

1,400 acres; 45,000 trees planted; 5,000 trees sold per year

■ **The Rocks Estate:** Cut your tree, roast marshmallows and enjoy carols and wagon rides.

By MELANIE PLEND
Special to the Union Leader

While horse drawn wagon rides, cozying up with some toasty marshmallows, cutting your own Christmas tree and carols lilting through the air are the very definition of traditional, in the North Country, where you get to do these things is anything but.

"It's a bit of an unusual farm because it's on conservation land," said Nigel Manley, the steward and tree farmer of the Christmas Tree farm at The Rocks Estate in Bethlehem.

Once the summer home of the Chicago businessman and International Harvester cofounder John Jacob Glessner and his family, these days The Rocks Estate in Bethlehem and its 1,400-acre property is both the North Country Conser-

vation & Education Center for the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests as well as a very popular cut-your-own tree farm. The Rocks Estate includes several buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places, as well as a maintained trail system that is open year round.

Manley explained that the land was donated to the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests in 1978. One of the criteria for getting the property was that they had to have a crop in the field because the place had always been a farm.

"So they tried a number of things; it was a dairy farm at one point," Manley said. "As with a lot of farms, they had to look at it and ask whether there was enough land there to support that, and there wasn't."

So the Forest Society in 1986 looked into it and decided to change paths and create a Christmas tree farm. They started planting in 1989, but despite a few wild trees growing on the fringes of the property,



COURTESY/THE ROCKS ESTATE

The Rocks Tree Farm sits on protected forest land. Families can explore row after row of trees as they search for the perfect Christmas tree.

there were only about 12 growing on the farm proper.

"We have about 45,000 in the ground right now," Manley said, "and we sell — on our rotation, sustainably — we sell between 4,500 to 5,000 per year."

Manley said it takes a huge amount of labor to get there. The crew each year plant anywhere from 5,000 to 7,000 trees by hand. They also need to regularly mow

between the rows throughout the year, Manley said.

"It keeps all the grass short and that way it makes it so that there's air drainage in the fields so that there's less diseases in the trees," he said. "And then we keep the weeds out the best we can. And then the biggest labor part comes in with pruning the trees."

Manley said they have a crew of seven people prune

every tree, every day, every year between July and August in order to get ready for the season.

"Most customers nowadays want a tree that is fairly dense," Manley said. "And if you don't prune them, they literally would look like a Charlie Brown tree. Because it will grow two feet and then you have nuts and branches."

Of the Balsam, Canaan and Fraser firs they sell at the farm, by far the most popular, Manley said, is the Balsam, because most people feel like it has that really New England scent.

When it's time to cut your own tree, Manley said they have staff out in the field handing out saws and offering safety tips and instructions for those who need them.

In addition to the trees, Manley said they aim to create memories complete with marshmallows for their onsite fire pits, Christmas carols, a walk along Scrapbook trail and horse drawn wagon rides. They also offer help cutting, transporting,

wrapping and tying the tree to your vehicle.

"We have generations coming to the farm now," Manley said. "We've been watching people come for 30 years, so we have people who come here who brought their kids and now those kids have got kids. It's really cool. They'll all come and take their family photos up here, so you see how the kids have gotten bigger and the families. It's very fun."

The Rocks Estate opened Nov. 7 and will be open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily through Christmas Eve. Christmas tree shoppers may select a tree from the farm's retail lot or wander the fields to Cut-Your-Own Christmas tree. The Rocks will be closed Thanksgiving Day, but otherwise open daily through Dec. 24. Package deals that include a tree, a wreath and lodging at one of 26 local hotels, motels, inns and resorts are also available.

The Rocks Estate is located at 4 Christmas Lane in Bethlehem. For more information, call 444-6228 or visittherocks.org.

Family endeavor becomes 'timeless' tradition

■ **Tonry Tree Farm:** Third generation now operating tree farm in Hampton Falls.

By MELANIE PLEND
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Alice Tonry might not know the names of all the people who come to Tonry's Christmas Tree Farm in Hampton Falls, but she knows them.

"I had a friend describe it once and he said it was timeless. And I've always kind of held onto that word because I totally agree," says Tonry, 25, who, along with other family members, recently took over the more than 50-year-old business.

"It's been fun growing up my whole life, having the farm in my life. And people come back every year. I don't really know their names, but I know their faces and they probably see me in the same way. And maybe there is a sense of time in there, but the act of cutting down a Christmas tree is so timeless and is something that everyone can enjoy and come back to

year after year."

Tonry's grandparents, Herb and Alice Tonry, moved to Hampton Falls in 1964. Her grandmother was a nurse during World War II and was one of the first women to graduate from Tufts Medical School. Tonry's grandfather owned his own insurance company in Boston. As the two began their lives together, they got to work raising six kids and splitting their time between Wellesley, Mass., and a farm in Temple. It was that time spent in Temple, Tonry said, her grandfather relished and ultimately helped them make the decision to settle on land in Hampton Falls. Well, on lands in Hampton Falls, as Tonry points out, her grandparents loved real estate and liked moving around.

At any rate, along the way one of their sons took on a 4H project in which his job was to plant a couple thousand Christmas trees, tend to them and try to start a Christmas tree business.

"It became kind of a family endeavor, everybody pitched in," Tonry said. "My grandpa really took to it. He was a business man, of

course, but he loved kind of planting things in straight rows and working the land and planting the trees and the kind of slow growing aspect of it."

The trees remained a side project until he retired, Tonry said, but no less a labor of love for the family, which included Tonry's grandmother.

"She was always right out there with him," Tonry said. "She loved mowing and driving the bulldozer around. It was kind of a cool family endeavor."

As the years went by, Tonry said, family members kind of came and went, but working on the tree farm was always something that brought them together at the holidays.

In 1990, Herb Tonry passed away. Tonry's Aunt Abby continued running the farm with Tonry's grandmother who, well into her 90s, continued to mow the lawn and walk the farm to check the trees.

"They made an impressive team," Tonry said. "My grandmother loved working on the farm and did so until her dying day. She lived until she was 94. Re-



COURTESY/TONRY TREE FARM

Jessie Tonry waits with a smile for customers to approach the window at Tonry Tree Farm.

ally up until then she was still mowing and walking and driving up and down the farm checking on trees and taking a lot of joy from seeing all the families come and pick their trees and cut them down and really make a tradition."

Since her grandmother's death in 2016, Alice Tonry and her family have stepped in to continue their tradition of running the farm, while at the same time hoping to breathe some new life into it.

Alice Tonry said with

other farms around them closing down, her family recognizes the role they play in the lives of other families and are looking forward to more years of sharing in that joy.

"They come to us year after year," Tonry said, "throughout their kids growing up and their grandkids growing up. We're so lucky to have loyal customers who keep coming back to us. It's such a unique tradition, we're very lucky."

The Tonry Tree Farm opens for the cut-your-own

tree season on Friday, Nov. 24, and will be open from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Thursday through Sunday thereafter. This year's batch includes 5- to 8-foot concolor, balsam and spruce trees all around the farm. They also have a stock of taller trees, although it involves a little patience and sleuthing to find them on the farm.

The farm is located at 314 Exeter Road in Hampton Falls. For more information visit tonryfarm.com or email tonryfarm@gmail.com.

Search for perfect Christmas tree leads to new passion

■ **Noel's Tree Farm:** After planting 500 trees a quarter-century ago, Paul Lemire now sells over 5,000 per year.

By MELANIE PLEND
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Paul Lemire wasn't a tree guy. In fact, he had spent much of his working life as a foreman at the Penacook Water works. But one winter, maybe 25 or 26 years ago, he and his brother-in-law went in search of a Christmas tree to cut down and bring home for the holidays.

"We didn't really find a really nice tree. They were all out in pastures, the trees weren't sheared," he said. "So the following year my father had some land and we started planting Christmas Trees."

Wait, what? "I didn't know anything about trees," he said. "And, when I approached my dad (Noel), he said, 'Do you



COURTESY/NOEL'S TREE FARM

Noel's Tree Farm in Litchfield also offers wagon rides for some extra family fun.

know anything about growing trees?' And I said, 'Nope. I'll learn.'"

They started planting trees, 500 of them, that spring. And over the years Lemire, owner of Noel's

Tree Farm in Litchfield, did learn. Last year they sold 5,800 fresh cut and cut-your-own trees. And, other than the amount they sell, Lemire said not much has changed. They still spend

much of the year planting, caring for and fretting over their stock.

Lemire said they keep busy trying to keep the grass, weeds and bugs down from their Blue Balsams,

Fraser Firs, Canaan firs, and a few Concolor trees.

"By far the most popular are the Fraser Firs because they retain their needles longer, and people like that," Lemire said.

And on that topic, Lemire is adamant: Keep your tree watered!

"When you buy a tree, the worst thing you can do is not give it any water," he said. "If you don't let it run out of water at all, any tree you buy that is fresh cut is going to last well after New Year's."

And he keeps a look out for those who heeded his warning over the course of two weekends they are open after New Year's. They encourage people to bring back their trees when they're done with them. The used trees are then chipped and turned into compost for their trees.

When people do, the ones that are still as green as the day were purchased clearly belong to those who listened to the advice he gives to everyone who buys a tree

from him.

But advice and trees are not all Lemire has to offer at Noel's. Visitors can purchase hot popcorn and marshmallows every weekend to toast in the outdoor fire pits on site. They can also visit with Santa every Sunday, explore the Christmas tree maze and visit the petting animals every day at the farm.

Noel's Tree Farm also has hand crafted decorations, including plain and decorated wreaths, roping and kissing balls for sale.

The farm is open every day from Nov. 25 to Christmas Eve from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. The farm will host a kickoff to the season on Saturday, Nov. 25, from 5 to 7 p.m. with hayrides, hot chocolate, cider and a fireworks display. There will also be discounts on pre-cut trees and wreaths. The farm is located at 21 Charles Bancroft Highway in Litchfield. For more information, call 759-2264 or visit www.noelstreefarm.com.