



A Historical View of Forestry in Delaware

*Beneath  
the Canopy*

**BOB TIADEN  
& WALT GABEL**



Bob Tjaden



Charcoal being loaded on railroad cars preparing to be shipped, near Overbrook – Note baskets used to carry coal and the size of charcoal chunks. All able-bodied coaler's family members participated in the job. Photo taken by William S. Taber – 8/1929.

Delaware Public Archives, State Forestry Collection, WUI 14

## MOONSHINERS ADD TO CHARCOAL MAKERS' WOES BY ROBBING THEIR PITS

GEORGETOWN, Del., Jan. 25—(Special).—With labor the cheapest it has been since the World War, many timber men have taken advantage of the opportunity to give as much employment as possible to men who wanted to work in the woods by having them cut pine for charcoal. The industry has not only given employment to many men, but at the same time it is enabling some of the farmers who had tracts of timber suitable for charcoal burning to realize a little money to help tide them over for a time.

The charcoal burning business is in full swing in many localities of lower Delaware, and while the market is the duldest it has been in many years, those so engaged are able to move much of the product. It is a business which requires men of experience. They must know when to draw the fire from the pits at the proper time in order to produce a good grade. Millions of people throughout the country have no conception of what the business is like, nor did they ever see a pit with acrid pitchy fumes issuing from the conical fire-holes in the top. Careful attention must be given by the coal-burner to see that the sticks of wood are piled properly in a conical shaped pit, covered with dirt. The dirt piled about the wood prevents it from burning too rapidly, and it smoulders for many days before it becomes a finished product.

Where there is extensive "coaling" going on, the fumes are noticed for two and three miles from the woods, and the smoke issuing from the top of the mounds fills the forests until they look as if there had been a forest fire.

Some of the charcoal dealers say that large quantities are being used by bootleggers to "age" their liquor. Complaint is being made by some that their pits have been robbed, evidently by bootleggers or moonshiners.

Evening Journal, Every Evening Newspaper, Wilmington – 1/26/1933  
Delaware Public Archives, State Forestry Collection, News Article #5891



## Chapter 5



### American Holly and the Holly Industry

The American holly (*ilex opaca*) has deep roots in the State of Delaware. On May 1, 1939, the Senate and House of Representatives of the State of Delaware passed a bill adopting the **American holly as the State Tree**. The American holly is also known as the Christmas holly and was highly sought after during the Christmas holidays. Using holly as a Christmas decoration dates back to early European cultures, and in colonial times it was used for tools, toys, inlay, and musical instruments. It is still used for many of these items, plus sporting goods and some scientific instruments.

In Delaware around the 1890s, an entrepreneur, William Buell of Farmington and later, Milford, sent 500 cases of holly to Chicago. John T. Watson of Georgetown, Buell's assistant and a merchant, is credited with making the first official holly wreath in Delaware. Thereafter, many others realized they had cheap and plentiful Christmas decorations in their backyards, and thus the holly industry was created. The height of the industry was in the 1930s and early 1940s with Delaware recognized as a leading national producer of holly wreaths. Milton, Bridgeville, Georgetown, Millsboro, and Selbyville were all booming holly towns. It was estimated, from a 1934 report, that some 8,500 people were employed by the holly industry in some way. In the heyday of the industry, the Pennsylvania Railroad scheduled a special train, "The Holly Express," to pick up the packaged holly products, loading from Delmar to Wilmington.

It was speculated that plastics were the reason for the industry's decline. Cheaper and more abundant wreaths could be manufactured with plastic holly substitutes from Hong Kong. In addition, WW II pulled many families into the war effort, shipments became more critical, resources were used by the war effort, and plastic wreaths appeared on the market.

The American holly is not only one of our most beautiful trees but has been valuable commercially as well. In a 1927 report by the Commission of the Conservation of Forest in Delaware, it is noted, "A recent survey was made of the state's holly industry and shows that wreaths and other holly products valued at approximately \$400,000 are annually shipped from the lower counties. About 7,000 cases, comprising some 1,500,000 wreaths, and in addition, approximately 600 cases of loose sprays and branches make up this shipment. Principally, the poorer class of people gather the sprays and make up the wreaths, which they sell on the open market at 2 to 5 cents



each. This would indicate that the annual Christmas present, distributed to the hundreds of such people, is close to \$108,000."

Between Thanksgiving and Christmas, farm families would focus on the last cash crop of the season, making holly wreaths and sprays for the Christmas holidays. The men would pick branches and berries in the woods, while the women and children made holly wreaths from formed hoops of willow, maple, or gum switches. Two men could pick enough holly branches each day for around 450 wreaths. In 1940 wreaths typically brought between three and six cents per wreath with a family making up to \$500 per season producing around 10,000 wreaths. Some larger families would make up to \$300 per week for their wares.

In a 1933 State Forestry report, it indicated a considerable reduction in income to the people of the state during the 1932 shipping season, with the estimated value of the holly industry at approximately \$250,000, compared to the 1927 report of \$400,000. The State Forestry Department noted, "Delaware is still the leading state in the production of American holly greens and remains the center of the industry in the United States." In this same report, it was calculated that approximately \$100,000 was paid by holly shippers to wreath makers and shipping case manufacturers. More than 6,750 standard holly-shipping cases were manufactured and sold to Delaware shippers. Of these cases, approximately 6,200 cases, containing 17 dozen wreaths per case, were shipped by rail or transported by truck out of state. In addition, the report shows approximately 2,000 cartons of a dozen to two dozen wreaths each were shipped out of state to large and small commercial dealers. These shipments alone indicated at least 1,275,000 wreaths were handled by Delaware dealers, of which roughly 95% were made in Delaware by Delawareans, from Delaware-grown holly. In addition, there were 300 cases shipped of laurel roping, mistletoe, crow's feet, boxwood wreaths, paper wreaths, and dozens of other creations made from a combination of natural and artificial products. In this same Forestry Department report, a few people were noted as connected to the holly industry: J. Reese White (Millsboro); E.E. Carey & H.B. Mitchell (Millsboro); Delaware Evergreens Co. (Selbyville); Charles G. Jones—"The Holly Wreath Man" (Milton); W.B. Chandler (Dagsboro); W.B. Truitt (Bridgeville); J. Raymond Baker (Dagsboro); W.K. Morgan (Seaford); John A. Cordrey (Millsboro); and Vollie J. Stephens (Selbyville). This list does not represent all holly dealers in Delaware.

One of the most prominent holly dealers was Charles G. Jones, also known as the "Holly Wreath Man," from Milton. He established his holly wreath business around 1908. He became the state's champion processor and shipper of holly products to all parts of the country.

Charles G. Jones was originally a fertilizer salesclerk and in 1903 began purchasing wreaths from local farmers to resell them. In 1904 he married Virginia Burton. The original name of his business was The Burton Evergreen Company but was later changed in 1908 to "Jones, the Holly Wreath Man". He sold wreaths both in-state and throughout the nation to florists, churches, and department stores. His business was well known throughout the nation. His business was located on Route

16 between Milton and Route 1. After his death in 1944, his son, William T. Jones, continued the business, expanding to a larger facility and using automated equipment. In 1952 the company imported many of their holly wreaths from Italy, where they were preserved through a sun-drying process. The wreaths arrived by the bale in mid-summer. The wreaths were brown but were reconstructed with a steam bath and an application of glycerin and a preservative. The leaves were then painted or dyed a bright green, with a combination of accents of gold, white, and red, as demanded. A light flocking made of chopped raw cotton was applied to create the effect of a dusting of snow. The wreaths were shipped to department stores by October, in time for the holiday season and displays. In 1951 Charles Jones manufactured a giant Lycopodium (ground cedar) wreath that was 11 ½ feet wide. The wreath was placed around the RCA Building at the Rockefeller Center in New York City. It was made in two halves so it could be transported by truck. When it arrived in New York City, the halves were bolted together and trimmed with lights.

His business took a downward trend in 1954 when Hurricane Hazel damaged both his 7,000 square foot building and several thousand dollars of goods ready for shipment. Also, in 1956 a federal ruling requiring people that worked out of the homes be paid a minimum wage (\$1/hour) under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) impacted his business. The final straw to break the back of his business was the manufacturing of cheap plastic wreaths made in Hong Kong.

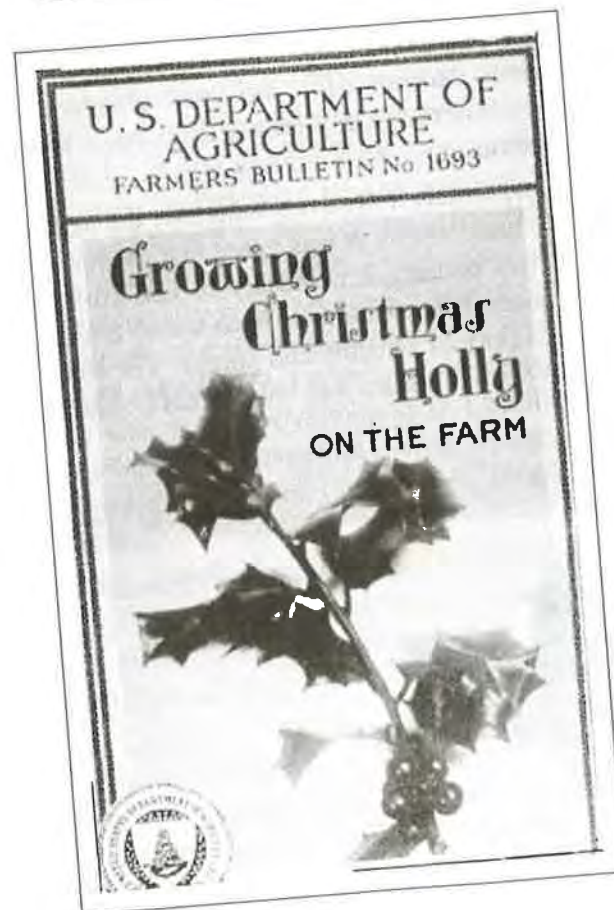
Today, the art of crafting holly branches into beautiful Christmas wreaths and sprays is practiced by only a few families of Sussex County on a local basis; a trade they learned from their parents and grandparents.

It is important to note, there are male and female holly trees, with only the female producing the bright red berries. During the early 1900s, it was noted that the natural berries would drop off during shipment, thus making it necessary to use artificial berries instead. This allowed the wreath makers to use branches from either tree and increase the availability and merchantable supply of wreaths and sprays. The tree is found throughout the state but is more prominent in Sussex and lower Kent Counties.





Bob Tjaden



Above:  
American holly branches,  
both male (no berries) and  
female (berries) plants  
Photo taken by  
William Taber - 1932.  
Delaware Public Archives  
State Forestry Collection  
TP 179

At left:  
USDA Bulletin on growing holly -  
Circa 1930  
Delaware Public Archives  
State Forestry Collection

*Beneath the Canopy*



Gatherers of holly sprays (Ellendale swamp) at work collecting material  
for use in the manufacturing of holly wreaths. As a rule, a 3' - 6' spray  
was collected for that purpose. 12/1929  
Delaware Public Archives, State Forestry Collection, WUI 53



Factory workers making holly wreaths - 9/18/1957  
Delaware Public Archives, Purnell Collection,  
box 61, file 7, Photo #9282, WUI 5009



Bob Tjaden



Holly wreath factory at Milford – 1960  
Delaware Public Archives, Delaware Development Office,  
Folder #36, Photo #1844, WUI 5005



At the packing plant of Jones, the Holly Wreath Man of Milton, Delaware  
Four important contributions of Delaware to the Christmas decorations of the  
nation. All are made in whole or in part from Delaware forest products.  
Photo taken by William Taber – 12/1929.  
Delaware Public Archives, State Forestry Collection, WUI 56

*Beneath the Canopy*



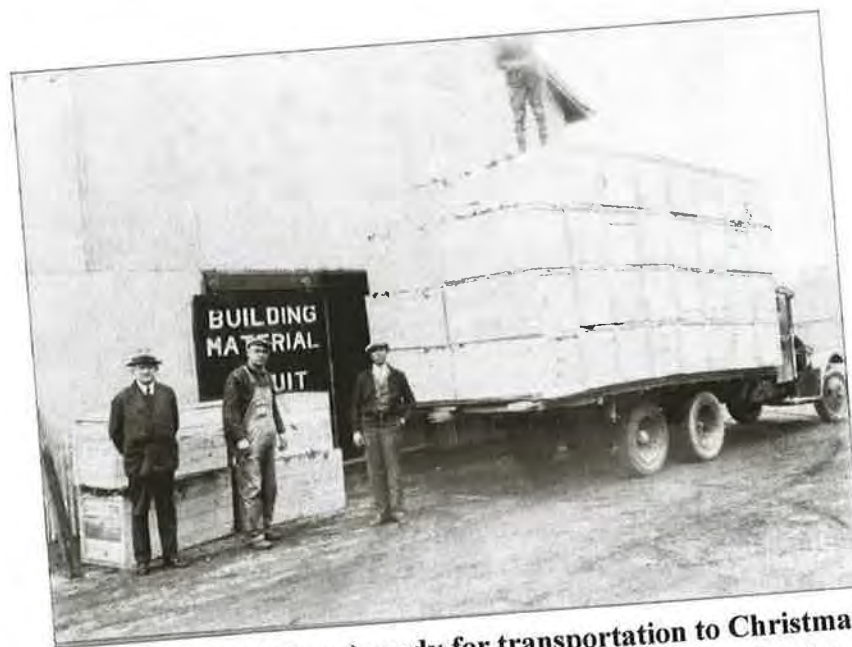
Packing house of Jones, the Holly Wreath Man of Milton, Delaware  
Shown in this photo are large and small holly wreaths,  
large boxwood wreath, small ground pine wreath with strawflowers,  
gum balls and artificial berries, red paper wreath with loblolly pine cones,  
ground pine and artificial berries, laurel roping and ground pine roping.  
Boy in picture is William, the son of Charles G. Jones, at age 6.  
Photo taken by William Taber – 12/1929.  
Delaware Public Archives, State Forestry Collection, WUI 54



Bob Tjaden



The shipping shed of W.B. Truitt of Bridgeville  
Several boxes of holly sprays packed up ready for shipment  
Photo taken by William Taber – 12/1929.  
Delaware Public Archives, State Forestry Collection, WUI 55



Boxed spray holly (34 Cases) ready for transportation to Christmas greens  
market – Plant of Layton & Owens, Bridgeville – Reese Layton-Left.  
Photo taken by William Taber – 12/20/1934.  
Delaware Public Archives, State Forestry Collection, WUI 269

*Beneath the Canopy*

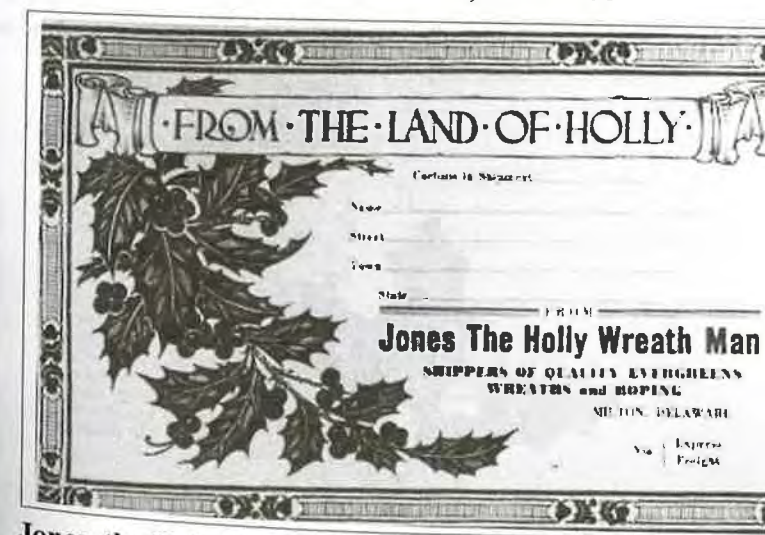
*of Jones The Holly Wreath Man*  
IA, TUESDAY, DECEMBER 10, 193

*cer at Christmas Time Is V*



Bringing in the Wreaths—Granville Hastings uses horse and buggy  
delivery to get the decorations into town. The holly trees in Delaware  
are protected and laws have been passed making it a jail offense for  
cutting the trees without permission of the owner.

Granville Hastings uses horse and buggy to deliver holly wreaths for  
Jones, the Holly Wreath Man of Milton – 12/10/1935.  
Delaware Public Archives, General Collection, Box 3,  
Folder 20, Photo #445, WUI 5006



Jones, the Holly Wreath Man, shipping label – Circa 1930  
Delaware Public Archives, State Forestry Collection



## SUSSEX HOLLY WREATHS FARMER LAST PAY CROP

GEORGETOWN, Del., Nov. 22.—(Special).—Yuletide cheer and festivity is expressed by the green-leaved, red-berried holly in the home of city folk, as well as those in towns and rural communities throughout the Christmas holidays.

To most farmers throughout lower Delaware, especially where they have suffered crop reverses, it means actual food and clothing. It's the last crop of the year to be harvested by large numbers of farmers and their families, and one which requires no cultivation. For fifty years it was scorned but now Chicago and New York markets make it profitable.

Farmers throughout Sussex County this week started to market the crop, most of which will be converted into wreaths for mural and window decorations in the city homes. They will continue to gather the evergreen until about five days before Christmas.

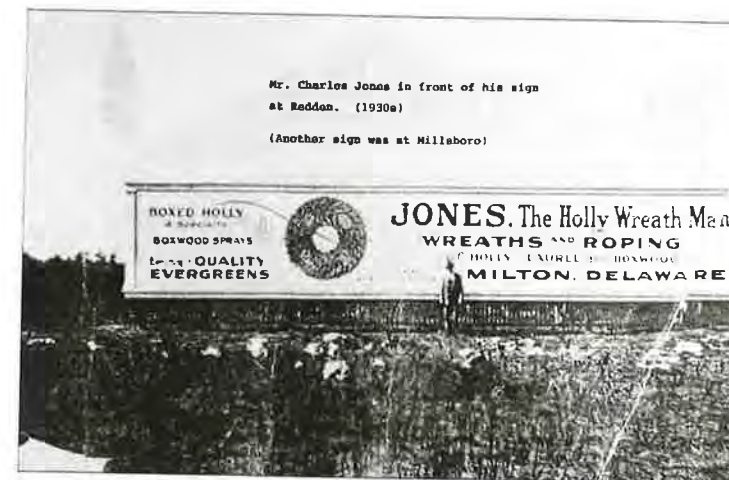
The first man to engage in the business was the late William Buell, of Milford, who in 1890 shipped 3,000 cases on consignment to Chicago. He got only a dollar a case for it and only the very highest grade of holly was accepted. From the small beginning of Buell, lower Delaware farmers began to realize that the holly trees had some value and during the winter produced a revenue to them much greater than some of their

choice oaks and gums and cedars. The demand for box or case holly within the past five or ten years has not been as heavy as it once was. Hence there is but little case holly shipped to Philadelphia, Baltimore, New York, Wilmington and other markets. The demand is now for wreaths. Farmers had much rather make their holly crop into wreaths than to cut branch holly, for the reason that they can make more money and save their trees better.

Most of the holly is now going to distant points in the Middle West. In the closing days, Buffalo, Boston, Albany, Pittsburgh, New York, Newark, Jersey City, Baltimore, Chester and the coal region of Pennsylvania will get the consignments.

The entire family starts making the wreaths early in the morning and works sometimes late in the night. The father and some of the big brothers are kept busy hauling the material to the house to keep the other members of the family busy. Children are able to earn money for their winter clothing in this way. Day in and day out they toil like Trojans until the season closes. Buyers drive through the rural sections, gather up the wreaths, pay the farmer at his door and truck them into the towns where they are packed in cases for shipment.

Every Evening-Evening Journal Newspaper, Wilmington — 11/22/1933  
Delaware Public Archives, State Forestry Collection, News Article #5887



Charles Jones with his road sign at Redden — 1930s  
Delaware Public Archives, State Forestry Collection.

## HOLLY CROP BRINGS THOUSANDS DOLLARS TO LOWER DELAWARE

By OSCAR S. WILSON

Nature has dumped into the lap of man, especially farmers of the Delmarva Peninsula, a never-failing crop—the native holly. It requires no cultivation, stands the rigors of winter and annually brings into the farmers many thousands of dollars. For 75 years it was despised by rural folk until its value was realized in the early 90's when some shipments were made for Christmas decorations to the New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Chicago markets. It came into its own about the time of the outbreak of the Spanish-American War, in 1898.

Holly is found along the Atlantic Coast for a stretch of about 500 miles, from central Delaware to the Carolinas, and about 75 inland. What this year's crop, now starting to be harvested, will mean up to the Christmas holidays, no one is able to venture a guess. It has, in seasons past brought into the farmers as much as \$400,000 in about six weeks.

When all other crops fail the average lower Delaware farmer, assisted by his family is able to make enough money from Thanksgiving to the middle of December when the season practically closes for faraway shipments, to tide him through the winter.

William Buell, of Milford, was the first man to deal in holly on a large scale more than forty-five years ago. The first season he bought 3,000 cases for consignment to a large seed concern in New York and Chicago and paid one dollar per case. The cases, made of wood, were five feet long and three feet deep. The price paid was considered big money in those days for a product which farmers and timber dealers scorned. It usually was the first wood cut during the winter and burned in the fireplace. Farmers wanted to get rid of it because they said it was a nuisance.

Mr. Buell accepted only the highest grades in those days. The branches had to be laden with berries and the leaves had to be green and free from holes caused by insects.

The branches or twigs were tightly packed in the cases in the forests and then hauled to the shipping points where inspectors opened them and removed all branches which were not of the highest quality. The assorted or culled holly branches at that time were better than the best grades today. The first holly shipments along the Atlantic Seaboard were sent out from Georgetown which was the center of the industry in those

Sussex Countian — 12/2/1943.  
Delaware Public Archives, State Forestry Collection, News Article #5990