

Laporte's Tree Program

By Henry Street, Laporte Borough Council and Laporte Borough Tree Commission.

Here is the missing article of Laporte's tree program featured on the cover photo of *Sylvan Communities*, the summer 2000 issue. My wife Ann and I are the sparkplugs of our community's tree program.

Laporte is a small town of 234 residents, doubling to 500 with weekenders and summer vacationers. Fortunately, a job opportunity allowed us to move to this beautiful forested mountain top community 20 years ago. We loved the big street trees, which were 80 percent sugar maple and 10 percent red maple along with a few other varieties. Not knowing the difference we tapped them indiscriminately making maple syrup every winter. These trees were all planted at the same time, shortly after our first street tree ordinance was enacted in 1858. This ordinance designated the distance from the center of the road where the street trees were to be planted. These trees were needed at the time to dress up the community, which had just been designated as the seat of Sullivan County. Prior to this time the area was devoid of most trees as a result of extensive lumbering.

Fortunately, a hundred years later in the 1950s several citizens became concerned about the increasing number of trees being lost to storms and old age and started a memorial tree program. They purchased and planted trees as memorials for residents of the borough, replacing those street trees which had died. This program has kept our streets lined with trees. Unfortunately, they chose to replant only with these same maple species.

Like many, or is it most of, Pennsylvania municipalities, Laporte had no street tree maintenance program. We

soon became aware of the deficiency after a few severe storms took their toll. Large trees fell bringing down wires, narrowly missing homes, and creating a mess. One especially large red maple landed on the back of a pickup truck as it was driving down the road. No bodily injuries were suffered but PennDOT and the electric company had to clean up the mess in the middle of the night. It took several days to repair the damage, as the tree also brought wires to the ground breaking two telephone poles. We realized that no one was taking responsibility for the street trees when another large branch narrowly missed our workshop. The borough told us the street trees along our property were our responsibility to maintain.

After several of these mishaps we began to scrutinize our street trees more closely, noting dead branches, serious cracks which opened and closed with the sway of the branches, attractive cavities which housed many critters, widow makers, listing trunks with heaved soil, and other problems. Our children played under this canopy and citizens strolled the peaceful streets blissful of these observations. Fortunately for us and other similar communities of Pennsylvania, the Extension Urban Forestry program came into being. Ann and I attended our first tree conference in September '94 on the PSU Wilks-Barre Campus, organized by Vinnie Cotrone PSU Extension Urban Forester. The topic was "Managing Trees in Your Community".



Charlie Gardner of Eagles Mere and Ann Street of Laporte selecting trees at Schichtels.

We became invigorated by this conference and wanted to begin a street tree management program in our town. We knew others would feel the same, so naively we proposed such a program to borough council. However, nothing happened, they seemed resistant to change. They liked the big trees, which had been here forever and didn't want anyone telling them what to do with them, besides it's the homeowner's responsibility for tree maintenance. We decided to bring in some heavy hitters in the community tree industry to meet our borough council and persuade them that in this day and age borough organized tree stewardship is a necessity and a civic responsibility. Surprisingly, the council treated Bernie Dincher, a noted arborist from Williamsport, and again our stalwart urban forester from the northeast, Vincent Cotrone, rather shabbily. But this was only a temporary setback to our community tree revitalization efforts.

Meanwhile the maple decline accelerated because of drought, elm spanworm, and forest tent caterpillar attacks, and their poor shape became more obvious. We continued to attend community

forestry conferences and one in particular caught our borough council's attention. Again it was PSU extension service sponsored and organized by Vinnie. The topic was "Community Tree Liability" by Gilbert High. Ann with our Mayor, Robert Carpenter, one of the first in the borough to support the tree program, attended this conference. Fortunately, the borough council secretary also was interested in this topic and attended the conference with her husband. This secretary, Winifred Ferguson, soon became borough president and apparently the conference had made its impact, for one of her first duties in 1997 was to enact a tree ordinance so Laporte could partake of the many community tree assistance programs available. Soon a tree committee was organized, council didn't want the autonomy of a commission. I became a borough councilman myself in '98. Our tree program was launched!

The following is a list of programs in which we have been able to participate.

• **1999 and 2000 — Tree Liability Evaluation and Treatment Grants**

These grants were an initiative of the USDA Forest Service for Northeastern Pennsylvania area coordinated by Morris Arboretum of the University of Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Bureau of Forestry.

• **1998 — Tree Maintenance Grant**

From the Pennsylvania Urban and Community Forest Council

• **1998 — Minigrant**

From the Pennsylvania Urban and Community Forest Council

• **1998 — Municipal Tree Restoration Program**

• **2000 — Municipal Tree Restoration Program**

MTRP is a street tree cultivars testing program. It is sponsored by electric utility companies and administered by PSU Urban Forestry and DCNR's service foresters.

The total cash value from all these grants was approximately \$38,000. However, this amount was expanded to a total of approximately \$172,000, by required cash or in-kind matches and homeowners sharing in the cost of the

work performed on "their" trees. This figure also includes the cost of our electric utility's, GPU, tree removals for the MTRP programs and the cash value of the 80 MTRP trees, which we planted.

Our tree committee also runs the Memorial Tree Program now. This is a great way to maintain or increase your street tree inventory. Even a small town like Laporte generates about 10 memorial trees yearly. We charge \$100 for the tree and \$60 for a bronze plaque. Committee members do the purchasing and planting of the tree and mounting of the plaque. Three hundred trees have been planted since our tree program began a few years ago. The variety of trees has been diverse with 25 different genera, 40 different species, and many cultivars. One hundred sixty nine trees have been removed. Most were hazards; others were misplaced i.e. big trees under high voltage electric wires. One hundred twenty five trees were professionally pruned either for hazard reduction or for structural improvement. Six trees were also cabled to reduce hazard. Finally 101 stumps were removed by grinding. Our community has also sponsored three workshops on Pruning, Caring and Planting of Community Trees; and How to Do a Street Tree Inventory.

I guess if there is a general message we can provide to similar small communities it would be to persist in your efforts to develop a tree program and it helps to:

1. Educate yourselves, not only on trees but all "green issues." Attend the many excellent courses sponsored by PSU extension.
2. Get involved with your local government. Without their cooperation a sustainable tree program will not be possible.
3. Start writing for that grant. Don't be intimidated. Most granting agencies have grant writing workshops and people eager to help you through the application process. Their jobs depend



Henry unloading mulch.

on successful distribution and utilization of the grant money.

4. Be visible. Let people know you are the tree people. Do your pruning, watering, mulching when others are out and about.
5. It would also help to retire from regular employment.
6. And, marry someone with good typing and computer skills who shares a similar interest in trees.

Laporte would like to thank the Pennsylvania Urban and Community Forest Council for the support of our Urban Forester, for without Vinnie Cotrone our program would never have started nor would it have been as successful as it is today. We would also like to thank the Pennsylvania Urban and Community Forest Council for stimulating arborists' interest in community forestry. For without help from knowledgeable and capable individuals like Bernie Dincher our quality tree work would never have been done. There are many other agencies and individuals that a successful tree program must partner with such as DCNR service forester Mike Deibler, who helped us through our first MTRP program, and Donna Murphy, landscape architect working for University of Pennsylvania's Morris Arboretum, who walked us step-by-step through the grant writing process.

It has been a pleasure to associate with other individuals of the community tree industry as well. All seem to be pleasant, knowledgeable and always ready to lend a helpful hand or give advice. Thanks.