

# Making a List

These caring Pumpkintown residents make holiday wishes come true.

Many letters come addressed simply "Country Santa, SC."

The post office delivers these wishes and hopes to Pumpkintown in the northwest corner of the Palmetto State, a tiny community with a large helping of Christmas spirit.

## Santa's Helpers

Early December finds the Country Santa workshop in high gear, with a swarm of "elves" plucking puzzles and radios and stuffed animals from shelves as fast as they can.

Middle school teacher Nelle Cox (aka Mrs. Santa) forages in a stack of children's wallets and, to her delight, discovers one with a monogrammed B. "This is for a student I taught last year," she says. "I believe this was meant for him." With the boy's dad in prison and his mom out of work, "Whatever that child gets for Christmas is in this bag," she says.

Six-year-old Cameron Brooks works with his 8-year-old sister, Carli, and their grandmother Joyce Gray. "You know what a 10-year-old boy

wants, right?" Joyce asks. As Cameron and Carli go off to plunder a stack of toy cars, Joyce confides, "We told them Santa needed help this year."

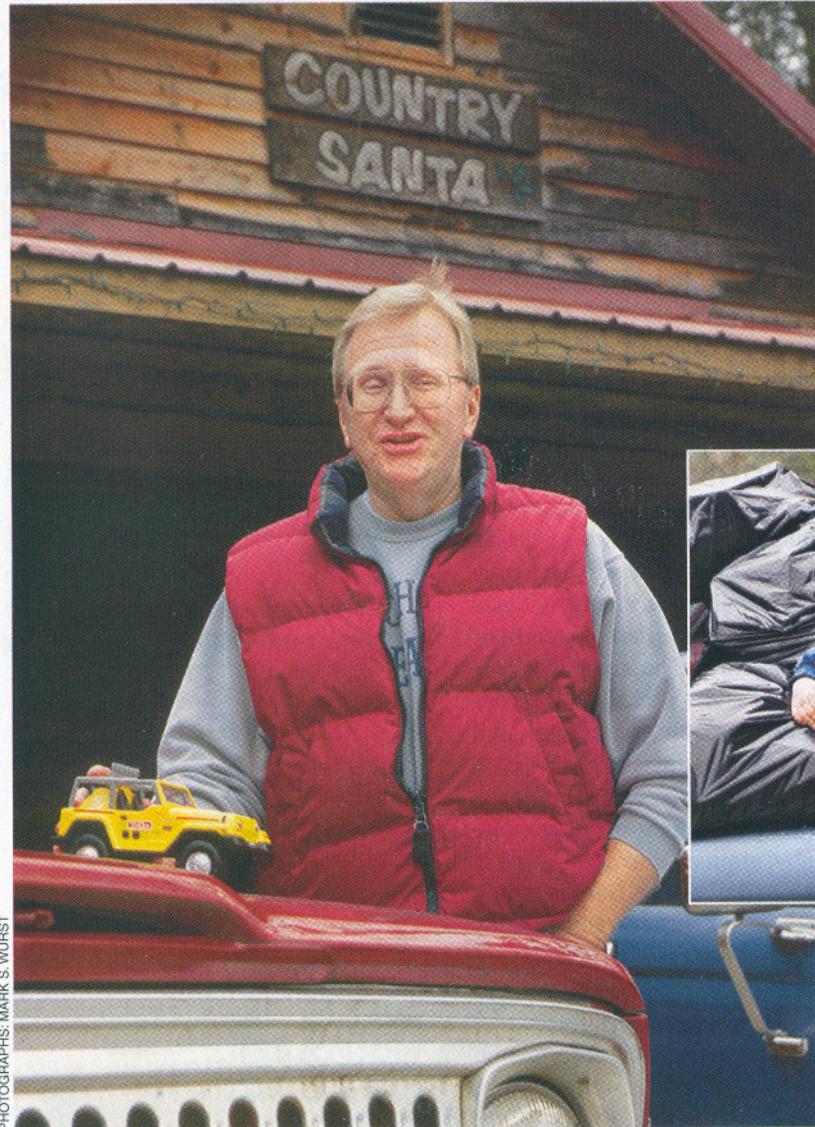
## A Helping Heart

With his lanky frame and slow-talking ways, John "Buddy" Cox hardly looks like Santa. Yet he mans the workshop command post, dispensing profile sheets for about 2,000 children. By Christmas Eve, his elves sort and pack \$140,000 worth of new and barely used toys and other items to distribute to needy families in Pickens, Oconee, Greenville, Anderson, and Spartanburg counties.

"Organized chaos, that's what this is," Buddy says. The accompanying grin belongs to a man who shuts

**"It wouldn't be Christmas for us if we didn't help Country Santa."**

*Deanna Spalding Hardin*



**left:** Country Santa Buddy Cox brings toys and holiday cheer to needy children. **above:** Joshua Hardin of Easley helps load a truck with Country Santa's gift bags, which deliver just as much joy as the red velvet sort.

PHOTOGRAPHS: MARK S. WUIRST

down his own business from Thanksgiving until Christmas year after year to devote a month of bone-crunching work to the holiday spirit.

Buddy's heart was first touched when a teacher told him about Mary Ann, a withdrawn first-grader so poor she didn't have decent shoes. After Christmas, she brought a tattered doll to school when her classmates were showing off their brand-new toys. Recalling his own tough childhood, Buddy says, "That just got me."

So Buddy brought Mary Ann the prettiest doll he could find. The teacher later reported dramatic improvement in the child's outlook.

It's hard to keep a good deed quiet in a small town, so word of Buddy's generosity spread. Teachers, ministers, and friends called about others in need. Of course, Buddy couldn't say no.

"Buddy helps many families that are overlooked by government agencies," explains longtime elf Tandy Collier. "Some get no assistance at all, and

Tim Scully mans the air pump to inflate all the balls that bounce out of the workshop in Pumpkintown.



they're in dire circumstances."

In the 28 years since Buddy turned Country Santa, he has delivered nearly 30,000 huge bags of happiness.

### **Comfort and Joy**

The annual project brings out the best in people. Cub Scouts fill goody bags alongside senior citizens. Preschoolers empty their piggy banks. Teens haul toys from drop sites. Business owners write checks so that some bags can hold coupons for groceries as well as toys.

Chief elf Bob Spalding recalls one early experience working with Buddy: "My daughter, Deanna, who was a sophomore in high school, looked at me with tears in her eyes and said, 'You know, Daddy, this is what Christmas is all about.'" Deanna Spalding Hardin now includes her own children in the elf tradition. "It wouldn't be Christmas for us if we didn't help Country Santa," she says.

Every Christmas Eve morning, vehicles inch down Buddy's drive to collect bags tagged for needy children. Hundreds of helpers fan out to make deliveries. This goes on until evening,

Working with a profile sheet, Nelle Cox combs stacks of toys for items that a child might like. Each receives about \$50 worth of gifts.



# "You know, Daddy, this is what Christmas is all about."

Deanna Spalding Hardin

when Buddy hops in his red sleigh, er, pickup to scour neighborhoods for homes that might have been overlooked.

## Making Miracles

Tandy Collier remembers one special moment that made an impact on her. She had two families to go and one scooter that was intended for the children in the next-to-the-last house. As luck (or some higher power) would have it, the kids at that house had already received new bikes, so Tandy moved on to the last family.

At the last home, Tandy met a woman whose husband had recently abandoned her and left her flat broke. "All my little boy wants is a scooter," the woman cried. When she looked in Tandy's truck and saw the blue scooter, she was speechless.

Another year, Tandy came to a stop on her long route where she expected to find children younger than 8 years old. To her surprise, however, two teenage girls came out to greet her. When Tandy explained that she'd brought gifts only for the younger children, one of the girls turned away with tears of disappointment. But the second girl said simply, "It's more important for the little ones. Thank you for bringing them Christmas."

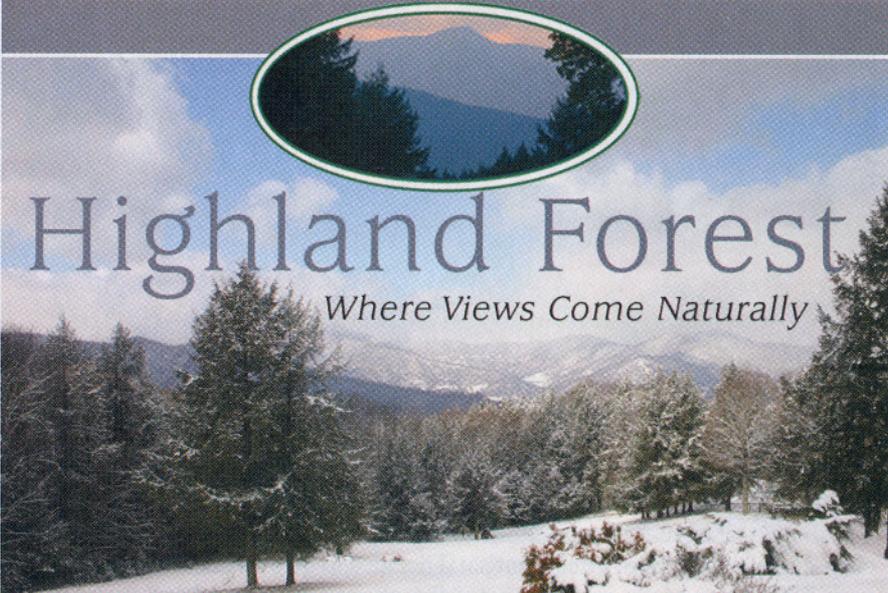
Touched to her core, Tandy drove more than an hour back to Country Santa's workshop, where Buddy keeps a little extra for just such situations. She set off again with gifts for the teens, including two big teddy bears. An hour later, the first girl happily tore into the bag to see what she had, but the second girl just hugged her bear and knew for

sure that somebody cared.

NANCY HENDERSON WURST

To learn more about Country Santa, visit [www.countrysanta.org](http://www.countrysanta.org), or call (864) 898-4422.

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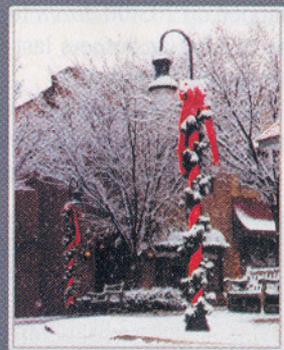
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