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Town finds new hope in children's book

By Tina Firesheets
Staff Writer

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SPRUCE PINE -- Is it possible that a children's book could help transform a town? Give it a sense of identity? Restore a sense of pride in its people and create jobs for them? One author and a group of town leaders and artisans hoped so.

This is the tale of how Spruce Pine became known as "The Home of the Perfect Christmas Tree."



Nancy Snipes of Mount Holly browses the wares at the Home of the Perfect Christmas Tree store in Spruce Pine. Credit: Maggie Sartin/News & Record

About two and a half hours west of Greensboro, N.C. 226 leads you through what locals call the "hills and hollers" of Mitchell County.

Nestled in these hills and hollows, you'll see the empty buildings. Henredon Furniture Industries. Lexington Home Brands. Taylor Togs. Hampshire Hosiery. Ethan Allen Interiors. The abandoned buildings once housed factories employing thousands of workers.

Manufacturing came to Mitchell County in the 1920s. The textile and furniture industries really exploded in the 1950s because labor was cheap and no unions existed. Young people knew they didn't have to graduate from high school to earn a steady paycheck and benefits.

Many households had two or more family members working in manufacturing, says Patti Jensen of the Mitchell County Chamber of Commerce. People also commuted to nearby Yancey and McDowell counties for similar work.

"For generations, those plants had always been here and paid good wages," she says. "There

was no emphasis on education."

Things began to change in Mitchell County in the mid-1990s. Hampshire Group Ltd., a hosiery manufacturer, cut 100 jobs in 1994, followed by 115 jobs at Henredon Furniture Industries later that year.

By 2002, Mitchell County lost about a third of its manufacturing base. About 2,500 jobs disappeared in five years. In a county where the labor force is about 7,400, the repercussions of these losses were deeply felt.

Many North Carolina towns have faced the same scenario in the past decade. Company officials move their operations for the very same reasons that they originally settled in the rural areas: lower wages and operating costs.

"There was just this cloud of desperation and depression," Jensen says. "You could feel it in this community."

* * *

The Mitchell County portrayed in several of Gloria Houston's books predates manufacturing, industry, even paved roads.

Book reviewers loved the stories about the idyllic mountains and valleys where Houston spent her childhood. In these stories, families care for one another and communities rally to support members in any way they can.

The Mitchell County native, who won't reveal her age, moved far from the Appalachian mountains after college. But eight of her nine children's books are set in her hometown.

Her best-selling book, "The Year of the Perfect Christmas Tree," published in 1988, continues to be a holiday classic. Educators have used it in their classrooms to teach their students how people lived in the early 1900s.

The story, set in 1918, features Ruthie, a little Appalachian girl whose father leaves home to fight in World War I. Their family is charged with donating the church Christmas tree that year. Before her father leaves, she accompanies him to a rocky cliff, where she marks a tree with a red ribbon.

On Christmas Eve, when her father still hasn't returned from war, Ruthie and her mother cut the tree themselves.

Ruthie, who is also to play the Christmas angel in the church play, needs a dress for her role. Her mother has no money to buy a dress or to buy the material to make one. So, she uses her own wedding dress to make Ruthie's costume and even has enough left to make a doll with a matching gown.

This is what people did back then, Houston says. They took stock of what they had and figured out a way to provide what they needed.

"Before the days of paved roads, this was a self-sufficient culture; one created or grew whatever was needed," Houston says. "It's called making-do."

And it's this sense of resourcefulness that Mitchell County leaders are counting on to revive the local economy.

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Four years ago, there was hope on the horizon.

Some Spruce Pine leaders were working on a plan they thought might help the area's economy. They didn't know it at the time, but Houston would play an important role in carrying out their vision.

She had agreed to serve as the grand marshal of the Spruce Pine Christmas parade in 2003. The theme that year was the title of her book: "The Year of the Perfect Christmas Tree." Usually, the parade drew about 30 floats, but there were nearly 100 that year.

Houston thinks it might have been about 20 degrees that windy December day. And all along the parade route she was stunned to see the number of youths -- particularly teenage boys -- who stood, braced against the wind, in just their T-shirts.

They weren't trying to make a fashion statement. People couldn't afford coats.

"That made a big impression on me," Houston says. "I've taught in poor situations, but I've never seen anything like that. And it was in the town that I claim as my hometown."

Houston thought she knew a way she could help. She'd seen what "The Yearling" did for the small town of Cross Creek, Fla.

Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' 1938 novel earned her a Pulitzer Prize in 1939 and became a movie classic starring Gregory Peck and Jane Wyman.

Rawlings' former home in Cross Creek and the Yearling Restaurant attracts thousands of visitors annually.

An actress from Spruce Pine once told Houston that their hometown ought to be called the "Home of the Perfect Christmas Tree." It was something that Houston herself had thought of when the book was published. She had even mentioned it to people a few times but didn't get much response. Until 2003.

Spruce Pine business leader David Lindsey commented that the Christmas parade was such a success there ought to be some way the theme of her book could continue to generate excitement for the town.

After the parade, Houston agreed to give Spruce Pine the marketing rights to her book so that it could call itself "The Home of the Perfect Christmas Tree." She'll never forget seeing the children there without coats.

"When you see that kind of thing and you know there are people standing there, hurting, freezing, starving ... you do something to help them," she says.

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The Home of the Perfect Christmas Tree store is at Oak Avenue and Crystal Street in Spruce Pine.

You can purchase Houston's book there, and she visits occasionally for book signings. Shoppers also will find locally made Ruthie dolls, glass ornaments, wooden keepsake boxes and decorative plates painted with wintry scenes from Houston's book.

It's funded by the Mitchell County Development Foundation, a nonprofit developed to use the skills of local people. It also creates what area leaders call a "place-based economy," meaning the products cannot be outsourced.

The infrastructure of Spruce Pine isn't conducive to attracting new businesses to the area. Although the area is affordable, the winding roads that twist and curve along the Blue Ridge Mountains make them hard to travel.

But Spruce Pine sits in an area rich in craft history, with an abundance of glassblowers, weavers, woodworkers, potters and doll makers. The Penland School of Crafts nearby has drawn artisans from around the world since 1923. Some who were trained there stayed in the area. So leaders felt they had the creative resources to launch such an initiative.

Some of the artisans who sell their work for the Home of the Perfect Christmas Tree were already crafting professionally, but others are former factory workers. The craft they once pursued as a hobby now helps put food on the table.

Jim Buchanan was too young to retire when he was laid off nearly four years ago. His career in furniture spanned 30 years. He first worked at Drexel Furniture, then when Henredon opened a plant closer to his home, he worked there until it closed. Buchanan likes to take wood from dilapidated barns and transform the old planks into furniture. But until the layoffs, woodworking was more of a hobby.

"I piddled around with it," he says.

A friend told him that the Mitchell County Chamber of Commerce was seeking local artisans to craft Christmas items for The Home of the Perfect Christmas Tree store. Buchanan built cabinets, fixtures and shelves for the store. He even made a few products to sell.

Buchanan attends craft shows, but he can't afford to operate a store on his own. Most artisans can't, he says. The Home of the Perfect Christmas Tree store gives them a place to sell their work, so they can focus on their craft.

Susanne Abell makes sure visitors to the store know about its mission. The retired teacher once used the book in her classroom. Now, she works at the store and tells visitors how the nonprofit foundation helps the area's economy. All items came from someone's home-based business, and a percentage of sales funds a scholarship program for local high school students.

The layoffs and plant closings didn't just take away jobs, Buchanan says. In a sense, the closings stripped the area of its identity. He thinks this project can help them create a new one. And give them hope for a brighter future.

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For 30 years, Shirley Hise tried to persuade students to stay in school, rather than work in the plants. The Mitchell County native used to teach high school history.

Now, she runs the Mitchell County Chamber of Commerce and directs the Mitchell County Development Foundation. When the layoffs began, displaced workers were faced with the challenge of finding new jobs without adequate literacy skills.

Although The Home of the Perfect Christmas Tree store used the skills people already had, it couldn't put money in the bank immediately. It was about a year before Buchanan began to see a profit from his woodworking business.

"You can't make \$18,000 a year just like that. It's a process. It's not going to pay the bills today," Hise says. "It's been a real challenge, but we do believe it could be the future of Mitchell County and the future of North Carolina."

Western North Carolina already is known for its Christmas tree farms. A tree from neighboring Ashe County was selected this year for the White House. And Hise believes they can become a leader in the handcrafted Christmas ornament industry.

When The Home of the Perfect Christmas Tree store opened two years ago with 15 product-

makers, people stood shoulder to shoulder inside the store on the night of the grand opening. The line continued along Oak Avenue, and a lot of the aritsans sold out their inventory that night.

When first lady Laura Bush learned of the project last year, she ordered 135 handblown glass ornaments and 115 Carolina snowflakes -- made of woven reed, dyed with crushed walnut hulls -- to fill two White House Christmas trees.

Hise and Jensen visited the White House for a special ceremony, in which the first lady spoke of their project and its importance. Afterward, the project aired on UNC-TV and HGTV. It also was featured in USA Today, drawing national attention to their efforts. The response was immediate, and Jensen says they weren't prepared for such a meteoric rise: "It was boxes flying and peanuts flying."

Although they had a Web site, people couldn't order online at the time. The store was flooded with calls from throughout the country. But Jensen says it was rewarding to hear how the project moved people.

A group of mayors from Italy visited recently to learn how they might be able to implement a similar initiative in their hometowns.

Despite their success, Hise remains realistic: "It is not the answer to our economic woes," Hise says. "It is one answer."

Unemployment will continue to be a problem in the area until students realize they can't get good jobs without staying in school, she says. The Mitchell County Chamber of Commerce started Mission of a Lifetime with the class of 2007. Last year 137 Mitchell High School graduates received \$25 Wal-Mart gift certificates, and the top 10 seniors won laptop computers. Seven scholarships were awarded to students to attend Mayland Community College.

"We have a long row to hoe here in terms of making a dent in getting kids to graduate high school and getting them ready to work in the 21st century," Hise says.

Still, she's confident that the people there will pull together to rebuild their community. And she knows that once people hear their story, they will respond: "This is an American story about a small town trying to redefine themselves so their people can make a living."

Contact Tina Firesheets at 373-3498 or tfiresheets@news-record.com

Want to go?

WHAT: Home of the Perfect Christmas Tree Store

WHERE: 262 Oak Ave., Spruce Pine

STORE HOURS: 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday-Saturday

INFORMATION: (828) 765-0571

TO PLACE ORDERS: (866) 485-8733, homeofthepperfectchristmastree.org