

## THE TUNNEL OF TREES

By

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The year was 1975. Fate and a little bit of luck found me occupying the Mayor of St. Helena's office as the first lady Mayor of the city. One evening, my phone rang at home, a voice asked for "Mrs. Ericson". "This is she," I said. "What can I do for you and who is this?"

The caller, a man, hesitated a moment, then responded, "I can't tell you my name, it would mean my job. I have to warn you about something terrible that will happen in about 10 days.

"Warn me?" I said, startled at the tone of voice. Anonymous calls are scary at best and my imagination is very vivid when activated by a stranger's call.

"Oh I don't mean to scare you, Ma'am, but I just don't know what else to do," he said.

"Well, start at the beginning and tell me your problem." I tried to sound calm.

"About a month ago, Governor Jerry Brown issued an edict out of Sacramento that all elm trees in California on state owned property were to be cut down. By so doing, the state of California would eliminate any and all expenses incurred by the Dutch elm Disease. As a result, the Cal Trans Highway crews last week cut down 17 healthy trees on the corner of Deer Park Rd. and Highway 29. (The site of the present Markham Winery.) I have to warn you that we are scheduled to cut down the Elm Tree Tunnel within the next 10 days." He sounded almost breathless but glad he had finally said his piece.

I was appalled at what his words stated. The Elm Tree Tunnel, 149 beautiful trees, was a dearly loved landmark of St. Helena, in fact of all Napa County. To cut these trees down was unthinkable. I feebly thanked the caller for his warning and the line went dead.

The Dutch elm disease originated in the Netherlands about eighty years ago and arrived on the East Coast of the United States in the early '30's. At that time, the federal government, believing incorrectly that the disease attacked healthy American elm trees from the top of the tree down, sent crews of tree trimmers throughout New York State that topped off all elm trees showing dead or dying evidence on the uppermost limbs.

The disease spread slowly across the United States and reached California in the early 70's. For Governor Brown to arbitrarily cut down all elms on State lands was overkill, excuse the pun!

What could I do? Where would I begin? Whatever was decided, it had to be done quickly. When I told my son about this bad news, he was simply angry and almost shouted, "They can't cut down the Elm Tree Tunnel. Every kid in St. Helena would be furious. They all remember riding through that tunnel and trying to hold their breath the whole way. Mom do something!"

Believe it or not, his words triggered the next action. I put together a flyer with the address of the Governor and of the Cal Trans main office but directed all mail to come directly to the St. Helena City Hall. Then I went to every classroom and alerted all the students in all of our schools to write letters of protest and to urge their parents to do the same. Within 5 days we receive 2,386 letters of protest. On the bed of a pick-up truck I had a pile of dry leaves mounded about a foot deep. The letters were piled on top, the result looked like an enormous amount of mail received in protest. We then parked the truck at the entrance to the Elm Tree Tunnel opposite the Beringer gate and had news photographers take the pictures. It went on to the AP wire photo and the story went coast to coast. The rest is history. Du Pont Corporation in Delaware stepped up to the challenge and the University of Davis got involved. They sent their tree experts to the rescue. Each tree had 3 or 4 bore holes put into the base of the tree – about a foot or two above the ground. Into these holes they injected a very expensive disease repellent donated and developed by the Du Pont Corporation. Following that treatment, the roots were cut apart between the trees. At this time, it was common knowledge that the Dutch elm disease was spread through the tree roots and not through the tree tops!

The system worked! Twenty-five years later, we still enjoy those elm trees as they turn green each spring and we luxuriate in their leafy shade when summer hits. I could end my story here, but I have to share one other small incident with regard to the tree tunnel. I was shopping at Keller's Market recently, where I have a charge account. A young Hispanic man was ringing up my purchases. When I told him my name, he said shyly, "I know who you are, Mrs. Ericson. You came to my school when I was in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade and you got all of us to write letters to save the trees. We still have our tree tunnel, and I always felt that my letter helped!"

The real hero here is the young man who worked for the Cal Trans crew cutting down healthy trees. He had the foresight and courage to call me and trigger the action to stop, even though his job was jeopardized.