

'Mountain Country Christmas' to bring holiday cheer to fairgrounds



A past view of the Mountain Country Christmas in Lights at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds, which will open for the season Thanksgiving night. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

**By Jarrett Whitener
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer**

The monthlong Mountain Country Christmas in Lights will return to the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds starting Thursday, Nov. 28.

And once again, the walkthrough experience will bring hundreds of thousands of lights to Hiawassee, turning the fairgrounds into a winter wonderland for families near and far to enjoy.

"We open Thanksgiving night at 6 p.m., and it lasts until 9 p.m.," Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason said. "We are open every Thursday, Friday and Saturday through Dec. 28."

"This will be our fourth year, and it has turned into quite the tradition. We had around 15,000 paid attendants last year, and under 12 is free.

"We are growing it every year and trying to add something new. This year, we have more lights, and we have a new animal farm and petting zoo called Noah's Ark."

Christmas music will be streamed within the walking route of the fairgrounds, with live carolers and plenty of craft booths filled up by churches, vendors, plus a very special guest in Santa Claus.

A new Christmas Village will be placed in the Exhibit Hall this year for vendors to set up and sell their products out of the cold weather.

"We have all the booths decorated by businesses, organizations, nonprofits, clubs, churches, craft individuals, and food vendors," Thomason said. "We have it looking beautiful."

"For those that need help getting around, we have six-passenger golf carts that will

take them through the lights so they can see it all.

"Santa will be here each night for pictures with children, and Jerry Taylor will be here playing the organ."

The first ever Mountain Country Christmas in Lights took place in 2016 thanks to an initial funding start of \$150,000 in county hotel/motel tax monies, followed by another \$50,000 in 2017.

At the time, then-Sole Commissioner Bill Kendall and the Conventions and Visitors Bureau brainstormed with Thomason about how to bring more tourism during the slower winter months, and together they came up with the light show.

A 2016 resolution adopted by Kendall regarding the "Mountain Country Christmas" highlighted the reason for the season:

"Towns County residents and those of the Appalachian region have a proud heritage of God-fearing immigrants, many of Irish, Scottish and Anglo-Saxon descent, who came to these isolated Appalachian Mountains to hammer out a living from the land through much hardship, developing fierce independent and conservative Christian values.

"Their word was their bond, and if a neighbor was in trouble, they would be there to lend a helping hand 'at the drop of the hat.' They celebrated the birth of Christ on Christmas with the meager things they could afford for their children — an apple, orange, or perhaps a stick of peppermint candy in a sock hanging by the fireplace; trees decorated with strings of popcorn.

"Therefore, be it resolved that the event shall now and

hereafter be called 'Mountain Country Christmas in Lights,' with area churches having a prominent role with displays and carols reflecting our Christian values and mountain culture of yesteryear."

And with the fourth annual event kicking off this week, Thomason couldn't be happier with how the light show has shaped up in the years since its inception.

"It's great for people to come enjoy the lights and get them in the Christmas spirit with their families, and let their children enjoy it as well," Thomason said. "It's a good tourism attraction for the Northeast Georgia Mountains in the wintertime when things are slower, and it brings a lot of people to the area to help fill up the hotels and restaurants."

The cost of entry to the Christmas lights is \$5 per person, with children 12 and under getting in free.

Thursday, Dec. 5, will feature a special Towns County Citizen Night, where residents get in free to light show.

There will be a dedicated drive-through only evening from 6-8 p.m. on Tuesday, Dec. 10, for nursing home, retirement home and homebound residents who are unable to get out of vehicles.

"We also have a Christmas concert on Nov. 30 with Lee Greenwood and T. Graham Brown," Thomason said. "You can come to the lights at 6 p.m., and the concert starts at 7. If you buy concert tickets, then you can get in free to the light show."

For more information on the event and to purchase tickets to the concert, visit georgiamountainfairgrounds.com.

Concert...from Page 1A

said. "But it all turns out well in the end."

Life on the road hasn't changed much, Greenwood said, though the music business certainly has.

It used to be that musicians started out playing small venues like clubs, then, as their popularity grew, performing arts centers, followed by concert arenas and stadiums, and both Greenwood and Brown followed that path in their rise to stardom.

No w a d a y s , s a i d

Greenwood, artists go right from the recording studio to the arenas and stadiums, and the small venues are bypassed. Apparently, the Anderson Music Hall hasn't fallen victim to that fate.

Greenwood and Brown said they tend to play more venues in the South and the Midwest, as opposed to, say, California or Arizona, largely because the South and Midwest are accessible by bus, which is much less expensive, and the logistics are simpler.

Brown and Greenwood both promised fun shows on Saturday that the whole family can enjoy, with lots of Christmas feeling in the mix.

Folks should arrive early to check out the family-friendly Mountain Country Christmas in Lights attraction at the Fairgrounds, which opens at 6 p.m. and features thousands of lights and plenty of food and other fun activities and displays.

For more information and for tickets to the show, visit georgiamountainfairgrounds.com.

Celebrate Christmas at the Reece Farm December 6th and 7th

Although the Reece Farm and Heritage Center is closed until April 15th for the winter season, the Farm and all of its buildings and exhibits will be open to the public on December 6th and 7th from 10 AM to 4 PM.

Come inside the Welcome Center, enjoy our Christmas Tree and decorations, Hot Cider, Coffee and Christmas Cookies. Browse the shelves, perhaps find some books of interest by Byron Herbert Reece or another contemporary North Georgia author.

All items in the bookstore and gift shop are on sale. A museum with many of Byron Herbert Reece's household items, photographs, newspaper articles, books, typewriter and many other items of interest is in the back of the gift shop.

Bring the whole family and enjoy the Farm Animals. If you like, bring your quarters to buy food from our vending machine and feed the donkey, sheep, goats and chickens.

There will be decorations on the beautiful and original Reece Barn. Bring your cameras and make pictures of your family in our Wooden Sleigh with Reindeer.

Experience early to mid-20th century farm life in Appalachia. Tour the barn and the Pentecost Antique Tool Shed. Spend time browsing in the barn, the corn crib, the chick-



Reece Farm and Heritage Center open coop and spring house. See inside the studio where Reece often wrote his poetry.

In the top of the barn, you will see photos of Byron Herbert Reece's family, some of his poetry framed with photos, including "There Never Was Time," "The Stay at Home" and others. His typewriter is on display, his phonograph, family photo album, favorite books, spinning wheel, and other personal and household items may be viewed.

There is a video of the life of "Hub" Reece, a farmer and writer, a native of Union County who is a nationally acclaimed poet and novelist.

Walk through the Seasons Garden where Reece's Poetry is engraved on the beautiful, large stones. Come one,

come all and enjoy the fun! If you'd like, you may bring a picnic lunch to the pavilion across the walking bridge. Sit in the swings beside Wolf Creek and enjoy the water as it rolls gently on down to the Nottely River.

The Reece Farm is located approximately 1 mile north of Vogel State Park at 8552 Gainesville Highway, Blairsville, GA.

For more information, please call The Reece Farm at 706-897-4117 on Friday or Saturday. Bring your children or grandchildren and enjoy "Christmas on the Farm." The Reece Farm is a part of the Union County Parks and Recreation Department. It is available for your education and enjoyment. [NT\(11/27/21\)CA](http://NT(11/27/21)CA)

Buchanan Christmas Lights return to Scataway Road Thanksgiving night



The Buchanan Family Lights will be on full display starting Thursday, Nov. 28, off Scataway Road in Hiawassee. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

**By Chad Stack
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer**

'Tis this season to be jolly, and nothing says jolly quite like the Buchanan Family Christmas Lights on Scataway Road in Towns County.

Every year, Robert Buchanan transforms his property into a spectacular and magical Christmas light display featuring holiday music for everyone to enjoy.

Buchanan will officially turn the lights on for visitors around 5 p.m. Thanksgiving night, on Thursday, Nov. 28, and they will run every evening from 5 p.m. to around 10:30 p.m. through Jan. 2.

The lights are free to view, though visitors are more than welcome to make a monetary donation to help Buchanan defray his electric expenses running the lights.

In continuing the now decades-old tradition, Buchanan said he always looks forward to the Christmas season.

"It's nice to know that people enjoy the lights as much as we do," Buchanan said. "We

enjoy seeing the headlights outside during this time of year."

What started out as a love for Christmas lights growing up turned into a hobby, then a passion for decorating seemingly every square inch of available space on his property with tens of thousands of lights and hundreds of individual Christmas displays.

"We have always had Christmas lights, but in the mid-'90s, it got big enough for people to come and see them," Buchanan said. "We just love Christmas lights, and it gives me something to do."

"People have gotten used to coming up here to see them, and we enjoy looking at them ourselves."

Starting the third week of September, Buchanan said he spends a couple hours a day to ensure his Christmas light display will be ready to go by Thanksgiving.

And each year, Buchanan said he tries to change things up for people. This year, he's added two more large reindeer, more Christmas trees, lights and several other displays.

Buchanan also spends two whole days decorating a single large tree in his front yard, which holds more than 20,000 lights all by itself.

"Sometimes, we may have them on a day or two before Thanksgiving, but we always have them going the night of Thanksgiving," Buchanan said. "We keep the lights on from 5 p.m. to around 10:30, 11 p.m., and we will keep them on till Jan. 2."

The Buchanans invite Santa Claus to the lights each year, welcoming him with his very own seat to visit with local children in the leadup to Christmas. Buchanan said he's still waiting to hear from Santa, so he hasn't pinned down a set of dates for the jolly old elf to visit the lights.

Many second and third generations of families from all over the area consider the Buchanan Family Christmas Lights part of their personal family tradition, and the cheerfully decorated property is a must-see for anyone who enjoys a festive holiday season.

Towns/Union Habitat for Humanity opens new ReStore in Blairsville



The Towns/Union Habitat for Humanity celebrated the grand opening of the new ReStore in Blairsville with friends, employees and customers on Monday, Nov. 18. Photo by Mark Smith

**By Mark Smith
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer**

BLAIRSVILLE—Habitat for Humanity Towns/Union Counties Inc. held the grand opening of its new ReStore on Monday, Nov. 18.

Located on Wellborn Street in front of The Skillet Cafe in what used to be a surplus parking area, the Blairsville ReStore has been dedicated and named in memory of Elizabeth Lashley, whose efforts brought the first ReStore at Young Harris into existence almost 25 years ago.

Lashley was a founding member of Towns/Union Habitat, and she passed away at her Young Harris home at the age of 94 in March 2018.

The new building's close proximity to the Castoff Pet Rescue and the Humane Society Mountain Shelter thrift stores will allow all three ventures to coordinate donations.

Local Habitat Executive Director Bryan Thomas said the plans are for the three thrift stores to work together, as each specializes in its own kinds of merchandise. The trio have even dubbed themselves collectively as "Vintage Village."

"We want to make this a destination for people to come to," Thomas said. "We're looking forward to growing this."

According to Thomas, Habitat found out it would be needing to build a new reuse store after the Georgia Department of Transportation approached the nonprofit about

three years ago.

GDOT has been planning to expand and relocate Georgia 515 between Blairsville and Young Harris for several years now, and the state agency informed Habitat that it would require much of the property being used by the former ReStore near the Towns/Union county line.

"They offered us a fair price, and we actually sold it to them last December," Thomas said. "This (new location) kind of came up out of nowhere, being able to do a long-term ground lease in this parking lot and build a building here."

Habitat Board Member Linda Lawrence said The Skillet Cafe owners, Karen and Cody Brendle, are also the owners of the property the new ReStore sits on, and they granted a 50-year lease to Habitat for Humanity Towns/Union Counties Inc. for constructing the building.

"We figure that there will be enough sales out of here within three years to let us build three houses a year," Thomas said, adding that two would be built by Habitat volunteers and one by the high school. "We're starting a partnership with the high school. They're putting in a Career Academy, so we are part of that."

"They're actually going to build a house a year on campus, and we're going to put it on wheels and tow it to a piece of property and jack it up and build a foundation under it. It's not a mobile home or a modular, it's a site-built house —

we just tow it down the road."

The Nov. 18 Grand Opening Ceremony and ribbon cutting was attended by Thomas, Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris, Hiawassee Mayor Liz Ordiales, Union County Tax Commissioner Lee Knight and officials from both the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce and the Lake Chatuge Chamber of Towns County.

Most of the Habitat for Humanity Board of Directors and all of the new employees were on hand as well, with hot dogs and warm chili being served to attendees.

Patrick Construction Inc. owner Solomon Patrick was also on hand for the ceremony. Patrick Construction is instrumental in helping Habitat build houses.

"We agreed to take this on, and we did it, start to finish, in 82 days," Patrick said, speaking on the new ReStore.

Since 1995, Habitat for Humanity has built 19 homes in Towns and Union counties and is on track to complete the 20th home in December, this one in Towns County.

"Habitat for Humanity International is a nonprofit Christian organization that partners with future and current homeowners to build safe, decent, and affordable homes for working families," according to townsunionhabitat.org. "The affiliate, volunteers and future homeowners work together through the home ownership process."

Correction to Nov. 20, 2019, article information

An article published in the Nov. 20 edition of the Towns County Herald incorrectly stated that the Georgia Department of Transportation had located 45 Native American artifacts that stand to be affected by

the upcoming construction of a Young Harris bypass along SR 515.

The article should have read that GDOT had located 45 individual sites, not artifacts. "To date, the GDOT

Survey Team has located hundreds of artifacts at those sites, with more likely to be discovered as GDOT performs mitigation and data recovery at the affected locations," local historian Bruce Roberts said.