

Out on a Limb

Parker family continues tradition of reaching for new heights

By Debby Schoeningh

Like modern day Tarzans, James Parker, Grant Parker and Rory Baker spend a good deal of their days swinging from limb to limb high in the canopies of trees.

But instead of vines, they use a series of ropes tied with what they appropriately call “monkey knots,” a form of tautline hitch that allows them to ascend and descend the trees with the graceful ease of a gibbon.

Although their practice of swinging in trees has nothing to do with saving Jane, their purpose is still a rescue attempt—aimed at saving the trees and the structures they could fall on.

The trio work for Parkers Tree Service of La Grande, which is owned by Jesse and Robin Parker, James and Grant’s parents.

Grant, 16, and James, 18, are the third generation of Parkers to learn the skill of tree climbing. Rory, 24, is a longtime friend of the Parker family.

Jesse learned tree climbing from his dad, Brownie Parker, who won the title of world champion tree climber in 1944 at the North American Shade Tree Conference.

Brownie started the family tree service business in 1937 in Southern California and operated it until about 1975, when he purchased a ranch in Oxbow and retired.

Jesse was a partner with his dad in the business when he was younger, and then owned his own tree service business in Central California.

Later in life, he received a higher calling—higher than the trees could take him.



Grant Parker works a chain saw as he trims a tree.

Jesse moved his family to La Grande in 1984 to begin the Lighthouse Church.

He initially set up his tree business in La Grande. After he became known, it flourished, but so did the church.

“I shut down the tree business

and went full time in the business of pastoring,” Jesse says.

At the time, the Parkers had four daughters, none of whom expressed an interest in climbing trees for a living. But when the boys came along, they were eager to learn the trade.

"We started the tree business again for our boys," Jesse says. "They make good money, have to work hard and they stay in a good environment."

Jesse started climbing when he was about 12 years old, similar to how he taught his sons, using a special harness and ropes and by learning how to tie knots "that slip when you want them to and won't slip when they need to hold."

Learning how to stand in climbing spurs is an important element of tree climbing.

"Your instinct tells you to hug the tree, but with spurs you need to stick your behind out some," Jesse says. "That is one of the hardest things to learn."

A prospective tree climber wants to start out with small, easy trees, Jesse cautions. But he has advice for those who are afraid of heights: "Don't try it—haul brush."

One of the tallest trees Jesse ever climbed was a 220-foot eucalyptus tree in California, which had vultures roosting in it. Jesse's job was to top the tree so the vultures would leave and stop making a mess on the owner's garage and driveway.

"The vultures didn't bother me, but it was hard to climb and when I got 30 feet off of the ground, I couldn't see the ground crew for the fog," Jesse says. "The owner was gone while I topped the tree, and just as I reached the ground he arrived with a bell to put in the top to scare the vultures off—so back up the tree I went."

Jesse says tree work is not dangerous for trained climbers who adhere to proper procedures and rules.

"The trick to our trade is to simplify what looks to be dangerous and complicated," he says. "There are safe ways to do any job. You use



James Parker uses climbing skills he learned from his father, Jesse, to maneuver high in a tree he is trimming.

your head and your skills. My boys and employees have the benefit of 90 years combined climbing experience from my father and me."

When cutting large branches over the tops of structures, Jesse works a rope system from the ground to guide those branches to a safe landing as his sons cut them.

"We are specialists in putting our cut limbs in just the right place," Jesse says. "We try not to climb in too windy of weather, mainly because of keeping control of the limbs we cut. We don't want them flying too far."

But some things are beyond even the best tree climber's control.

"Hornets have met with hornet spray a few times ... and the boys have been stung a few times," Jesse says.

Jesse says tree climbing is somewhat of a dying art among tree

pruning services. Most modern day tree service companies have trucks with buckets to lift them high into the branches.

"We have bought some bucket trucks and are using those also," Jesse says, "but there are still some places you just can't get to without climbing, and my boys sometimes think it is easier to just climb the tree."

Robin, Jesse's wife, says she had lived next door to the Parkers since she was 8 years old and hauled brush for them for years, so she is used to the activities of a tree climber.

"My husband is extremely safety conscious," she says. "He makes sure the boys can do what he asks them to do. If it is a bad situation, he usually does it himself."

She says the tree business has been good for her sons.

"They are learning how to please the customers, which is not a young person's natural instinct, and

how to work until the job is 'finished,'" Robin says.

Grant says learning the ropes was easy.

"The hardest thing for me to learn was how to place the cut limbs in the right place when working over a house," he says. "Now I feel confident that I can do those jobs. No problem. I enjoy my job."

James says the money is good and it is an enjoyable trade.

"You get a lot of satisfaction from a job well done," he says. "We even get tips sometimes. Some people think it is scary, but when you learn how, it is fun. I have gained a lot of confidence. I know that if I set my mind to do something, I can get it done." ■

The Parkers serve La Grande, Haines, Baker City and Richland. Contact them at (541) 963-8201 or (541) 786-2420.