



Crab pot trees are  
a sound invention.

SCOTT TAYLOR

The background of the page is a photograph of a yard at night. Several Christmas trees are illuminated with strings of lights. Some are warm white, some are multi-colored, and one is a simple white triangle. The trees are arranged in a row across the yard. In the background, there are dark trees and a building with some lights visible.

# crab pot. creation

*With a name like Nick, this Down East businessman may have been destined to invent a new kind of Christmas tree.*

BY BILL MORRIS

**W**hen it comes to holiday traditions, the folks of Down East Carteret County take a back seat to no one. On Christmas Eve, the tender on duty at the Harkers Island bridge dresses up like Santa Claus and stands at the side, waving at drivers headed home for clam chowder and charcoal mullets, fig preserves, and pound cake. If the wind off Core Sound has a sting to it, someone will remark, "It's cold as the night of the *Crissie Wright*," referring to a schooner that ran aground at Cape Lookout in the winter of 1886.

Down Easters treasure their connections to holidays past, but that doesn't mean they're slow to adopt a new tradition — especially if it's the invention of a native son like Nicky Harvey, the former commercial fisherman who for 23 years has operated Harvey & Sons Net and Twine in the soundside village of Davis. Using the



coated wire mesh used to make crab traps, he has created Core Sound Trees, a newfangled Down East tradition that, in only five years, has spread from Harkers Island to Long Island and then right on down to Florida.

Better known locally as "the crab pot Christmas tree," Harvey's creation is beautiful, practical, and ideal for indoor or outdoor use. Made to fold flat for easy storage, the trees are sold pre-strung with the option of white or colored lights. Additional decorations, like ornaments or garlands, can also be added. Down East, people often use sand dollars, colorful floats, or even sections of net to decorate the "tree." Made from materials that hold up for five years even with a daily dunking in saltwater, the Core Sound Trees are incredibly durable.

At Harvey & Sons Net and Twine, Sue Willis ties up a few loose ends. Inset: Originator of the crab pot tree, Neal Harvey has created a fine mesh for himself.

On the sound side, people and their traditions are made to endure. Like most of his neighbors, Harvey has seen his share of hard times, the no-name nor'easters, and hurricanes like Isabel, which flooded most of Down East in September 2003. He's seen the commercial fishing fleet of Carteret County decimated by 21st-century economics. But, like generations of Down Easters, Harvey has adapted. After all, the first Europeans to settle at Cape Lookout were 18th-century whalers. Their descendents reinvented themselves as boat builders, fishermen,

and shrimpers. Perfectly natural, then, that Harvey would reinvent himself as a crab pot Santa Claus.

**'Tis the season**

The story behind Core Sound Trees is the stuff that holiday movies are made of, beginning with the stocky figure of Harvey himself, who is balding and beardless, yet still somehow Santa-like. Harvey once owned a trawler, but in 1981 he finally got tired of fighting the weather, governmental regulations, and a merciless seafood market. He quit fishing and opened Harvey &

Sons Net and Twine, just down Core Sound from his hometown of Atlantic. Sitting at his desk behind a nameplate that reads “Neal L. Harvey,” he tells a visitor about the origin of the crab pot tree.

“We started out selling nets and trawls,” he says. “When that market went bad, we started making crab pots. Now,” he says with a shake of his head, “the crabbing is terrible.” Producer statistics back him up: In the last five years, North Carolina has gone from 43 crab processors to only 20.

“It’s gotten tough selling crab pots,” Harvey says, “so we started working at getting this tree business going.” At different times the “we” included sons Dennis and Sean, but they have moved on to other jobs. Now the second desk in the Harvey & Sons office belongs to Sue Willis, who spends far more time bending wire in the workshop than she does sitting at her desk.

Located alongside U.S. Highway 70, the Harvey & Sons head office has raised, brick-patterned linoleum on the floor, a deer head on the wall, and a black-and-gray goose decoy on the bookshelf next to a miniature crab pot with two plush toy crabs inside. The back room is an organized jumble of bins holding various piece-parts that go into making a crab pot: zincs to slow saltwater corrosion, cull rings that let juvenile crabs escape, spools of shock cord that serves as a latch. Under a shed roof out back, iron rebar is being bent and welded into rectangular frames. In the driveway, a flatbed trailer is piled high with the finished product, bright red cubes ready to be delivered to a crabber who might be as far away as Georgia or Maryland.

“This business has always been seasonal,” Harvey says. “When we’ve got all our crab pot orders filled, we start making trees.”

What started out as a Christmas novelty has become something of a year-round phenomenon, and now there’s a Core Sound Tree for nearly every occasion — the original green to celebrate Christmas, orange-and-black for Halloween, and a red-white-and-blue “Freedom Tree” to put patriotism on display.

While Harvey and Willis are talking about translating crab trap mesh into trees, an older fellow wearing a long-sleeve dress shirt and sweat-stained blue cap comes into the office with a brand new gill net stuffed in a clear plastic bag. He’s rigged the raw mesh (pronounced ‘marsh’ Down East) with floats on top and a lead line at the bottom, to help Harvey & Sons fill an order. When they begin to good-naturedly haggle over how much he’s owed for “hanging” the net, the old-timer cautions, “Money can break a friendship.”

“Yeah,” says Willis, “but I bet biscuits could cure it.” Everybody has a good laugh.

### Flash of genius

But how did a commercial fisherman start marketing artificial trees? The answer begins with the evolution of those deceptively simple-looking wire cubes used to catch blue crabs. The first metal crab pots were made from plain galvanized chicken wire, but even with chunks of zinc attached they were quick to rust. Soon vinyl-coated wire became the standard. Like the Model T, the first coated traps were black. Then green became an option, followed by red and then yellow.

Like all watermen, crabbers are a superstitious lot, eager to grab any advantage, real or imagined. Over time, the popularity of different crab pot colors has changed with the same

sort of logic that drives teenagers’ fashion trends.

“Now yellow is the most popular,” Harvey says. “But out here in Core Sound they swear that a red pot catches Jimmy crabs better.” (“Jimmies,” slang for male blue crabs, are more valuable.)

Green wire has long been the standard color, though — which could account for the flash of genius that inspired the crab pot Christmas tree. Of all the thousands of people who have worked with green-coated crab pot wire, it was Harvey who saw that it could be cut into triangles and made into a tree. This past August, he successfully patented the design.

“The important thing,” he says, “is that we came up with a way to make it fold flat.” The crab pot tree does indeed fold up with the lights still attached — and not just for easy storage. Some people choose to display their trees only partially unfolded. They open them halfway and put them against a wall as “half trees.” Open only 90 degrees, a tree may fit neatly in a corner. “I’ve seen them outdoors wrapped around the corner of a building,” Willis says. “It looks really neat.”

Core Sound Trees are available in six-, four-, three-, and two-foot models. The list of dealers is growing, and they are also for sale directly from [www.harveyandsons.com](http://www.harveyandsons.com).

But there’s one unsolved mystery in this holiday tale. One more question remains for the visitor to ask, there in the Net and Twine office with the deer head on the wall: Why does the nameplate on the owner’s desk read “Neal L. Harvey?”

“That’s my name,” Harvey says. “But I’ve always been called Nicky. How they got Nicky out of Neal, I’ll never know.”

Well, isn’t it obvious? A mere Neal couldn’t invent his own Christmas tree. But a St. Nicky might be destined to do just that. 🗺️

*Bill Morris is the author of Saltwater Cowboys. He lives in Beaufort.*

## if you're going



Harvey & Sons Net and Twine  
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Davis, N.C. 28524

To order a crab pot Christmas tree, call (252) 729-1731, or visit the website at [www.harveyandsons.com](http://www.harveyandsons.com).

