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All aglow
The magic of Christmas Town

ALL IS BRIGHT

Every December 600,000 visitors from across America descend on McAdenville, North Carolina (population 600ish), to see its remarkable transformation into Christmas Town. **Melissa Whitworth** visits a determinedly Scrooge-free zone. Photographs by **Kyoko Hamada**

Christmas lights first appeared in McAdenville in 1956. Now, there are lights on 375 trees on the 1.3-mile road through the town and on nearly every house

A steady stream of cars snakes slowly up Main Street in McAdenville, North Carolina. It is just after sunset, but people are driving without their headlights on so as not to diminish the effect of the houses, trees, civic buildings, street lamps and fences that have been festooned with red, white and green lights. There are ribbons and wreaths hanging over a small bridge that crosses the South Fork River. Every tree in every garden seems to be decked with yards of fairy lights. Children hang out of car windows and sun roofs shouting, 'Merry Christmas!' to the crowds walking along the narrow pavements.

Every December for more than six decades, the 600 or so residents have worked together to help turn McAdenville into 'Christmas Town', and each year about 600,000 people travel from all over America to see the lights. McAdenville is a small town with a post office and a diner – serving hush puppies (deep-fried cornbread, a Southern delicacy), burgers and pot pie. There are a couple of family-owned shops, and no bars. Pharr Yarns is the town's main employer ('producing the highest-quality carpet yarns and high-performance yarns for industrial and military applications'), founded in 1939 by William J Pharr, and still family-owned. It was Pharr who, with his wife, travelled to Europe as a young couple and fell in love with Christmas.

'My parents loved London and were very taken with the traditions, the decor and the spirit surrounding the old English Christmas,' Catherine Ann Carstarphen, Pharr's daughter, now 78, says. 'They saw how Christmas brought communities together. On their return, they launched McAdenville's own Christmas parade, a ceremonial bonfire and carolling with all of the townspeople. Their love of Christmas was infectious.'

Today, the public face of and unofficial spokesman for Christmas Town is Mel Collins, 59, who has the enthusiasm and demeanour of Ned Flanders, the goody-two-shoes Christian character

in *The Simpsons*. His bushy moustache twitches as he talks with passion about the town, its history, its lights and about Christmas. Collins and his wife, Patricia, have lived in McAdenville for 12 years. 'The first time I saw the town, I thought, gee, this is a Normal Rockwell painting come to life,' Collins says from his office at Pharr Yarns, where he is the company's vice-president of human resources. 'It is so magical here and it really distils the American spirit of giving: you see Christmas again through the eyes of the children. The Pharrs evidently were just gaga over Christmas, instead of having that jaded, commercialised idea.'

The motivation behind this display of lights is pure and simple: civic pride. Christmas lights first

appeared in McAdenville in 1956 when nine trees surrounding the community centre were decorated. Dick Roberts, 76, has been helping to deck the town ever since. 'Five of us started, and Mr Pharr liked that,' he says. Roberts and some of his co-workers from the textile plant had begun by fashioning the words MERRY CHRISTMAS from metal rods and, after attaching a number of light bulbs, placed the makeshift greeting on a hill in McAdenville for all to see. According to Roberts, Pharr said, 'Boys, I'll pay for all the decorations you can put up,' and a tradition was born. Now, there are lights on 375 trees on the 1.3-mile route through the town, and on almost every house. 'It is each resident's choice whether to decorate or not,' Carstarphen says, 'but

Far left Mel Collins is the unofficial spokesman for Christmas Town: 'The first time I saw the town, I thought, gee, this is a Normal Rockwell painting come to life.'
Above Mayor Ferrell Buchanan, who presides over the annual Yule Log ceremony

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virtually everyone joins in enthusiastically. Many specifically moved to McAdenville just so they could become a part of the Christmas celebration.'

The lights – there may be 500-5,000 on each tree – go on at 5.30pm each day from December 1-26. They are switched off at 9.30pm during the week (so that workers on the Pharr Yarns night shift don't get stuck in traffic) and 11pm at weekends. Residents are free to use their imagination to decorate their home and garden as they see fit; there are no rules, but in keeping with what the Pharrs saw as a traditional English Christmas, most people continue to use red, white and green lights.

'For everyone within the town, there is this sense of all hands on deck,' Collins says. 'The whole notion of Christmas Town, the thing that makes it so unique, is that it's this completely unselfish gift or gesture to the town. If you drive through town you will see there is nary a hotel nor a restaurant, so there is no commercial impact that this can have on the town of McAdenville.'

And woe betide any Grinch who doesn't return the many shouts of 'Merry Christmas' here. 'If it's 5.30 and you have run out of milk or bread, it could take you 50 "Merry Christmases" just to go out and get a loaf,' Collins says.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this is not a secular town. The religion practised here is primarily Protestant: Methodist, Baptist and Presbyterian. 'I think people would fall over, clutch their chest and collapse in a heap if anyone spelled it "Xmas",' Collins says, laughing.

If McAdenville has a motif, it is the light bulb. The town was incorporated in 1881, and grew up around the original textile mill, which was then called McAden Mills. By 1884 the factory had one of the very first Thomas Edison generators, and one of the first light bulbs, and people would travel from all over to see what they referred to as 'the light in the bottle'. 'And now, 127 years later,' Steve Rankin, a local photographer, says, 'all these people are still coming to McAdenville to see the lights.'

Bill and Judy Cozart have a house just off Main Street, and it is festooned with lights. A few years ago, a young man knocked on their door, holding an electric sign. He asked them a favour and they were only too happy to oblige. Later that evening, as the man and his girlfriend walked past the house, he dropped to one knee beside a tree in their garden. On cue, the Cozarts switched on the sign: in lights it read WILL YOU MARRY ME?

Since then, as news has spread, their front lawn has become a destination for young lovers. Four other men have proposed to their girlfriends on the same spot; one couple recently returned with their baby. Many of those who visit McAdenville come again and again. 'People who may have come here as a child often come back with their own children,' Collins says. 'Now we have grandparents bringing their grandchildren.'

A highlight of the festivities is the Yule Log Parade, which has taken place here since 1949 (the Pharrs had seen a version of it in Europe). The police close Main Street as a group of schoolchildren haul a log on ropes from one end of town to the other. The school choir sings carols accompanied by a group of local musicians sitting on a trailer filled with hay bales. The crowd then take their seats in the YMCA building, where a huge fireplace is set up for the log to be thrown in. The chaplain, Dr Bob Adams, 82, gives a welcome address, and *God Bless America* is sung by a lady from the choir. Tables are laid out with plates of cookies and there are large vats of hot chocolate – no alcohol is served.

After the ceremony, Mayor Ferrell Buchanan takes to the stage to award the keys to the town (and honorary citizenship) to a British couple, Lea and Paul Newnham from Crawley, West Sussex, who have visited McAdenville every year since 1998 bar two. 'Christmas isn't Christmas for us until we come here,' says Lea, whose eyes fill with tears as the mayor hands her a certificate. 'Being here takes all the commercialisation out of Christmas, and you can be a kid again. You pass through the town and you get that tingle.' ∎