

From USA Today:

Town hangs hope on holiday trees

By Kathy Kiely, USA TODAY
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WASHINGTON — In Gloria Houston's 1988 children's classic, *The Year of the Perfect Christmas Tree*, a combination of pluck, tenacity and never-say-die optimism salvages the holidays for an impoverished little girl.

This year, residents of a small town in the same Appalachian hills that inspired Houston's story are hoping to reproduce its magic for their hard-luck community.

During the past four years, closings and layoffs at local textile and furniture mills have eliminated more than 2,500 jobs in western North Carolina's Mitchell County. "We have lost one-third of our manufacturing base," says Shirley Hise, director of the local Chamber of Commerce. "It has been devastating for our county."

Even so, the people of Mitchell County are experiencing what local congressman Patrick McHenry calls "a glimmer of hope." Houston's generosity and Hise's hard work are helping county residents tap a vein of creativity and find new ways to make a living. And this holiday season, Americans can help them out — and, at the same time, decorate their homes in presidential style.

Last week, when she hosted the annual unveiling of holiday decorations at the White House, first lady Laura Bush went out of her way to give a plug to the handmade ornaments provided by Mitchell County artists. "This is a very wonderful American story," she said. "They all worked together, the people in the town, to figure out a new industry for themselves, and they came up with making these wonderful ornaments."

The media-savvy first lady even provided some direction for the TV crews on hand: "When you're in the west reception hall or in the visitors' reception room on the east side, I hope you'll be able to get there to get some B-roll of those trees and see these beautiful, handmade ornaments."

Mitchell County's contribution to the White House holiday décor is the result of a brainstorm Houston had in 2003 after being invited to be grand marshal of the Christmas parade in Spruce Pine, Mitchell's county seat.

After hearing about the community's problems, Houston donated the rights of her book to Spruce Pine and suggested local officials market the town as "the home of the perfect Christmas tree." Last year, the community cut the ribbon on a retail store featuring handcrafted items inspired by the book. They're all made by local artisans.

These aren't amateur holiday fair items: The curvilinear red, green and walnut Carolina "snowflakes" hanging at the White House are the creations of Billie Ruth Sudduth, a basket weaver whose work is displayed at the juried Smithsonian craft show. The White House trees also feature handblown glass ornaments by Virgil Jones, whose work is on display in galleries in Asheville, N.C.

IN THE BAG: How does your holiday decor stack up?

Sudduth taught several local women how to make the snowflakes so they could help her keep up with demand. At a basket-weaving class she taught to raise money for the local homeless shelter, "I saw some talent," she says.

No one is suggesting a few cottage industries will replace the thousands of manufacturing jobs that once powered Mitchell County's economy. McHenry, who called the project a glimmer of hope, also notes it's not a light at the end of the tunnel.

But project participants say it has helped lift the gloom that enveloped Mitchell County after all the layoffs. "This project has really turned the county upside down with excitement," Sudduth says.

Patti Jensen, who manages the retail outlet in Spruce Pine, says her biggest problem initially was persuading local craftspeople to provide her with enough inventory to keep pace with sales.

"They were so skeptical ... that anyone would want to buy what they make," Jensen says.

After one of Marquitta Holdsclaw's art glass plates sold for \$600 at a local silent auction, Jensen says she found the artist in the parking lot in tears. "It just blew her away that anyone valued what she was doing," Jensen says. Holdsclaw's plates are available for as little as \$39.50 through the Home of the Perfect Christmas Tree store. An online catalog can be found at homeofthepperfectchristmastree.org.

Working on their own poses challenges that employees of big companies never face, the artisans concede, especially "the very real problem of health insurance," says Sudduth, 61. She says it costs \$700 a month to maintain her coverage.

Jim Buchanan, a woodworker who built the interior of the Perfect Christmas Tree shop and designs items for the catalog, estimates he's making half of what he did before the Henredon furniture plant where he worked was shuttered in 2004. But there are other compensations. "I'm making the type of furniture I like to make, so it's more enjoyable," Buchanan says.

Mike Queen, a local metal worker who is trying to grow his artisanal blacksmithing business, agrees. "I'm enthused about it," says Queen, who employs several people laid off from local plants. "It's good for the community. There's so many small towns in the country that seem like they're dying."

THE IDEA WENT BY THE BOOK

Gloria Houston, whose book inspired the Home of the Perfect Christmas Tree store in Spruce Pine, N.C., says research she did as a graduate student prompted her to suggest the project.

Houston, a former Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings scholar at the University of South Florida, says she was researching the namesake of her fellowship when it struck her that Rawlings had inadvertently thrown a lifeline to her tiny Florida hometown, the setting for her classic novel, *The Yearling*. "I realized Cross Creek would have long since disappeared had it not been for *The Yearling*," Houston says. "Everything there had something to do with it."

Years later, she decided to see whether her 1988 children's book, *The Home of the Perfect Christmas Tree*, could do the same for her North Carolina Appalachian home.

Houston's parents operated a country store in western North Carolina for more than 50 years. In writing the book, she was inspired by stories of their circumstances (her father told her about once giving up his Christmas dime so his sister could have a doll).

Not wanting the same crushing poverty to reappear in the region, Houston donated rights to the book to Mitchell County, and the Christmas tree store project was born. "I'm so proud of the people here and their many skills and talents," she says. "Now they're being put to work in their own county."

