

Bright Lights, Forest City

Aglow with the holiday spirit — and more than a million twinkling lights — a western North Carolina community carries a torch for neighborhood conviviality.

by Bryan A. Oesterreich

Tar Heel Christmas traditions are as varied and plentiful as football games in December. And small towns and villages across the state each have their own unique way of showing their holiday spirit: Some locales choose to engage the citizenry in orchestrated sing-a-longs in the town square; other communities are proud of their Christmas parades. In the tiny, Down East village of Bath, people come from three neighboring counties to watch the many floats and marching bands usher in the holiday season. Still other locations go to great lengths to brighten up their downtown boulevards. They hang string after string of twinkling lights on trees and lampposts. Garlands and wreaths bring color and life to otherwise wintry landscapes.

And then there's Forest City, the charming community in the beautiful foothills of western North Carolina that doesn't take its Christmas tradition celebration, well, lightly. Or depending on how you look at it, indeed they do.

Stringing 'em along

Wayne Powell, electrical superintendent for Forest City, scratches his head and squints when asked how many lights he and his crew string up every year. "The number has to be well over 1,500,000," he says chuckling. The town uses so many lights, the electric crews begin their work in mid-September. "We just keep adding more every year." "A few years ago," Powell recalls, "I had just climbed down a ladder, when I felt a tug on my pant leg. A little guy around five years old wearing a weathered baseball hat looked up at me and said, 'Thanks, mister, for making all these lights come on.' That's why I like this whole deal."

Danielle Withrow, city planner and downtown development director, says, "We've been able to convince people to park their cars and become a part of the holiday." It hasn't been easy, she says, but everyone involved thinks it's been worth it.

The scene along Main Street looks like this: Lights are everywhere — up the streetlight poles, swirling up and around the deep green fir and oak trees that line the sidewalks and center the boulevard. They coat the boxwoods and azaleas. They hang lazily on overhead power lines. There are lighted snowflakes enough to be seen on Doppler radar. Lighted reindeer. Lighted candy canes. Lighted fountains. And tiny white lights flicker around park benches. Strollers say they feel completely immersed in a radiant fantasyland.

Beaming goodwill

Since the mid-1970s, Forest City has been the home of The Howard Harrill Company, a business that manufactures Christmas and seasonal decorations. Its extensive product line includes everything from lighted nine-foot trumpeting angels to life-sized Santa and reindeer displays to 21-foot trees of light. The welded frames and colorful bulbs have been marketed throughout the Southeast and as far away as Hawaii.

Company founder, Howard Harrill, had the Christmas spirit. “Howard said he wanted Forest City to give people a special feeling around Christmas,” says Mike Micalove, company president. So, over the years, the company began donating many of its products to the city to be used during the holidays.

Shopkeepers along Main Street have very kind words for Harrill. Dianne Weathers, owner of Farmer’s Hardware, a gift shop, remembers one Christmas in particular. “I was in the store doing some last-minute decorating when Howard called at 2 a.m. to tell me how wonderful my storefront looked,” she says.

The company still plays an active role in the downtown display of lights, last year donating an eight-foot-wide by five-foot-tall American flag silhouette display. City officials, however, knew it would take more than lights to encourage people to stroll both sides of the boulevard-divided Main Street. “We had to get people involved — we had to help them experience the spirit of Christmas — and that meant activities,” Withrow says. Forest City found it in horses.

Coach seats

Ten years ago, two horse-drawn carriages were engaged to carry visitors up and down Main Street. They were an immediate hit. “People love the carriage rides,” says Withrow. “What better way to take in all the sights and sounds? Sleigh rides aren’t feasible downtown, but the carriages help people feel the spirit.” The number of carriages has increased every year. There will be 10 available for rides in December, and blankets to stave off the chilly air are provided.

The most popular attraction for the real believers, however, has to be Santa himself. Once again, a local company stepped up to enhance the experience. All-American Homes, builder of modular houses, donated all materials for a Santa house. The 14-by-14-foot house was constructed with volunteer labor provided by local merchants and city employees. “Santa’s house is a real home,” Withrow says. “It might be small, but it has all the quality of a much larger structure.”

Santa’s popularity — lines to tour the house became rather lengthy — necessitated a change in protocol, however. Parents are much more experienced in waiting in line, so city officials organized a tent for children to participate in crafting holiday decorations while mom and dad hold their place. Children are summoned when it’s their turn to sit on the big man’s lap.

After a visit with Santa, families can stroll leisurely down Main Street and be entertained not only by passing carriages and twinkling lights but also by roving, costumed carolers. Tom Callison, Forest City native, former lead singer of Five Blind Men (a Doo-Wop

group) and a currently semi-retired English professor at Isothermal Community College, enjoys leading his group of holiday warblers. “People love to hear live music,” Callison says. “We’ve had offers to record, but we prefer to maintain our amateur status.”

What would Christmas be like without a parade? Forest City residents and visitors will never face that bleak prospect. Each year, the city hosts a parade that attracts more than 200 floats. And the parade attracts a lot of people with the spirit. “We have approximately 1.5 million folks living within 60 minutes of Forest City,” Withrow says. “And it seems like a good many of them make it here for the parade.” In 1994, Forest City honored Howard Harrill by making him parade Grand Marshal. A humble man, Harrill had to be persuaded to accept the honor. “He never wanted to be in the limelight,” company president Micalove says.

Continuing in their efforts to strengthen downtown Forest City, officials have plans on the table to enlarge downtown holiday offerings. “We’re hoping to renovate an old cotton mill one block off Main Street,” Withrow says. “It’s an historic mill, so we’d maintain that integrity.” Plans call for street-level retail space, upper-level residential space, a Christmas shop, and a modest museum space that would showcase the Howard Harrill Company’s holiday decorations produced for more than 30 years.

The project also calls for a 2,500-seat covered pavilion. “We already draw a lot of folks for our annual car show and jazz festival, but we want to continue to bring people to the streets and to foster a sense of community. We want folks to come out and enjoy their downtown — like it used to be.”

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