

THE ASHEVILLE CITIZEN

Dedicated to the Upbuilding of Western North Carolina

44 Pages

Friday, Dec. 7, 1990

25c

Symbol Of Friendship Planted At Ex-POW Camp

By **CLYDE OSBORNE**
Staff Writer

One Western North Carolina Fraser fir will never become a Christmas tree. It has been planted in Poland where Fraser firs are uncommon.

John Creech of Hendersonville, the former director of the National Arboretum in Washington, recently planted the Fraser fir on the site of his two-year war imprisonment by the Germans in Szubin, Poland.

One of a large number of U.S. Army officers captured by the Germans after being shot down, Creech contributed greatly to the survival of the war prisoners by providing food. A horticulturist, his job at the camp was to operate a garden project and provide much-needed vegetables to sustain the meager German prison ration.

Praised for saving a number of American lives, Creech was decorated by the U.S. Army.

The former prisoners of war have been meeting annually and this year they decided to go back to the site of their imprisonment.

Creech, wanting to leave something from his current life behind, talked with Lonnie Israel of Jesse Israel and Sons Nursery in Asheville and asked him to find a Fraser fir which he could take with him to Poland.

Grower Dale Hawkins provided the tree. The tree was wrapped by Creech and Israel so that it could travel safely. Tree, soil and burlap weighed 30 pounds, Creech recalls.

In the meantime, the horticulturist cleared the entrance of the tree into Poland with the Polish embassy in Washington and arranged with U.S. Air for the tree to be given special handling.

The tree ended up traveling in the front of the plane from Asheville to Kennedy Airport in New York.

And for additional assurance, six small Fraser fir seedlings had been added to the shipment by Henderson County Extension

Agent Glenn Davis — just in case the larger tree died.

"Perhaps the greatest excitement in taking the tree to Poland was moving it from the U.S. Air terminal to the S.A.S. terminal several buildings away at Kennedy Airport," Creech said.

"It was as if people had never seen a tree, particularly in an airport. Children touched it commenting, 'Oh, look, a Christmas tree.'"

Finally Creech put a sign on the tree explaining its purpose and that, he said, only created more interest.

The tree received special treatment on its journey across the Atlantic in the first class compartment of the plane.

"Take a tree with you if you want attention," Creech says.

The group of ex-P.O.W.s, 20 of them made the trip, were wined and dined by Polish and American embassy officials in Warsaw and then went by bus to the site of the German prisons. Speeches and wreath laying and the planting of the Fraser fir from WNC highlighted the program.

"The Fraser fir was planted with great dignity and awareness that here was a symbol of friendship and a lasting memorial to the presence of so many young Americans held by the Germans deep inside Poland," Creech said.

A plaque inscribed with information about the Fraser fir was placed on a stone behind the tree. Two of the seedlings were planted nearby and others went to a reserve planting area, he said.

Then Creech said, "the now-old men walked down the cobblestone road where they had been forced to walk by the Germans and toured the Szubin war memorial museum where some of the letters found after the war were on display."

Following the visit to the prison, the ex-POWs toured Leningrad, Helsinki, Stockholm and Norway.



Symbol Of Friendship

John Creech of Hendersonville speaks to a group of ex-POWs in Poland after planting Fraser fir from Western North Carolina. The Mayor of Szubin, Poland holds the plaque which was placed on a stone behind the tree.



CLYDE OSBORNE