

December harvest - what else but Christmas trees?

BY JOYCE BUPP
Staff Correspondent

YORK — While most farmers across the mid-Atlantic area were parking away their pickers and cleaning out the combine bins, harvest of a different nature was just getting underway at Strathmeyer Forests, Inc., Dover.

And the crop that Fred Strathmeyer and his sons began gathering in late November has already been growing in the fields for some ten years.

The Strathmeyers are growers of Christmas trees, about 500 acres worth of them, spread across sites in York, Adams, Cumberland and Columbia counties.

They also sell over two million evergreen seedlings annually, a large percentage of that wholesale, bare-root nursery stock marketed to other Eastern commercial Christmas tree growers.

A fourth-generation business, Strathmeyer Forests family nursery and tree operation includes Fred Strathmeyer, his sons Fred, Jr., Gary, Tim and Brian, still in college, plus sister Robin who, with her husband, returns home weekends from State College

to lend a hand during this busy holiday season.

Great grandfather Strathmeyer began selling holiday trees back during the Great Depression, and Fred's father expanded the business into plantings of evergreen stock. With four sons all actively interested in the nursery growing, wholesaling and retailing angles, Fred who heads the state's Christmas Tree Growers Association, has continued to expand the "tree farm," and the nursery part of the business that has outdistanced Christmas tree production.

The bulk of the 15,000 trees being sold by Strathmeyers this season was cut off acreage at the farm near Airville in southern York County. About one-third of those go out to York area customers from a retailing site on Roosevelt Avenue, under the management of son Gary.

Trees grown at Strathmeyers begin life as seeds, planted in the Fall in raised, outside seed beds, and left to germinate over the winter months as evergreen seeds would do in the wild state. Most popular seeds with the Christmas



Gary Strathmeyer stands up a potential York Christmas tree for customer Eugene Shaffer of

tree trade are species like Douglas, Fraser and Concolor (or white) firs, and Scotch and white pine.

Seeds from carefully selected strains are purchased from suppliers across the nation. Douglas fir seed, for example, is brought in from Colorado, and Fraser seed comes from North Carolina.

After germinating in the seedbeds, the evergreen sprouts are fertilized, kept moist, and shaded during the hottest weather. At the end of two years, they're moved to field transplant areas, and carefully spaced at planting so that each two-year seedling has about 6 inches in each direction to encourage sturdy root growth and branching.

With two more years developing in the transplant sites, the four-year-old plants are ready for their final trip to permanent growth sites in the Christmas tree plantations.

Because the seedlings already have their sturdy four-year start, Strathmeyers and their wholesale customers find quicker field growth from the small trees, with a lower mortality rate.

In their final location, maturing Christmas trees need minimal individual care. Trees with double "leaders," or two branches poking out of the top instead of a shapely and symmetrical single one, have one of the leaders lopped off.

Only after the trees have another few years of growth in the permanent fields does it become necessary to shear them annually to promote branching and the classic Christmas tree shapeliness.

Pest control consists mainly of controlling weed growth, using a spring spraying to control the annuals, with a swipe during the fall at the perennial types, using Roundup. Although occasional insect or fungus infestation may occur, many of these cause only unsightfulness or discoloration, not actual physical harm to the tree.

"There are numerous diseases that can hit evergreens," says Fred Jr. "But we're not yet affected much by that problem because we're still in our first plantings. After a sight is replanted a couple of times, then diseases can build and become a problem."

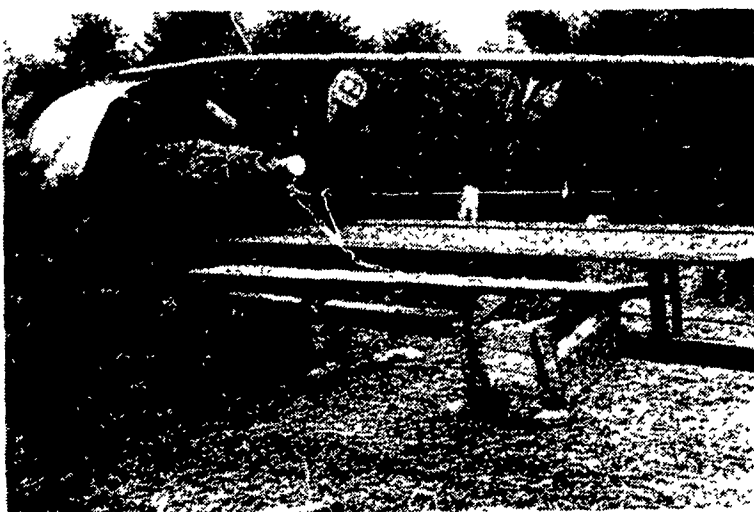
He credits York County as being a healthy area for evergreen growth, since heavy winter storms that damage tree branches are not too common. Strathmeyer's close location to the metropolitan areas in southcentral Pennsylvania is an added bonus for both sales and holiday trees and for the landscape nursery business.



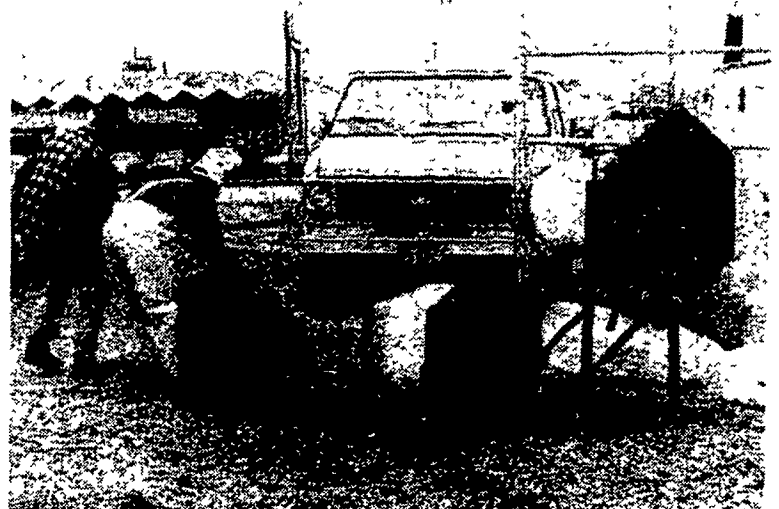
Seemingly endless rows of evergreens of all sizes march out alongside the curving slopes of the Strathmeyer tree farm in southern York County.



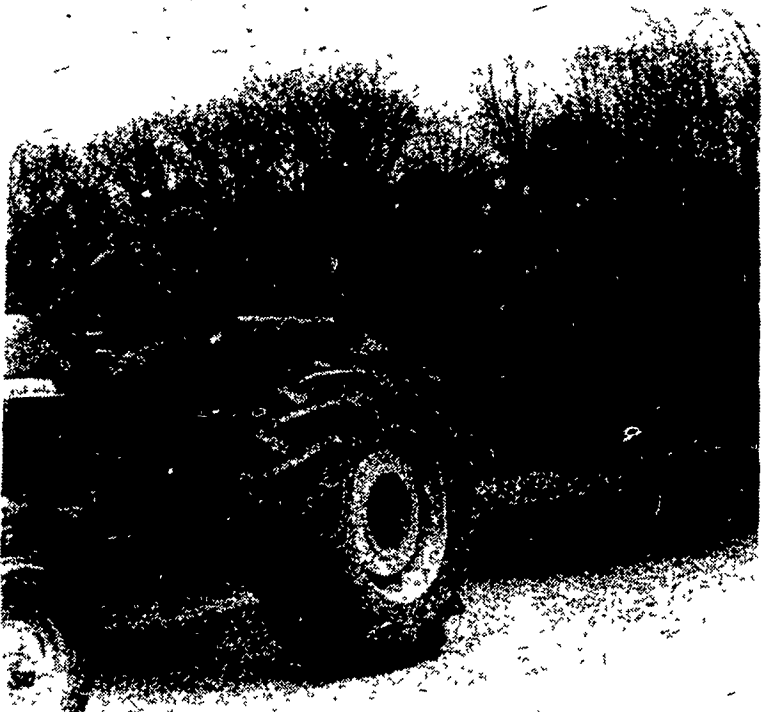
Freshly-cut broad and bushy evergreens from the Strathmeyers tree farms are fed into the back of the eight-horsepower motor Howey Christmas tree baler machine....



...and come out the front neatly wrapped with plastic twine for a compact shipping package.



Before a Strathmeyer Christmas tree customer hauls his purchase home for decorating, Gary "gift-wraps" the evergreen, sending it through a device that encloses the branches loosely in wide mesh plastic net, for ease of handling and branch protection.



Hauled from the fields on wagons, the Strathmeyer trees will be loaded on trucks for delivery to retailers in dozens of locations across the eastern seaboard of the country.

After the tree harvest crew selects and sells a number of trees in an area of cutting, the evergreens are fed, one at a time, through a baling machine — a specialized piece of equipment that compacts the branches and wraps each tree loosely with a plastic twine. Baling the trees reduces chances for limb breakage and allows the compacted trees to be loaded, trucked and handled with greater ease.

The harvest and delivery is

handled by Fred, Fred Jr., Tim, and a crew of full-time men and several part-time employees either vacationing or moonlighting from another job.

Gary is in charge of the retailing business, operating from an outside site located on York's Roosevelt Avenue. Only in use for the second year, the retail site opened to customers on December 2 and will stay in business till Christmas eve.

(Turn to Page A33)