

O Christmas

TREE

One of Avery County's oldest tree farms extends its evergreen branches to those who fight for our freedom — a sacrifice its founder understood well.

*written by* DANIEL WALTON



PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID UTTLEY

Cartner's Christmas Tree Farm in Newland owes its decades of success to the High Country's ideal growing conditions and the passion of its founder, veteran Sam Cartner.



Come the first Friday in December, a joyful noise rises from the blustery shores of Smith Lake at Fort Bragg. Christmas carols greet the families of troops from North Carolina's biggest Army base as they drive up.

Just ahead, volunteers, some wearing Santa hats with their camouflage fatigues, await the crowd. Between bites of Duck Donuts and sips of coffee, the troops leap into action and tie Christmas trees to car roofs and truck beds. Each one is a gift from Trees for Troops, a program by the national nonprofit Christmas SPIRIT Foundation that donates American-grown Christmas trees to military facilities across the country.

"We see a lot of grateful faces and smiles," says James Day, Fort Bragg's chief of outdoor



Since 2005, Sam and Margaret Cartner's farm has donated firs to Trees for Troops events like this one at Smith Lake Recreation Area at Fort Bragg (below).



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recreation, who has helped coordinate the base's involvement with the program since 2013. "And it's on both ends: the families and kids getting the trees, and the soldiers helping out and giving back."

But North Carolina isn't simply on the receiving end of the Christmas spirit: For the past several years, the state has been one of the top five biggest contributors to Trees for Troops. The roots of that generosity — along with the whole Tar Heel tree industry that makes it possible — were planted by one farmer more than 200 miles away in Avery County.

**SAM CARTNER FOUNDED CARTNER'S CHRISTMAS TREE** Farm in 1959 as a 39-year-old World War II veteran. He rarely spoke of his own military connections. While he served as a B-24 tail gunner in the Pacific Theater, he lived by the Christmas ideals of peace on earth and goodwill toward men. "He said, 'If the people who made the decision to go to war had to fight in the war, we'd have a lot fewer wars,'" recalls his son Jim.

Understanding the sacrifices they made, Sam believed in supporting the troops. And when the National Christmas Tree Association reached out in 2005 looking for contributions to the first year of Trees for Troops, he knew he could share a bit of holiday joy with them.

Since then, the farm has donated many of its own Fraser firs to bases across the U.S. and coordinated donations from other farms in western North Carolina.



The Cartner family stands proudly by one of their Fraser firs, a 20-foot-tall tree selected to be the official White House Christmas tree in 2024.



Sam died in 2017. At 97, he was one of the oldest veterans in Avery County. Jim and his brothers, David and Sam, have carried forward the tradition their father started. “We’ve always felt like it was a worthy cause, to help our service-people that have done so much for us to make our country great,” says the younger Sam.

That commitment held strong even last year, as western North Carolina wrestled with the impacts of Hurricane Helene. Despite washed-out roads and damaged fields — the Cartners alone lost nearly 6,000 trees, about 10 percent of that year’s planting — North Carolina still contributed more than 960 trees to military families, nearly double the amount that Trees for Troops had estimated before the storm.

Rick Dungey, executive director of the Christmas SPIRIT Foundation, said he didn’t expect any donations from the state in the wake of Helene. “I almost came to tears,” he recalls, on learning of what the Cartners and other growers put together for military families. “The dedication and the commitment that those folks have to make this program happen is just inspiring.”

ABOVE: PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID UTTLEY; BELOW: ALL ABOUT THE TABLE/LIZBUSHONG.COM

THE ELDER CARTNER STARTED GROWING TREES IN THE spirit of generosity. Sam had grown up in Mocksville but came to Avery County as an agricultural extension agent after the war to help local farmers. At the time, many mountaineers battled a short growing season to eke out a living with annual crops like beans and cabbage.

He soon realized that the native Fraser fir, if marketed and sold as a Christmas tree, could bring those farmers an economic boon. Compared to other conifers, it holds on to its needles longer, has sturdier branches for hanging ornaments, and exudes an unmistakable scent. But despite these advantages, customers mostly ignored the tree in favor of the Scotch pine and other species.

Sam decided to set an example himself and establish the largest Fraser fir plantation east of the Mississippi River in 1959. He devoted himself to advising farmers and helped organize the North Carolina Christmas Tree Association to advocate for their new crop.

Through Sam's steady persistence and relationship-building, the Fraser fir became a success: North Carolina is one of the top Christmas

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tree producers in the country, harvesting more than 3.2 million in 2022.

IN THE WEEKS AFTER CHRISTMAS, THE ROLLING BLUE Ridge slopes of the Cartner farm will lie at rest under a quilt of snow, like an overstuffed relative dozing on the couch after too much fruitcake. A quiet wind will rustle the soft, stubby needles of the Fraser firs that fill the blanket's blocks with green. Dirt access roads run across the hillsides, ruddy threads stitching together the tidy plots of trees.

The hills won't be sleeping for long. Soon, workers will clear space for new trees, each transplanted onto the farm's roughly 400 acres as a

tiny seedling. The spring, summer, and fall will pass in a flurry of fertilizer, pest control, and trimming to keep the trees healthy and coax them into the perfect conical shape.

And then will come the riotous run-up to Christmas itself, when the fragrant harvest fills tractor-trailers that carry tens of thousands of 4- to 8-foot firs to garden centers as far flung as Utah. As in years before, they'll set 20 or so aside, ready to ship out across the nation with Trees for Troops.

Although the three younger Cartners now live away from the property — Sam is a veterinarian and splits his time between North Carolina and Alabama, while David is a lawyer in Asheville and Jim is a veterinarian in Statesville — they continue to run the business and gather at their childhood home in Newland, now the farm office. Between plans for the next holiday rush, they reminisce about boyhood sled rides down the long hill beside the house, their dad pulling them to the top with his tractor after each run.

Beyond his farm, the sons say their father's real passion was giving back to those around him.

Of his many accolades, Sam's most cherished was being named an Avery County Citizen of the Century in 2011, in recognition of the benefits Christmas trees had brought to the region.

"He would be so proud that the Fraser fir species had provided so much income and supported so many families," Jim says of his father's work as the county agricultural agent.

"He educated more kids, built more houses, and helped more vehicles get bought in this county than anybody, and it was all because of this," David says, gesturing to a snow-dusted field of young firs outside the office window. Their emerald branches stand proud and strong, ready to support not just lights and baubles but a family's legacy of service. **Os**

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### CARTNER'S CHRISTMAS TREE FARM

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