

\*Excerpted from an article in the Washington Post Magazine (12-25-11) by Steve Hendrix on the Barr Family entitled, "Shine: How one Christmas Tree grew up to fulfill its destiny"

Photos by Benjamin C. Tankersley

**T**hree days earlier, the Tree is high on an Appalachian slope in northwestern North Carolina. It is the fifth tree from the left in the third row from the top on a steep patch of Ashe County belonging to Barr Evergreens.

Below spreads a broad snow-dusted valley carpeted with thousands of trees. Few of them are taller than seven feet, and most are mere saplings. There are some blue spruces and a smattering of white pines down near a pond winking sunlight from its frozen surface. But most, like the Tree, are Frasers. They are in a plantation forest, standing in rigid ranks. Some sections run perpendicular to others, and the scene spreading before the Tree is a vast cross-stitch sampler over the rolling and snowy land.

The scene is breezeless and perfectly still, except for a muffled scrunch of lively boots in the snow. A figure in a blue pointed cap and trim ginger beard moves from tree to tree, a tall man, stout in his padded overalls. Rusty Barr, 42, a second-generation Ashe County tree farmer, grew up in these regimented woods near the town of Crumpler, and his years have long been



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defined by the carousel calendar of the tree: planting, pruning, thinning, fertilizing.

"Sometimes, by the 22nd of December or so, I can be a little, 'Bah, humbug, I don't even want a Christmas tree at home,'" Barr says. "But I love Christmas, and my wife *looves* Christmas. We've never skipped a year. Sometimes, we do take it down pretty quick, but we've never skipped a year."

He works with a handful of orange ribbons in one hand and a tall staff in the other. At each tree, he holds up the staff, judges the tree's height by the pole's taped gradations and, if the



tree's tip falls between the five- and six-foot marks, twists on a ribbon with a practiced flurry of fingers.

He flits along the row, marking the trees to be cut the next day for the Frager's order. At the peak of the harvest, he might tag 1,000 trees a day. This is toward the end of a cutting season. Barr's seasonal crew, mostly Latino migrants on agricultural visas who spend the rest of the year cutting tobacco or digging sweet potatoes, began to gather in mid-October.

"Some of these guys have been with us 14, 15 years," Barr says, his ruddy face seasoned by an

**At Barr Evergreens, Miguel Reyes Luis loads the cut and baled trees.**

open-air career, his voice tuned to a sharp twang by generations in Appalachia. He was born, and lives still, 12 miles down the road in West Jefferson, where his grandparents built a chair factory long before the Christmas tree business boomed. "We're like family. I've gotten to where I can count pretty good in Spanish."

There were still pumpkins on the town's porches when his crew of about 40 men, some of whom bunk in trailers around the equipment yard, divided into five teams and set off into the half-million trees growing on Barr properties. They have cut, baled and shipped more than

40,000 trees by the time Barr approaches the Tree with a fistful of orange ribbons, tagging one of the last batches of the year. He tied three extra ribbons on at the very top, marking the Tree for the purposes of this story.

This is a fateful day for the Tree, maybe the most fateful since February 1998, when a technician dropped a tiny seed into a special growing compound.

The Tree was lucky from the beginning. Given the 50 percent germination rate typical of Fraser firs, it was as likely as not that the seed would be a complete dud. But the tiny seed stirred. The double helixes inside began their grand molecular knitting. A minuscule shoot appeared, reaching up. A thread of rhizome crept out, digging down. The Tree was born.

It was nature's miracle, to be sure, but it unfolded in a wholly artificial setting: a germination facility operated by the paper giant Weyerhaeuser outside of Rochester, Wash. In a five-acre forest under glass, engineers fiddled with air conditioners, humidifiers and heated trays to speed the Tree through several winter-summer cycles in its first few months. After just 11 months, it graduated from the incubator as a precocious eight-inch seedling, ready to sink itself into earth proper.

The Tree sprouted in the Pacific Northwest, but its roots, the figurative ones anyway, were deep in the mountains of the East. *Abies fraseri* is native to the middle reaches of Appalachia, particularly the peaks of western North Carolina.

It was discovered here in the late 1700s by Scottish botanist John Fraser, and then largely ignored for commercial purposes until the 1950s. That's when someone took note of its shape, fragrance and remarkable ability to hang onto its soft needles. An agricultural revolution was sparked in these poor mountains, where not much else grew all that well. The Tree itself was born of seeds pulled by hand from fir cones gathered on these slopes by the Mount Rogers Area Christmas Tree Growers Association.

"Now, that's some sappy work, pulling those cones apart," Barr says. It takes 50 pounds of cones to produce a pound of seeds; there are 20,000 seeds in a pound.

A year earlier, Barr had bought 70 pounds of seeds, at \$185 a pound, and shipped the lot to Weyerhaeuser. At a half-will-fail germination rate, he needed nearly a million and a half seeds to produce the 700,000 trees he wanted.

In January of 1999, the Tree was packed into a box with 750 other small seedlings, called plugs at that tender stage, and frozen solid. At 28 degrees, the organisms were completely



*"We never had one in my house when I was a boy. But now, we have one every year. It is our tradition now," says tree farm worker Israel Chapuz-Luis.*

dormant, not growing but not losing energy. In all, 680,000 plugs were shipped back home.

In early spring, Barr and a crew led by one his longest-serving workers, Israel Chapuz-Luis, began the slow job of planting the plugs in "line-out" beds on a Barr nursery farm near the New River. For four years, the Tree grew a bit taller and developed its root system in cushier conditions than it would get on the mountain-side.

Finally, in March of 2003, using a mechanical planter pulled by a John Deere tractor, the crew set the Tree on the ridge.

Chapuz-Luis came from the subtropics of Veracruz, Mexico, two decades ago. Now, he tends his own patch of Fraser firs behind a house he owns down the road. He sells about 200 trees a year, earning \$3,000 or so, but he always brings one in through his own back door.

"We never had one in my house when I was a boy," Chapuz-Luis says. "But now, we have one every year. It is our tradition now. My kids, they are American. This is what they know."

Barr is a generation older than the Chapuz-Luis children, but he, too, grew up in a Fraser-filled world, with trees crowding every spare acre and filling every idle day. As a youngster, he cut them, carried them, planted them, tripped over them in the predawn starts to many a workday.

Barr remembers long climbs up Roan Mountain with his father in the days when new plantings came not from high-tech greenhouses but from wild seedlings collected under Forest Service allotments. He remembers particularly the time he got separated in the fog and wandered lost for an hour, his half-empty burlap sack on his shoulder.

Every high school summer was spent locked in a Herculean chore of trimming the tips of the

branches on every Fraser on the farm, to perfect their density and shape. With his 16-inch pruning knife, he could do a tree in 45 seconds, 800 to a 1,000 a day.

He studied business management at Appalachian State University in nearby Boone. These days, with half a million trees growing on four farms, he spends a lot more time in the two-room office in the corner of the evergreen-scented warehouse, many more hours on the cellphone that works about half the time out in his rolling fields. But it's still a rare day when he doesn't dance with an evergreen or two.

"When Rusty comes home, he smells so good," says Melissa Barr, his wife of 19 years who comes from a Fraser-growing family herself. "It just seems like these trees have always been a big part of our lives."

Melissa works part time amid the file cabinets and pin maps in the Barr office. And while their son, Avery, 16, plans to apply to medical school, Olivia, 13, seems to have to caught the family thing for trees. As the sun casts long evening shadows from the rows of Frasers, she joins Rusty in the truck for his last tagging run of the day.

That evening, after dinner with his father, Wilson Barr, in a restaurant called Frasers in the four-block downtown of West Jefferson, Rusty and Melissa walk into their house and plug in their own Christmas tree.

It's a big one. The angel at the top is only a halo's width from the nine-foot ceiling. They had to trim the tip to get it in. "We hate to do that," the tree farmer and his wife both say at the same instant, and then laugh together, too.

**T**he Tree's last morning on the mountain breaks colder still. It's 15 degrees when Barr and his crew pull up on the ridge in their short diesel caravan: two pickups filled with chain saws and gas cans, a tractor pulling the baler and a flat-bed trailer. One man kneels before a tree and places the quivering saw against its trunk. The other holds the lower branches out of the way with a long pole, and grabs the upper trunk with his free hand, ready to lower the severed tree gently to the earth like a faith healer's assistant. And then, seven years and nine months after arriving, the Tree is in its spot no more. A two-stroke whine, and there's nothing left but a sliver of stump and a crime-scene shadow of sawdust.

But there is no guilt here, no sense of loss. This is work. They cut and drag for an hour, until an odor of exhaust and evergreen hangs in

**Opposite:** Trucker Jeff Brooks hauls the trees to Washington.  
**Below:** The trees from the mountains of North Carolina arrive on Capitol Hill, at Frager's Hardware, where Christine Moschetti begins unloading.

the air, and more than 300 trees lie massed in the narrow lanes.

Chapuz-Luis backs the baler, a narrow trailer with what looks a jet engine housing mounted at one end, into position. When the gasoline motor is roaring, two men wrangle a tree up to the mouth of the tube, trunk first, until a third can grab it with a pair of iron clamps attached to heavy chains. The switch is thrown, everyone leans away, and the chains winch the tree inexorably through. As the limbs compress, a pair of spinnerets twirls 90-pound test line along its length. From the other end emerges a straitjacketed, ready-to-ship Christmas tree.

By late afternoon, the wagon is parked in the farm yard, and the crew is humping trees into the truck bound for Washington. They haul each bundle — an eight-foot Fraser can weigh



75 pounds — to a mobile conveyor that trundles it up to the trailer. Despite the cold, a steam of sweat rises from their necks.

As the men trudge by, Barr stands at the base of the conveyers with a clipboard in his mittened hands, struggling to keep track of the color-coded ribbons tied to each tree.

“Sing-qwen-tay uno, sing-qwen-tay dos,” he calls out, then into the dark interior of the truck. “Hold on, hold on. How many blues you got up there, Israel? Sing-qwen-tay cinco ... fifty-five?”

He squints at his clipboard. “One a y’all needs to learn to count.”

Some 400 trees on, the invoices are reconciled, the little forest is packed in the trailer, and the workers are ready to swing the wide rear doors closed. At the very top of the pile, closest to the rear and marked with extra ribbons, lies the Tree.

Rusty Barr is done. He has cared for these trees for the better part of a decade, from seed to saw. Now he stops in the tiny bathroom off the office to wash away some of the day’s resin. Sap is tough; a thorough cleaning requires alcohol or some solvent. In the fading light of a long workday, there a few dark smears of it still clinging to his hands when he comes out, wiping them on his soiled jacket.

“How about some barbecue,” he says. “I’m starved.”