

The Big Orange 83 Years of Service and Innovation

by Karl Pokorny, Southern Chapter ISA Vice President

On August 28, 1928, Griffith, Lester and Carl Asplundh, the sons of Swedish emigrant Carl Hjalmar Asplundh and Swiss emigrant Emma Steiger, founded the Asplundh Tree Expert Company in Glenside, Pennsylvania. The three brothers, whose last name means “grove of aspen trees” in Swedish, had learned tree work while working their way through college in their older brother Oswald’s tree-trimming business.

Griffith, Lester and Carl earned degrees in arboriculture, electrical engineering, and finance. This combination of educations made for a perfectly logical decision to specialize in tree work around power lines. Some family members believed that this decision would limit the growth of the company, but as history has proven, their education and work ethic paid off more than any of them could have imagined.

The first Asplundh crews were equipped only with second-hand trucks, cross-cut saws, axes, ropes and ladders. As anyone in our business could imagine, the work of early line-clearance tree trimmers was grueling with no bucket trucks, brush grinders or even padded climbing saddles. There were some hand-cranked platforms in 1929, but they were not in wide use. Asplundh made training in proper pruning techniques and safety around electrical conductors a priority from the beginning, which helped them work more efficiently than other companies.

Among their first corporate customers were Philadelphia Electric Company, Public Service Electric and Gas Company, Jersey Central Power and Light Company, Pennsylvania Power and Light Company, and American Telephone and Telegraph. The Asplundh brothers forged close business relationships with these companies by providing excellent service and charging fair prices. Because of the Asplundh’s strong commitment to these companies, many of their early customers are still clients today.

During the Depression, many line-clearance companies failed, but Asplundh was expanding and able to hire many of these workers. The brothers’ commitment to their employees was strong as and, in order to keep the company open and crews working, they went without salaries in 1932. By 1934, hard work was paying off again and Asplundh was gaining enough new business to justify a move to a larger facility in Jenkintown, PA. This new location had enough room for a repair shop and more office space. In 1936, the company was expanding into the Midwest, so older brother Oswald Asplundh left his tree-service company to join his brothers’ company.

In the late 1930s, storm-emergency work caused still more growth for the company. Asplundh’s continued commitment to worker training and safety was still paying off, as utility companies preferred to work with tree trimmers who were expert in working around power lines. In 1940, “The Asplundh Tree” was published for the first time in an effort to improve communication in the expanding company and keep employee morale high. At that time, Asplundh crews were working in the Mid-Atlantic states, Georgia, the Carolinas, Texas and New Mexico.

The growth of the company (still in the midst of the Depression, I remind you) justified yet another move. The new location was 505 Old York Road, Jenkintown, PA. This would be the home for Asplundh until 1974. Ten years into their business, the crews were now equipped with the modern marvels of the day: the motorized chain saw and pole pruners. The early saws were too bulky to use in trees, so the work aloft remained much the same. The crews still had to load brush on and off of stake body trucks

During World War II, Asplundh lost many workers to the war effort and, like all companies at the time, faced rationing of almost everything they needed for business. Fortunately, line clearance was considered and essential industry to the war effort and work continued to build. A result of having more work and fewer workers was the development of chemical control on utility right-of-ways. After the war, many workers

returned to the company and Asplundh was adding ever more contracts with new utility customers.

In 1948, Asplundh's equipment specialists began development of one of the most important innovations in the tree-care industry: the brush chipper. The early prototypes were either truck mounted or the more popular trailer model. As the 1950 advertisement below indicates, they also offered a "basic unit – for those who prefer to do their own mounting ...". The basic trailer-mounted Asplundh brush chipper, which was wildly popular, has changed little over the years and is still a ubiquitous piece of equipment in the tree-care industry. The new chippers were manufactured in Asplundh's new Philmont shop in Huntingdon Valley, PA, where the company also rebuilt trucks and saws.

From 1948 to 1952, Asplundh had several changes in leadership due to death, illness and new family members joining the company: On Christmas Eve of 1948, company co-founder and President Griffith Asplundh died. In January 1949, Lester Asplundh was elected President, but in 1952 he had to step down due to illness and the remaining first generation founder, Carl Asplundh, was elected to fill the vacancy. Meanwhile, the three brothers' seven sons were learning the ropes of the company by working in the field with crews and in the office. This company policy of new generations of Asplundhs working in the field remains in effect today.

The 1950s brought more growth with new contracts in New England, Florida, and the Pacific Northwest. With the new growth came the first supervisory training schools in 1953. These schools, which are now called the Asplundh Supervisory Training Program, are used to train the company's general foremen. The company was also automating with early IBM computers to make billing and payroll functions more productive. The automation process, which started in 1949, put Asplundh once again years in front of their competition. Asplundh also realized the need for a written emergency procedure in the aftermath of hurricanes Carol and Hazel. The new procedure manual was distributed to both utility companies and employees in 1954.

In 1956, Asplundh launched a subsidiary company, Asplundh Brush Control Company, to specialize in right-of-way clearing and maintenance. This subsidiary company utilized chemical brush-control methods developed during the war. New methods were also being developed from company research in cooperation with universities in central Pennsylvania.

The company had experimented with hand-cranked platforms in the 1920s and truck-mounted ladders in the early 1950s. In the mid 1950s, Asplundh developed hydraulic lifts that resemble the lifts of today, but were not insulated. Realizing that a non insulated bucket truck could never be an effective platform for work around power lines, Lester Asplundh developed a new boom made from a combination of spun glass fiber and epoxy resin. The early fiberglass was called "spiralloy" and it became the industry standard for bucket trucks. The new "Asplundh Manufacturing Division" manufactured the first boom trucks in 1958 at a new facility in Chalfont, PA.

During the 1960s, Asplundh branched out with new services such as treating and reinforcing wooden utility poles, underground utility construction, and were pioneers in thermographic/infrared inspection services (detection of overheated equipment on circuits).

With the death of Carl Asplundh on July 2, 1967, Lester Asplundh was called on to be the temporary chairman of the board while the company transitioned to the second generation of leadership. In 1968, Barr Asplundh, son of the late Griffith Asplundh, was elected as the new president and all of the second-generation Asplundhs working for the company were elected to positions on the Board of Directors. Also in 1968, the company formed its own GMC truck dealership to supply its fleet and manufacturing operations. The move gave Asplundh more supply and cost advantages over their competition.

The company diversified again in 1972 with the addition of the Asplundh Street Lighting Division, which

provided inspection and repair services to utilities and municipalities operating street-lighting systems. In 1975, the company branched out to railroad maintenance with the creation of the Asplundh Railroad Division, which provided vegetation-management service to the nation's railroad companies. Also in 1975, Asplundh established the One-Call Division. The One-Call centers served as a link between contractors and utilities with buried service lines to protect the underground lines during excavation.

Barr Asplundh stepped down as president of the company in 1982 and was elected the Chairman of the Board, while Edward Asplundh, son of the late Carl Asplundh, was elected as the new president. On May 3, 1984, Lester Asplundh, who had been serving as an Honorary Company Chairman since 1982, died. Lester had been involved with the company for 56 years and had helped grow it from a handful of crews in 1929 to a multi-million dollar, highly diversified corporation. The foundation that Griffith, Lester and Carl had laid for Asplundh was strong and company growth continued at a rapid pace even after Lester's death.

The same year that Lester died, Asplundh expanded its Canadian operations by purchasing a partner company in Ontario and acquiring a right-of-way company in Alberta. Two years later, in 1986, they won their first overseas contract in the U.S. Virgin Islands. In 1987, the company greatly expanded its Canadian operations with the purchase of two tree-service companies in British Columbia and another right-of-way company in Alberta. Asplundh Canada, Inc., was formed in 1988 to service the Atlantic provinces of Canada and Quebec. With the addition of a line clearance contracts in Hawaii in 1988, Asplundh was working in all 50 states and most of Canada.

The first of the "third generation" Asplundh family members completed the eight-year-long Family Management Training Program in 1987. As it was in the beginning, family members were not handed any management responsibilities just because of their names; they all had to work their way into management. The ability to instill the same work ethic from one generation to the next is no doubt part of the reason that in 1988, after 60 years in business, four of the first five Asplundh customers had used their company continuously since 1928. In addition, another 24 utilities had been using Asplundh for 40 years or more.

The company continued to diversify in 1989 with the acquisition of a Florida-based lighting and signalization company, and again in 1990 with the purchase of a utility construction company on Long Island. The name of the company on Long Island was changed to Asplundh Construction Corp and it immediately began expansion into other regions of the US. Continued expansion of the signalization and lighting business was achieved through the purchase of another traffic-signal contractor in North Carolina. The new company operated as a subsidiary of the previously acquired American Lighting and Signalization Company in Florida. In 1994, the company name was changed to ALS of North Carolina.

Crew safety and productivity training was still a primary focus of the company and in 1990 Asplundh created professional line-clearance training crews. This move was also intended to reduce employee turnover. Another step forward in crew productivity came with the development of the LRIII-55 aerial lift by the Asplundh Manufacturing Division in 1991. The new lift was capable of over center movement and had an additional five feet of height.

Asplundh, which had maintained its own GMC dealership since 1968, added a Buick dealership in 1984 and moved both operations to Manahawkin, NJ, the same year. The huge demand for company vehicles also prompted the establishment of a Ford dealership in Ottsville, PA, in 1990. The Asplundh Manufacturing Division was sold to Altec Industries, Inc. in 1992 to ensure a steady supply of aerial lifts to the company. Most Asplundh and Altec lifts are refurbished after retirement from Asplundh and end up in the hands of hundreds of small companies (including the author's) for many more years of reliable service.

Utility companies became more interested in outsourcing business functions in the early 1990s. Asplundh quickly capitalized on the opportunity by offering meter-reading services beginning in 1992. The company

continued to grow overseas the same year with the additions of operations in Australia and the United Kingdom. More expansion followed in 1993 with the purchase of certain assets of Southeastern Public Service Company, which was a holding company for several successful line-clearance contractors. The four companies, Blume Tree Services, Farrens Tree Surgeons, Tree Preservation Company, and Wilson Tree Company, continued to operate with their original names as part of Asplundh Subsidiary Holdings, Inc.

In 1994, the company expanded its Asplundh Supervisory Training Program to help integrate employees from newly acquired companies. The same year, they developed a Line Clearance Training Certification Program to meet new OSHA requirements. By 1995, a staggering 90% of Asplundh's employees had completed the new OSHA-mandated certification program. At the same time, Asplundh also worked with representatives from throughout the tree-care industry to develop the ANSI A300 Pruning Standard.

Chairman of the Board Robert Asplundh retired in 1995 after six years in the position, but remained on the Board. Paul Asplundh, son of the late Griffith Asplundh, was elected as the new Chairman. After the transition on the Board, Asplundh acquired manufacturing rights to the "Slashbuster" mower from D&M Contracting in the Pacific Northwest. This new piece of equipment and other new work platforms increased Asplundh's productivity even more.

One of Asplundh's largest projects ever came in 1996, when Pacific Gas & Electric Company decided to accelerate its line-clearance program. Asplundh dispatched more than 200 crews from all over the country to the John Macri Region of Northern California for several months to get the job done. 1996 also brought more expansion with the Asplundh One-Call service opening call centers in Ontario and Sydney Australia. The Pole Maintenance Division evolved into a new subsidiary, Utility Pole Technologies, Inc. Another new subsidiary, Utility Meter Services, Inc., was established to service the growing demand for outsourcing in this area. The company purchased Underground Utility Locating, Inc., to expand services to utility companies. Perhaps the biggest event of 1996 was the deployment of more than 1,100 crews to help Virginia, Maryland and North Carolina utility companies recover from Hurricane Fran.

Asplundh saw an opportunity in the outdoor advertising industry and purchased Southern Outdoor Maintenance in 1997. The new subsidiary, which provided both construction and vegetation management for outdoor advertising, was renamed Outdoor Maintenance Company. That year also saw the expansion of Asplundh's underground locating service with the purchase of Central Locating Service, Ltd., in Syracuse, NY. Paul Asplundh retired in 1997, but remained on the Board of Directors while Carl Asplundh, Jr., took Paul's place as Chairman of the Board.

Asplundh was called on again in 1998 to do what no other single company could have done: deploy more than 580 tree crews and 100 construction crews in response to a massive ice storm in the northeastern US. At the same time, they were able to deploy more than 300 crews into southeast Canada. In another unprecedented event, 30 tree crews along with their lift trucks were flown on military transport planes from North Carolina to Maine! Asplundh quickly broke its own record though, by deploying more than 850 crews from 20 management regions in response to Hurricane Floyd in September 1999.

Asplundh purchased still more assets in the line construction and underground utility industries in the year 2000. However, they made the largest single purchase in company history in 2001 with the acquisition of all of the line-clearance assets of the F.A. Bartlett Tree Expert Company. That same year, Scott Asplundh, Sr., became the company president and Chris Asplundh, Sr., was elected Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer. These two leaders ushered in yet another Asplundh subsidiary with the creation of Asplundh Environmental Services, Inc. This new subsidiary was established to assist cities, counties and states in disaster-recovery efforts.

Asplundh celebrated its 75th Anniversary in 2003, but no one in the company was resting assured of their

position in the industry. They were still eager to acquire more acquire new companies that would expand their capacity and diversity in the utility industry. Their Meter Services expanded that year with the purchase of VSI Meter Services, Inc., a company that installed automatic meter-reading equipment. A major change in Asplundh's structure occurred in 2004 with the creation of UtiliCon Solutions, LTD, which is a holding company for all of their non-vegetation management subsidiaries. Asplundh selected three non-family company vice presidents to top leadership positions: Steve Bostic, Doug Gober, and Larry Moore became company sponsors in 2004.

2004 and 2005 saw Hurricanes Charley, Frances, Ivan, Jeanne, Dennis, Katrina, and Rita, and Wilma devastated the Gulf Coast from Texas to Florida. Once again, both Asplundh crews and their new subsidiary, UtiliCon, were taking the lead in the cleanup and recovery. In response to the two years of massive hurricane damage, Asplundh recognized another opportunity and began offering "tent-city" services to utilities during storm emergencies.

An important new subsidiary was created in 2006 to provide consulting, contract personnel, and cutting-edge technology in vegetation management. Bob Richens and Henry King from ArborMetrics Solutions, Inc. were charged with developing the new business which has quickly grown in size and scope. ArborMetrics and Utility Risk Management Corp joined forces in 2007 to offer Light Detection and Ranging LiDAR inspection, analysis, and reporting services. LiDAR helps utility companies to identify vegetation risks to transmission lines. Asplundh also launched a pilot program in Automated Vehicle (AVL) in 2007. AVL uses vehicle-mounted electronic devices that send vehicle and equipment information via cell phone networks to a central database. Asplundh's goal is to improve efficiency and employee safety with the new system.

With 83 years of service and innovation behind them now, Asplundh Tree Expert Company with all of its subsidiaries is the undisputed world leader in vegetation management for utility companies. With the commitment to customer service and strong work ethic of this family-owned business, Asplundh will no doubt continue to be a dynamic growing enterprise with many more success to come.

Based on "The Asplundh Tree, 70th Anniversary Edition, Summer 1998" and information from http://www.asplundh.com/our_history.htm, May 5, 2011.