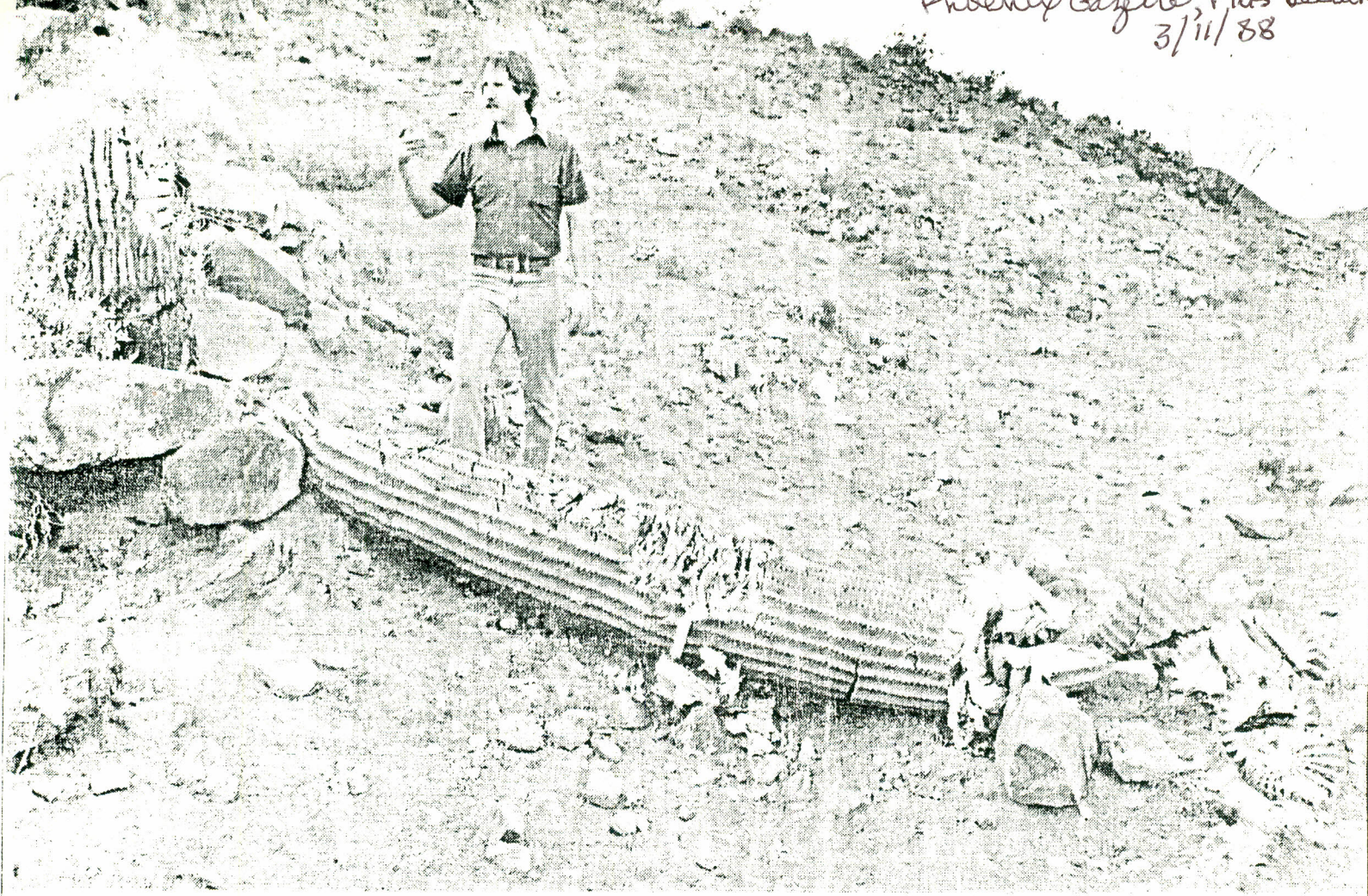




Bob Leiby, *Phoenix Gazette*

Chuck Collier, who lives in the 19000 block of north 22nd Street, stands by a saguaro cactus that was chopped down and mutilated. Such incidents are becoming more and more common, officials say.

Cactus killer

Hacking of north Phoenix saguaros probed

By Doug Frerichs
Phoenix Gazette

The mutilation of cactuses on desert lands in far north Phoenix has focused attention on an increasing problem with illegal destruction of protected native plants.

Vandals used an ax or machete to hack down and chop apart two large saguaros and other cactuses on partially developed desert northwest of Union Hills Drive and 22nd Street.

Larry Richards, head of the state Agriculture and Horticulture Commission native plant division, says his agency views the case as an example of vandalism on a larger scale around the Valley.

He says his agency began an investigation into the cactus mutilation incident after residents of the 19000 block of north 22nd Street reported cactuses on their properties had been destroyed during the past two weeks.

Richards, whose division is responsible for enforcing state native plant laws, says vandals had chopped down and mutilated a 14-foot tall saguaro, had lopped six arms off another saguaro, had hacked to pieces barrel

"It's an ongoing problem, and it's going to be an increasing problem with expansion and development of outlying areas."

— Larry Richards

and hedgehog cactuses and reportedly have damaged other cactuses in the same vicinity.

He says losses exceed \$700 and the matter probably will be referred to Phoenix police.

Under state law, it is a misdemeanor crime to transport, remove or destroy protected native plants without permission of the Agriculture and Horticulture Commission.

Richards says his agency, meanwhile, is investigating increasing numbers of cases involving illegal destruction of protected native plants by developers.

"They go in with bulldozers and simply

wipe out the desert wherever they think roads are needed without seeking permission of landowners, cities, the county and the commission," he says.

The commission is investigating one incident that involved the wholesale clearing of desert vegetation on 160 acres near north Seventh Street and Joy Ranch Road in south New River, he says.

In another case near 60th Street and Dixileta Drive, road-cutters wiped out a total of 48 plants and seven different species, he says.

In another case near 43rd Street and Ashler Hills Drive in northeast Phoenix, a road was illegally bulldozed across the desert, wiping out scores of slow-growing, hard-to-replace plants, Richards says.

"We're getting cases like this three or four times a month in Maricopa County, most of it in the Carefree, Cave Creek, New River areas and in the east Mesa-Apache Junction area.

"It's an ongoing problem, and it's going to be an increasing problem with expansion and development of outlying areas, particularly in northeast (county) areas. It's a problem of real concern," Richards says.