

Resurrection of a Crane-Tree Bonsai

By Jack Wikle

Editor's Note: The following story was written by Jack Wikle for the Sakura Bonsai Society Gnarly News and appeared in the May 2020 issue. Timely indeed. The tree finished in the Top 10 of all voting at this weekend's Virtual Michigan All-State Bonsai Show. Congratulations to everyone that submitted entries to this year's show. [You can still see the entries here.](#)



Fast forward to 2016 when I learned that a long-time friend and bonsai collaborator Cyril Grum and his wife Cathy Strachan were making arrangements for their first visit, that fall, to Japan. They would be traveling as participants in one of the bonsai tours Bill Valavanis and Kora Dalager conduct annually. My wife, Jeannine and I had traveled with Bill and Kora and knew these trips to be a very good value including visits to places not normally open to the public.

Realizing I really wanted to share this experience with Cyril and Cathy, and knowing Jeannine wouldn't be up to it physically, I proposed to Dean Bull that he and I join this group as roommates and traveling companions. As it worked out, several other Michigan bonsai enthusiasts, including Kurt Smith, accompanied us also.

When she learned I would be going to Japan on this tour, Vicki Norfleet, another Ann Arbor Bonsai Society member and close friend of Jeannine and I, proposed that I should meet her Tokyo cousin, Nozomi Tagami, who lives not far from the first hotel we would be staying in. Nozomi and I did meet and have cocoa together on our arranged "date," and we have been corresponding intermittently since that brief introduction.

Among her many other, in depth, interests, Nozomi is an accomplished origami (paper folding) artist, and she mails us samples of her work regularly.



*Photograph of the origami magazine clipping
Nozomi mailed to me a year ago in January.*

It was January 2019, when Nozomi mailed me a clipping from one of her origami magazines, showing several small, artificial bonsai with foliage represented by folded-paper cranes. She noted that while she found this interesting, she dismissed it as something she didn't have the energy to do herself.

To my surprise, maybe a few weeks later at the most, Nozomi emailed me saying she would fold some cranes and send them on to me so I could make a pine tree bonsai using paper cranes as foliage. Of course, I was intrigued by the challenge and responded by thanking her for her generous offer. Not much later a follow-up email from Nozomi led me to believe she might send as many as 200 cranes. With subsequent messages, the crane number kept growing until --- some weeks later --- Nozomi announced she was sure she could get “some ladies from her church” to help her and promised 800 cranes.



Box of origami cranes received from Nozomi a year ago.

Nozomi never told me the actual crane count in the box delivered to me a year ago in April, 2019. But my understanding from Vicki is that she told Vicki there were 1,000. I didn't count but I don't question that number.

Ultimately, I ended up attaching something more than half of the cranes available to my tree.

Box of cranes waiting, the first big challenge became what to mount them on. Where could I find a strong, interesting trunk with some branches to be the framework for my construction?

It was most likely our July, Ann Arbor Bonsai Society meeting when I took the magazine clipping and box of cranes along to show everyone and make a plea for anyone with interesting bonsai “remains,” with potential for resurrection as a crane-tree bonsai, to please talk with me.



*Photograph of the bonsai “remains”, and plastic pot
Kurt Smith gave to me.*

Ultimately, it was Kurt Smith proprietor of the Flower Market (florist and bonsai business) on Rte. 50 between Dundee and Monroe, who retrieved the remains of a clearly dead bonsai (elm I think) and gave them to me. Before I left his shop, we also discovered Kurt had a plastic bonsai pot which looked like it had been made to meet my need for a container and he gave that to me too. I was excited and very appreciative of his generosity.

Okay! I had the basic ingredients and the desire, but time was a problem. Clearly, this wasn't going to be a project I could work on intensively for a day or two and then go on with life. Actually, it wasn't until early this year that I finally began working to put the pieces together.



View of tree support system.

Another challenge was figuring out a way --- finding places -- to attach hundreds of paper cranes to the impressive but sparsely branched and almost twig-less tree remains I had to work with. More about this later.

It had occurred to me that having a plastic pot could be a significant advantage in that I could drill holes through its floor wherever I wanted them and run long wood screws up into the trunk base. Well, working to position the trunk at the level in the pot which looked good to me, it quickly became apparent the trunk base would have to be elevated well above the pot floor. The few minutes I'd imagined needing to screw this trunk to the pot floor became most of a morning.

Then there was clearly the need for more branches and for branches on the branches. Fortunately, I had the foresight to not discard some interesting branches and branch ends removed during the summer to improve the visual quality of other bonsai. Some of the most useful pieces were hackberry and larch remains.

These discards became prosthetics. Holes were drilled into the trunk and some into larger branches, and the bases of the implants were inserted into these holes, wetted with a bit of wood glue. In some cases, toothpick-tip wedges were necessary to tighten the added branches in their new locations.



Tree secured in pot with branching supplements installed and cranes mounted on one branch.

In a few cases, branches were lengthened by adding extensions mostly secured by continuing spiraled wire wrapping out from the existing branch wood. The result looked better, but still clearly not enough surface, not enough twiggy-ness, to attach all those cranes to, or even to attach enough cranes to be visually effective.

In groping for possibilities for adding crane resting locations, the best I could come up with was to substitute fine (1 mm. aluminum) bonsai wire for twigs. In most instances, this fine wire was secured by spiraling pieces around the existing wood with both ends free, extending out into new territory for cranes. Along the extra, outward reaching, wire length, I twisted the wire into small loops --- at least two or three in each wire end, but occasionally one or two more depending on perceived need. The concept was that these loops would serve as crane attachment sites. In a few instances, the fine wire was

secured by pushing its end into a drilled hole, but these installations were not nearly as secure as spiraled wraps.

I had known of hot glue from my son's use of it in design school but had no experience with it. Lacking a better idea, I purchased a small, beginner-level, hot glue gun and glue sticks. It didn't take long to confirm applying a hot glue glob to a crane's breast and rushing that crane to its resting place on a wire loop, or occasionally another location, without brushing off already installed cranes, worked better than putting glue in the destination spot and adding the crane. Replacing cranes that got pushed overboard was part of the process. Yes, there are perches missing their cranes but most of these vacancies aren't obvious now.

One advantage of using this flexible wire was that it allowed some freedom in locating cranes pretty much wherever they seemed needed.



Tree with most of the ultimately used cranes in place.

Okay, fast forward again, a few days later, this creation doesn't look too bad after picking off stray hot glue strands. But we needed soil to achieve the envisioned look. Adding screened bark chips may be the only part of this process which was achieved with the efficiency originally imagined.

Previous issues of this publication are located in the [History section of the AABS website](#)

NEXT WEEK: *Connie Bailie-Crancer: Community in Bonsai*

HOW YOU CAN HELP WITH OUR 50TH CELEBRATION

1. To help us in this celebration effort, all Ann Arbor Bonsai Society members present and past, and all others wishing to contribute are invited to submit personal statements (60 words or less) to be published in our Yearbook. Each text contributor is also strongly encouraged to submit a favorite photo (with caption) of a bonsai tree or a bonsai activity to accompany his or her personal statement. (We can scan old prints or digitize color slides for anyone needing this help with old pictures.) [Upload Form is here.](#)
2. Let's all Celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the AABS in style with shirts that have our commemorative logo printed on the front. Shirts will be available for purchase for \$20 each at our monthly meetings, at the Annual Club Show August 29-30, and at The Flower Market in Dundee, Michigan.



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