts made such an indelible change in this profession. In inventing a way to keep one of his men from being dragged around a tree 30 years ago, he has changed our practices and saved lives and property in ways that he can never know.

We don’t erect statues to the heroes of this profession and we have yet to establish an Arborist’s Hall of Fame, but I for one would nominate Ed Hobbs as a candidate for either.

Like Thomas Edison or John M. Browning, I hope that this profession can grow to recognize its authentic geniuses. I hope that 100 years from now, the name Ed Hobbs and many other deserving men are still honored and remembered for their lasting contributions to the profession.

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