Fresh Cut Trees

In December 2012, Managing Editor Ellen Woods and University Photographer Ed Pfieffer spent a day at a western Maryland Christmas tree farm run by alumnus Michael Ryan. The magazine staff held onto that story so that we could present it to our readers now as we usher in the Christmas season.

Signs along Clemsonville Road in Union Bridge, Md., alert drivers that the Clemsonville Christmas Tree Farm is cutting up. But the signs are hardly needed. Not far from the entrance to the farm perched on a hill is a can’t-miss 50-foot Christmas wreath made of fresh evergreen boughs affixed to a round wooden frame. A huge carved-wood red bow adorns the wreath. A large American flag flies at the stop.

We pull into the gravel driveway and before we can park the car, the side door to the farm’s historic 18th-century home swings open. Owner Michael Ryan, B.A. 1959, heads down the hill wearing a red plaid flannel jacket with a red apron over it that reads, “Merry Christmas.” Ryan’s son, Michael Ryan Jr., has come for the day from Bethesda, Md. He too is an alumnus, a 1991 Columbus School of Law graduate. While Ryan studies our bunch of lasagna, dinner rolls, and pie, Michael takes us on a tour of the house. The uneven floors, imperfect glass windows, and four-foot-thick stone walls are original. The house has the feel of a museum, with Christmas decorations at every turn. The dining room table is set for Christmas dinner. Every room has a working fireplace, but the house is chilly since the Ryans no longer use most of it as a living space.

Returning to the wood-beamed kitchen, we welcome the heat from the pot belly stove. During lunch, Ryan tells stories and laughs often. His hair is white, his cheeks are rosy, and he is downright jolly. If only he had a beard.

As a boy in the 1940s, he spent several holiday seasons selling Christmas trees on a city lot in the Bronx, N.Y., where he lived. “We sold them for 25, 35, and 4 dollars apiece.”

Growing up, Ryan longed for nature. “My father took me to Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx. I couldn’t get enough of it. That’s where my interest in historic homes began. I must have toured the old museum house there a hundred times.”

Ryan came to Catholic University as a history major and left for two years when he joined the Army. When he came back to begin his junior year, he switched his major to sociology. He earned money to help pay tuition by waiting tables at Caldwell Hall, later working evenings at this Rent-a-Car.

A hard worker who loves talking to people, Ryan embarked on a 40-year sales career in the furniture business. “I sold to large institutions, lots of schools. CUA was one of my best customers,” he says.

By the 1960s, he had a family of three little boys, Michael Jr., Paul, and Tom. In 1965, still longing for the country, he bought the Clemsonville home and land, then used as a dairy farm. He moved the family from Rockville to the Frederick County farm, which is about 60 miles from Washington, D.C. He started planting trees a year later, and on the Friday after Thanksgiving in 1974, he and his three teenage sons began selling Christmas trees.

Business was booming for the next 15 years, with about 2,000 cars coming through every weekend. “There was a half-hour wait to get in every Sunday after church,” says Ryan. “Back then folks went on Sunday outings; they weren’t as compelled to race home after church to watch football.”

“And the artificial trees hadn’t gained popularity yet,” adds Michael.

“We had one road in and one road out. We charged by the foot. After donuts, he takes us to the “everlasting Christmas tree” at the entrance to his farm—a limestone formation that rises up from the ground in a near-perfect triangle more than 50 feet in height. Ryan has placed a large star at the top and red presents beneath.

“When we used to mow the lawn here, we could see the tips of the everlasting tree in the horizon,” he says. “It took months and when
Today, he still offers a flat rate — $20 per tree, no matter which one of the 100,000 trees on his 250 acres you choose. But that is about all that remains the same at the Clemsonville Christmas Tree Farm. The business had dropped off as artificial Christmas trees became more popular. “No matter what your budget, you can find a tree. You can spend $20 for an artificial tree all the way up to $500 for a fancy pre-lit tree that comes complete with snow on the branches,” says Ryan. “And family life changed, too. It’s just more hectic. Folks seemed to have less time and interest in heading out to the ‘country’ for a real tree.”

So Ryan countered that trend by making a trip to his farm an experience for the whole family. He already offered hot cider and donuts and one of his workers dressed up like Santa Claus. But he thought about how he could go bigger.

In 1988, Ryan and his sons built the world’s largest Christmas wreath (certified by the Guinness Book of World Records), 116 feet in diameter and 8,120 pounds. And he turned his big red barn into an indoor display he calls “Christmas World.”

After lunch, as we head down the hill to the barn, a car pulls in — the first customers we’ve seen today. Michael explains, “Weddays are a lot slower than the weekends and we are pretty much coming on the end of the season. We sell most of our trees in seven days — the three days after Thanksgiving and the next two Saturdays and Sundays. But we stay open every day through Christmas Eve! As you can see, every customer is important to us. My dad would say, ‘If you are having a slow day, you have a customer’.”

Ryan is getting a saw and rope for the family that has come from New Windsor, Md., in a blue Chevy Blazer. “Oh good, you have a white truck,” says Ryan. “We’ve got four fields. If you cross over the blacktop and go about 100 yards and turn left, the farm goes for a good mile. There are plenty of beautiful trees left.”

As they head off into the hills, Ryan reminds them to get some cookies and punch when they come back to pay for their tree.

Inside the barn, we don’t know where to look first. There is a large Nativity scene, and a mailbox for letters to Santa, and a red, lush tea party. Ryan leads us to his main attraction — a Santa’s bedroom, where he tucked away in a full-size bed. A tape recording of Santa musing plays continuously. His boxes, red with green Christmas trees of course, hang out a coat hook nearby. On the other side of the barn, Ryan shows us a large fireplace. Behind it are hidden stairs leading to a platform. For years, on the Saturday after Thanksgiving, Ryan’s wife, Mary, would read “Twas the Night Before Christmas” to groups of children visiting the farm. When she got to the line, “Down the chimney St. Nicholas came with a bound,” down from the platform came Ryan himself dressed like Santa.

“My teeth got too old for that now,” laughs Ryan. “Mary’s taken an early retirement at age 76.”

But for every attraction we take away, we add something new,” he says. Recent additions are a 14-mile nature trail and maze that runs along a stream, and a small, life-like redwood rest stop.

Of all the attractions, though, Ryan himself might just be the main draw. Another family who has purchased their $20 tree enters the barn. Ryan starts his tour from the beginning. “What a great man comments a woman in the group.

He later tells us, “I love my customers. On a busy day, I get hugged a couple a dozen times. It’s one of the best parts of the job — knowing that we’ve made people happy and we gave them a fun day in the country, and pleasant of Christmas memories.” He says he has many regulars that he looks for every year, including the extended Lacey family set about 50 that has come faithfully from Gaithersburg, Md., every Friday after Thanksgiving for the last 37 years.

As Ryan spends time with his customers, Michael, who teaches an evening course on securities market regulation at the Columbus School of Law, tells us what the farm means to him.

“My 10-year-old son and I like to camp out here once a month. He loves the sounds, where he looks for the snapping turtles. And about once or twice a year, we bring his scout troop here for campouts. The boys launch model rockets in the fields. I love the simple traditions here,” he explains.

Our afternoon winds down with a car tour of the farm. Ryan explains that he has put his farm into agricultural preservation, which prohibits any type of development on the land forever. As he drives us through the fields, he shows down to point out transplant beds, where his seedlings are sprouting into new trees that will be ready for families to cut down in about five to six years. For every tree cut, he plants three more. “The important thing is to get them past that first year. If we have a dry spell, we can lose them,” he says.

He grows fir, spruce, pine, and cedar trees. “Some of these white pines got away from us,” he says, pointing to large trees ahead. “You would need a shopping mall for Christmas trees that big. But leaving a field looks good and it’s a nice place for the hawks.”

We come upon a pickup truck on one of the dirt roads and stop to look down the hill where the Greenwalds of Arlington, Va., are cutting down a 14-foot white pine with a power saw. “It’s the only place you can get a tree this size,” says Ed Greenwald. “And we like the punch and cookies.”

As the family attempts to load their $20 tree into the truck, Ryan strikes up a conversation. “That’s a fine tree,” says Ryan as he runs his fingers along the needles. “They have these wonderful soft four-inch needles. Each chine has five needles. And they’ve got the best retention.”

“Mom loves a white pine,” says David Greenwald. “Back at the house, we’ll look approaching. Ryan has a wreath for each of us and he asks if he can wrap up the leftover pie for our ride home.

There are just a few more questions to squeeze in. After the last tree is sold on Christmas Eve, what does Ryan do? “I go home and sleep for a few days,” he says with a wink. “Actually that’s the answer everyone wants to hear. But I don’t do that. I teach a class taught by a priest at CUA on marriage and family. That was many years ago, but I always remember he told us no matter what we do for a living, always put family first. So I wait until December 26 to go to sleep.”

There’s one more question — the obvious one. “Mr. Ryan, what is your favorite kind of tree?”

“Oh, I love any tree that has a few ornaments on its branches and a couple of kids underneath,” CUA