

TRAVEL LIFE

Section **B**

Dec. 10, 2006



Oh Christmas Tree, Oh Christmas Tree

Elgin tree farm inspires family tradition with multi-generational business

By DONNA BOWMAN BRATTON

While many family businesses enjoy a slower pace through the holiday season, Marc and Twyla Nash, second-generation owners of the Elgin Christmas Tree Farm, spend the weeks leading up to Christmas in a constant state of rush.

From the day after Thanksgiving through December 22, the cut-and-choose tree farm is a bustle of activity as families, schools and churches scour the endless rows of trees in search of the perfect tanenbaum. Mr. and Mrs. Nash hadn't originally planned on being Christmas tree farmers, but the seed was planted in 1984 when Twyla's father, Bill Walton, a retired computer programmer, decided on tree farming as a post-retirement business.

From the beginning, Twyla and her two younger sisters helped with various duties such as cashiering, scheduling workers, pruning and coordinating field trips. Within 10 years, Twyla was married and teaching school while Mark, then a recent civil engineer graduate, was set on his own career path. But, as families do, they helped with the farm at every opportunity.

"Every year we got a little more



Photos/Donna Bowman Bratton

Above: Shari Sloane's kindergarten students from Old Town Elementary in Round Rock use teamwork to haul the tree they selected. Top: Hayrides are offered for touring the farm, and they also are used to carry cut trees back to the preparation area.

involved, taking on a few more of the duties on the farm," said Twyla.

When her parents talked of retir-

ing and possibly selling the business, around 1997, Marc and Twyla began working toward purchasing the farm. In 2002, the proverbial

torch was passed to the second generation. When they aren't traveling, Bill and Kaye Walton can often be found helping with the many

farm responsibilities. Even the three Nash children, aged 6 to 11, have responsibilities like caring for the animals in the petting area, helping with the Barn Store gift shop, and pruning crop trees. In many ways, the family business has come full circle.

Growing Christmas trees is a labor-intensive business. Forty of the 70 acres are dedicated to approximately 35,000 trees in various stages of growth. The most popular tree is the Virginia Pine, but they also grow Loblolly Pine and the allergy-free Leyland Cypress. Fraser Firs from North Carolina are brought in for the season as well. With an average five-year growing season, the trees are planted in January and harvested the December before the fifth year. To achieve the trademark cone shape, each tree is routinely attended to. Otherwise, the trees would naturally grow more round in proportion.

According to Mr. Nash, "The shaping process starts in the first year, with basal pruning to get the tree branches up off the ground (putting a handle on the trees) and hand-pruning any branches that are competing with the top of the tree . . . and straightening tree trunks."

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Donna Bowman Bratton

At the Elgin Christmas Tree Farm, trees are agitated on a shaking machine to minimize shedding in buyers' homes.

Tree care: A look at Elgin tree farm

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The second year sees much the same routine with the addition of the first shearing to define the Christmas tree shape. "Third, fourth, and fifth growing seasons consist of shearing in May and again in August for main shaping followed up with top and basal trimming," he said.

Then there's the challenge of irrigation through summer droughts, and controlling the almost invisible bugs that can destroy a crop. By the time customers arrive for their Christmas jaunt, each tree has been examined and trimmed numerous times to achieve the ideal shape, with sizes ranging from 4 to 15 feet tall. The culmination of five years' efforts are realized as smiling customers narrow their search to the tree with just the right height, just the right fullness, just the right shape for their tastes. School field trips to the farm are popular in November and December. Pass any of these school children, proudly carrying their class picks, and you may find yourself joining in the contagion of impromptu Christmas carols among the unmistakable aroma of evergreens.

Once Christmas is past, the chore of removing the leftover stumps requires the work of the family's John Deere tractor, a stump puller and weeks of hard work, Mr. Nash said. "Once the stumps have been removed, the field is disked and irrigated if necessary to prepare for planting," he said.

Crops are rotated on 6- to 8-acre plots to maintain the best soil conditions in preparation for the 6,500 to 8,000 new trees planted each year. Several hundred trees are sold to local retailers, but the majority of

Tips for maintaining cut Christmas Trees

- Choose a tree that is fresh with green, soft needles. Avoid brown and brittle needles.
- Make a fresh cut right before placing the tree in a stand. When exposed to air, trees seal a cut with sap, making it difficult for the tree to draw up moisture.
- Never let the tree run out of water.
- Do not place the tree near a fireplace or heat vent.
- Keep the room cool.
- Use plain water with no additives.

the annual crop is focused on the choose-and-cut family experience.

Bow saws are provided to cut the tree, then the tree is agitated on a machine to shake out loose needles before it is cleaned and wrapped for the transport home. Hayrides are also available to tour the sea of trees or to haul the cut tree from the field to the barn area.

A member of the Texas State Christmas Tree Association, the Elgin Christmas Tree Farm boasts the honor of producing the Grand Champion Christmas Tree for five of the past nine years of the association's annual contest, a testament to the care and nurturing of a family business.

In addition to Christmas trees, a portion of the farm is dedicated to raising pumpkins for the Halloween and Thanksgiving seasons, which include scheduled pumpkin festivals. You'll also find several picnic areas, an antique tractor display, haystacks and play areas for the kids.

Elgin Christmas Tree Farm is located at 120 Nature's Way, in Elgin. For more information, call 512-281-5016 or visit www.elginchristmas-treefarm.com. The farm is open

through December 22, Monday through Saturday, from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. and Sunday, noon to 5:30 p.m.

DISCO



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August 6, 2007

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Ms. Donna Bowman Bratton
The Williamson County Sun
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Dear Donna:

The Texas Christmas Tree Growers Association has awarded to you the 2006 media award highlighting an individual Christmas tree farm for your article "Oh Christmas Tree, Oh Christmas Tree" which appeared in the December 10, 2006 edition of the Williamson County Sun.

Selection was based on the following criteria:

- a. Promotion of real Texas Grown Christmas trees
- b. Fairness to all growers in the area
- c. Visuals used in the article
- d. Timing of the articles---Thanksgiving week and the first two weekends in December
- e. Journalistic excellence

Numerous articles from various newspapers across the state were judged by a panel of Christmas tree growers. Your article stood out as capturing the spirit of our industry.

The Texas Christmas Tree Growers Association would be honored to present you this award at our annual state meeting Saturday, September 8, 2006 in Athens, Texas. The presentation is scheduled for 6:00 p.m. during our banquet. If you cannot attend, the Christmas tree grower who submitted your article for nomination will present the award to you at a mutually agreeable time.

The convention will be held at the Cain Center in Athens, Texas. The address is 915 S. Palestine Street, Athens, Texas and the telephone number is 903-677-2001.

Enclosed you will find a schedule of events. I will be calling you the last part of August to see if you can attend.

Once again, congratulations and thank you for informing the public about Texas grown Christmas trees.

Sincerely,

Marge Gunia
Chairman, Media Award Committee