

# Modern Marshal Dillons Track Cactus Rustlers

By CYNTHIA SCANLON

**T**HE LAST hope for native cacti in the Southwest very well may rest on the shoulders of just three men — Richard Countryman, Larry Richards and Robert Gronowski. They are district personnel of the Arizona Commission of Agriculture and Horticulture. Most people simply think of them as "cactus cops."

"A lot of our investigations and confiscations come from newcomers into the state, and they're not aware of our Native Plant law," said Richards, native-plant-law specialist for the ACAH. "In some states you're allowed to pick flowers and plants, and they (newcomers) keep the idea that they can do the same thing in Arizona. They can't do that."

**BESIDES** newcomers, there are private individuals and landscapers who steal cactus to sell for a profit, according to Gronowski, special supervisor for ACAH. "A landscaper will knock on a door in a neighborhood and say he'll put five plants in the yard for a hundred bucks," Gronowski says. "You know

that's way too cheap, so it's got to be illegal."

"There's some pretty good money in it," Richards adds. "The market bounces anywhere from \$10 to \$20 a foot. If it is a saguaro that is armed, some dealers will add an additional \$50 per arm to the price of the saguaro. Let's say it's 20 feet high and has two arms. You're looking at anywhere from \$200 to \$400 just for the height and an extra \$100 for the arms."

**ILLEGAL HAULERS** who steal cactus already have a market for what they snatch, say Richards and Gronowski. So the cactus cops (they number 110 and watch over the state of Arizona as well as communicating with California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado and Texas) keep an eye on nurseries and landscapers as eventual stopping-off places.

"The plants have to end up someplace. They're not stolen for the heck of it," Gronowski says. "They (illegal haulers) are not going to hang onto them for a long time. It's got to be a pretty immediate market and they know where they are going to sell it. We train every district inspector to know who their landscapers are in their districts."

The Arizona Native Plant law has been in effect since 1929, says Countryman, eastern regional director of the ACAH. Countryman himself has been with ACAH for 33 years and takes his job seriously. He has arrested his neighbor twice.

"If I treat everybody alike, no matter how big or small, it all comes out in the end," he says. "Guys I went to school with and have known 40 years have had to go down the line with me."



—Photo by Cynthia Scanlon

**From Left, Richard Countryman, Larry Richards and Robert Gronowski Are With Confiscated Cactus That Has Been Replanted**

## GRIT

GRIT is published weekly at Williamsport, Pennsylvania 17701 by Grit Publishing Company, a subsidiary of Stauffer Communications, Inc.

Second-class postage paid at Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Postmaster: Send address changes to Grit Publishing Company, 208 West Third Street, Williamsport, PA. 17701.

GRIT (National Edition) by mail, postage prepaid 52 weeks, \$26.95; 104 weeks, \$49.95; 26 weeks (six months), \$17.49. Outside the United States — 52 weeks, \$40.99.