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Captain Jack uproots Christmas tree tradition

Cut-your-own tree farm near Ankeny enters its final season

By JOANNE BOECKMAN By JOANNE BOECKMAN REGISTER STAFF WRITER

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It's last call at Captain Jack's Christmas Tree Farm near Ankeny.

The tree farm will open for the season Nov. 18. When it closes Dec. 17, owner Bill Dennis, 65, is retiring from the Christmas tree business, but not from two other unrelated ventures.

"This is the last year" for tree sales, Dennis said.

Captain Jack's Christmas Tree Farm has a crop of more than 10,000 Scotch pine, white pine and blue spruce trees, most in the 6- to 10-foot-tall range, but some as tall as 20 feet.

It's a cut-your-own venture, but help is available for those who can't.

In past years, Dennis had reindeer to entertain visitors and he imported Fraser fir trees from the north. Neither will be making an appearance this year. The reindeer died earlier this year and Dennis said he won't have Frasers.

"A lot of people enjoyed going out there and seeing the reindeer and buying the trees," said Julie Stinard of Ankeny. "It's kind of sad."

There will be hayrides for customers who come out on weekends, though, and popcorn as usual, Dennis said.

"We popped 500 pounds of popcorn last year," he said.

Dennis started his cut-your-own tree farm in 1984 when he bought 40 acres and planted 1,500 seedlings.

"The deer ate about 500 of them and we had to replant," he said.

Last year he sold about 2,500 trees and the farm had about 10,000 to 15,000 visitors. That's down from previous years when as many as 35,000 people visited the farm, Dennis said.

Dennis' wife, Rhonda, runs a gift shop of winter and

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Captain Jack's Christmas Tree Farm

ADDRESS: 2866 N.W. 82nd Ave., Ankeny

PHONE: (515) 964-8500

TYPES OF TREES: Scotch Pine, up to 14-15 foot; White Pine, up to 15 foot; and Blue Spruce, up to 15 foot.

HOURS: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily, Saturday through Dec. 17

ON THE WEB: www.iowa christmastree.com

IOWA CHRISTMAS TREE GROWERS: www.iowa christmastrees.com

Christmas items during farm hours of operation.

Dennis decided last year that 2006 would be his last, and he negotiated the sale of 13 acres of the 51 he owns, to be finalized after he closes the retail operation. He said he will retain ownership of the buildings and house on his property, and he is considering selling trees wholesale next year.

Dennis became known as Captain Jack when he was hired by WHO radio, and later WHO-TV and KLYF radio to do traffic reports under the name. Before that he was a pilot with commercial airplane and commercial helicopter licenses.

While he was up reporting on traffic, Dennis also launched an aerial photography business and Captain Jack Communications, a 12-year-old Internet and Web development business in Ankeny.

Des Moines area residents have other options for locally grown Christmas trees, said Gary Harman, president of the Iowa Christmas Tree Growers Association and owner of Walnut Ridge Farms in Indianola. There are approximately 100 members in the association, he said, with 34 in central Iowa.

"There are probably another 50 or 60 (in the state) that sell Christmas trees - but probably don't sell many - who aren't members," Harman said. "Membership is voluntary."

As for the reindeer, Kidman Tree Farm in Polk City has two, Mistletoe and Jingles.

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