

# SC Man Recalls Birth Of Christmas Tree Farms

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Sentinel Staff Writer

The Santa Cruz area, with its tree-covered mountains, could be called the birthplace of Christmas tree farms on the West Coast.

Thirty years ago, when there wasn't a single Christmas tree farm on the West Coast, about 20 Santa Cruz area citizens gathered with the idea of rais-

ing the yuletide evergreens. Their idea prospered and today, there are 625 registered Christmas tree farms in California alone.

So related Howard and Beatrice Nielsen of Santa Cruz, who were among these visionaries in 1948 who started today's thriving industry where families can choose and cut their own Christmas trees.

Up to four years ago, the

Nielsens were owners and operators of the 138-acre Crest Christmas Tree Ranch on Empire Grade Road.

They sold the ranch in 1974 and today, at 81 and 80, respectively, Mr. and Mrs. Nielsen are retired with loving memories of their life among the trees.

The Nielsens moved here from Southern California to retire on their 138-acre ranch in 1947. The ranch then was a vineyard and the Nielsens found raising grapes wasn't very profitable.

"Edward Koch, an old friend, came up to take a look," Mr. Nielsen related. "We told him we didn't want to raise anything like chickens or turkeys.

"In a voice I didn't think sounded too convincing, Koch said 'why don't you raise Christmas trees.'"

The idea took root and Henry Washburn, the county farm advisor, gathered about 20 people together that wanted to plant Christmas trees on their land, he said.

"This had never been done on the West Coast anywhere," he added.

That year, Washburn had 30,000 Pacific Coast Douglas Fir seedlings shipped from Washington and they were divided among the 20 farmers, the Nielsens related.

"No one had much knowledge of planting trees. It was a thought of sticking the seedlings in the ground and seeing what occurred," Nielsen said.

"Everyone planted that spring and survival was one of the big problems," he explained.

But the Nielsens read in the 1947 Agricultural Yearbook that the best trees came from Colorado and Montana, so they sent away for some seed.

Little did they know that the Glauca variety of Douglas fir that they got from these states was very slow-growing, taking 15-20 years to reach Christmas tree size while the coastal variety takes only seven years.

"The seedlings sprouted, but once they were planted, they didn't do anything," Mr. Nielsen said. "We found the coastal strain of Douglas firs the accepted tree for planting."

By 1952, the trees had reached three to five feet level and people started coming by to dig them up and take them home for Christmas the

range experimentation.

"They were in unanimous agreement it was a great project and we should pursue it. They told us they would give us all the help possible," Nielsen said.

It was then that the industry became a science, with farmers experimenting with all types of trees and methods of harvest.

It also was then that Koch, the originator of the Christmas tree farming idea, took over as county farm advisor and helped with the experiments.

The Nielsens travelled all over the United States, visiting other farms and bringing back seedlings such as the Scotch pine and Austrian pine from the East Coast. They also imported

trees from Europe.

Improved methods increased the survival rate of trees from 40-50 percent to 80-90 percent, the Nielsens said.

Mrs. Nielsen, boasted her proud husband, invented shearing, a method of pruning the trees as they grew to promote shape and fullness.

The Nielsens also invented "stump culture," where the trees are cut leaving about a foot of trunk and branches. This way, a new tree grows from the trunk, they explained.

This is the predominate method now used at Christmas tree farms, they said.

In the early 60s, with Christmas tree farms still a rarity, the Nielsens said they didn't even have to advertise and

would get 30,000 visitors a year. "It was a mob scene of people there to cut trees," Mrs. Nielsen said. "You'd see all these trees moving (with people underneath them.) It was the funniest sight."

The farms aren't quite as crowded nowadays, since the number of farms has grown. Due to the spirit of those who started Christmas tree farming in this area, the business has become widespread.

Due to intense interest in Christmas tree farming even in the early 50s, the Monterey Bay group expanded to become the California Christmas Tree Growers Association.

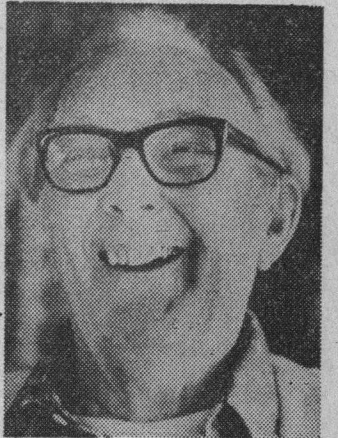
Nielsen became president and Mrs. Nielsen became secretary for 17 years.

The state even got into the act, raising seedlings at three nurseries to sell to tree farmers and for reforestation.

"It's gotten to be almost a big business," Nielsen smiled. "California must now use about 25-30 million cut Christmas trees a year. This includes the 'choose and cut,' trees coming from the Sierras and ones still shipped in from Oregon and Washington," he said.

At the peak of their business, the Nielsens had 100,000 trees planted. Now, they can see the tips of the trees at the Crest Ranch from their hilltop home.

"We don't go up there and look at the trees anymore," Mrs. Nielsen sighed. "It makes us feel bad. They were all our babies."



Howard Nielsen

## Sentinel

Sunday, December 3, 1978 -17

Wally Trabing's  
Mostly about  
People



Dream, Perchance (!)

Dream of an eel and your illness will heal.

Or, watch a zebra attacked by wild animals while you snooze and your honor is in danger, suh.

I was hanging around the bookcase the other evening and came upon a book, published by Doubleday, of all publishers, called, "Encyclopedia and Dictionary of Dreams."

Written by one who only calls himself, Zolar. That's enough to make me dream of doubt.

\*\*\*

Buy avocados in your dreams and you will be loved by many people.

Just dreaming of avocados and you will wake up fat. And, in turn, will be loved.

\*\*\*

I don't dream, myself.

Probably because I dream all day at work.

So, it is difficult for we non dreamers and non tea drinkers to get a line on our future.

Just reading the papers and I can look into the future — and it doesn't look good.

\*\*\*

I never know when company's coming, not having ready access to tea towels and my nose never itches so I can't look forward to kissing a fool.

But to continue: Dream of talking to a school teacher and you'll have sad news, (especially around report card time, I presume.)

Dream of kissing a dead person: long life ahead.

Or, dream of children eating tomatoes: return of good health.

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oe, Niensens related.

Most of those who entered the Christmas tree farming business in 1948 looked at it more as a reforestation project than a commercial enterprise, they said. Therefore, the Niensens were a bit surprised at the popularity of picking one's own tree from a farm.

Due to the rising popularity, the farmers formed the Christmas Tree Growers of the Monterey Bay Area in 1952.

"With all the losses of trees, though, we were generally discouraged with the whole thing," Nielsen said.

To boost the disgruntled farmers' spirits, Washburn organized a meeting at UC Berkeley with the farmers and about 20 of the most knowledgeable men in forest and