

Clinton signs controversial Brady Bill

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — As James Brady turned in his wheelchair to watch, President Clinton signed into law the most sweeping handgun control bill in a quarter century Tuesday. "Americans are finally fed up with violence," the president declared.

Cheers and applause erupted in the East Room as Clinton signed the long-fought bill before an audience of law enforcement officials, mayors, governors, members of Congress, and families who have lost relatives to gun violence.

The new law will require a five-day waiting period and background check on handgun buyers when it takes effect in 90 days. It was named for Brady, the White House press secretary who was gravely wounded and left disabled in the 1981 assassination attempt against then-President Reagan.

Reading slowly from notes as his wife, Sarah, held a microphone for him, Brady called the ceremony "the end of unchecked madness and the commencement of a heartfelt crusade for a safer and saner country."

It was the first major gun bill since 1968 when Congress banned mail-order purchases of rifles, shotguns, handguns and ammunition and curbed out-of-state buying of those firearms.

Clinton said the Brady bill finally passed "because grassroots America changed its mind and demanded that this Congress not leave here without doing something about this. And all the rest of us, even Jim and Sarah, did was to somehow light that spark that swept across the people of this country and proved once again that democracy can work."

"America won this battle," the president said. "Americans are finally fed up with violence that cuts down another citizen with gunfire every 20 minutes."

A major anti-crime bill is expected to be high on the agenda for Clinton and Congress next year. It's a politically popular issue, since polls show that violence-weary Americans say crime is their top fear.

Clinton said that opponents have successfully portrayed gun restrictions as an impingement on the American culture of hunting and fishing.

"We have taken this important part of the life of millions of Americans and turned it into an instrument of maintaining madness," the president said.

"It is crazy," Clinton said. "Would I let anybody change that life in America? Not on your life. Has that got anything to do with the Brady bill or assault weapons or whether the police have to go out on the street confronting teen-agers who are better armed than they are? Of course not."

He said that signing the Brady bill was "step one in taking our streets back, taking our children back, reclaiming our families and our future."

Critics contend the Brady bill will have a limited effect because criminals will simply buy their weapons in illicit markets.

Texas Christmas tree industry booming after start with A&M

The Associated Press

DALLAS — The Texas Christmas tree industry has grown up.

Take Glen Gray, for example. Gray and his wife, Bitsy, began planting Virginia pine trees in Van Zandt County 13 years ago, when the Christmas tree industry was getting a push start from Texas A&M University's Agricultural Research and Extension Service. Their St. Nick's Picks farm now has about 30,000 trees and a little something for every visiting family member.

"We've got a team of horses, hayrides, an arts and crafts tent that's got hot dogs, barbecue and other goodies, and Santa Claus," said Gray, 65. "I don't know what else they'd want."

Texans haven't always been so lucky.

The Christmas tree industry in Texas began in 1972 with one tree farm in Smith County and another one in Orange County, and with a team of A&M researchers hoping that the tiny Virginia pine seedlings would take root.

Twenty years later, Gov. Ann Richards proclaimed December as Texas-Grown Christmas Tree month to honor an industry that had grown to 448 farms in 103 counties with a statewide economic impact of \$17 million.

Texas growers now produce West Texas pine, cedar, South Texas pine, Arizona cypress, and even Virginia pine.

Lanny Dreesen, marketing coordinator for the Texas Christmas Tree Growers Association, said he joined A&M's extension service as a forester in 1976 and saw the industry peak during the 1980s.

"Soon the news got out that we could grow trees in Texas," Dreesen said. "We had our best increase in 1989, with peak membership at 480 members."

"It's stabilizing now with members that are more serious about farming," he said.

The tree growers' association works with the Texas A&M Agricultural Extension Service and the Texas Agriculture Department to provide its membership with information about advanced growing and marketing techniques and the best pesticides and farming equipment to buy.

The association now has 317 members which include suppliers and growers and 300,000 to 400,000 Christmas trees for sale this year, Dreesen said.

The membership fee is \$40 a year, and \$15 to be listed in the growers brochure published in No-

ember for Christmas sales.

Dreesen said the growers in this industry are rather unique: The more experienced growers are willing to share with the inexperienced ones.

One pair of experienced growers in Montgomery County ask growers to remember the "mom and pop" stops that gave the industry its sweetest beginnings.

"The best thing for the mom and pop farm is to stay small, the smaller the better. When the farms get so large, it gets to be like a large theme park," Fred Whiteside, 74, said. "If you could keep the size down, the customers could enjoy themselves."

Whiteside and his wife, Catherine, owned Whiteside's Christmas Tree Farm before leaving the business last year. They said theirs was one of the first farms to start planting. They began operation in 1978.

Whiteside said the tree industry is not a get-rich-quick venture.

He said some people get "dollar signs in their eyes, and think they can put a seed in the ground, come back at Christmas time and cut it off and decorate it."

The Whitesides said they sold the tree farm because the work was more than they could physically handle.

Mrs. Whiteside, 70, said that the industry has gotten to be very commercial. "We were building on family tradition, and we had a wonderful time doing it," she said. "Some of the farms are so big and so busy we didn't want to be that way."

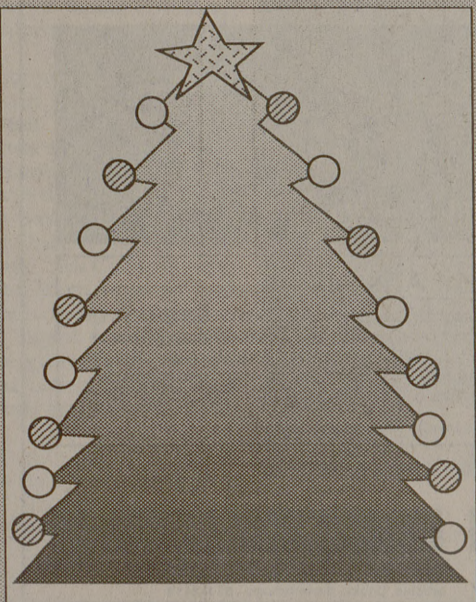
However, Dreesen said the farms have become more commercialized as a matter of practicality.

"Hayrides are necessary to get the customers to the fields and back," he said, adding, "If they can get the experience then it's a lot more fun, so they get a double benefit."

Besides hayrides, many farms now offer one or more of the following attractions: petting zoos, gift shops, picnic and playground areas, bonfires, nature trails, snack bars, free drinks and cookies, horseback riding, mule-drawn wagons, music, face painting, craft fair, photo sittings with Santa Claus and bed and breakfast.

Janet and Richard Johnson, owners of the Cypress Spring Tree & Berry Farm, 36 acres in Franklin County, also sell strawberries, blueberries and blackberries in season, as well as Christmas trees. The farm has a log cabin, and a team of horses and a wagon to carry customers to the tree fields.

"On weekends we've got a bonfire going every night," Mrs. Johnson said. "It's a family affair."



Angel Kan/THE BATTALION

Shuttle mission to include 5 spacewalks in attempt to repair Hubble telescope

The Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — Feel free to put in your 2 cents worth once spacewalking astronauts start trying to fix the Hubble Space Telescope.

That's what it costs each American citizen each week in taxes to operate and maintain the billion-dollar-plus observatory, which has bad eyesight, bad memory and a bad case of the jitters.

Space shuttle Endeavour was due to blast off before dawn Wednesday on the multimillion-dollar mission, considered the most complex shuttle flight and biggest repair job in space ever.

Bad weather threatened to delay the flight.

Forecasters gave only a 30 per-

cent chance of favorable conditions for the scheduled 4:57 a.m. EST launch.

The telescope's future lies in eight gloved hands — four spacewalkers who will go out in pairs to install corrective lenses, a new wide-field planetary camera, new solar panels, new gyroscopes, new computer and more.

A record five spacewalks are planned during the 11-day flight, and three more are possible if problems arise with either Hubble or the shuttle.

The tab for the mission is \$629 million: \$251 million for Hubble parts, ground operations and related activities and \$378 million for the shuttle trip.

While just about everybody has criticized NASA for launching Hubble with an improperly

ground mirror, few have complained about the basic premise of studying the universe above Earth's distorting atmosphere.

Nonetheless, some scientists have complained that ground observatories could do the job almost as well.

David Leckrone, Hubble's senior project scientist, said he doesn't think American taxpayers have gotten their money's worth out of Hubble — yet.

The telescope has been in orbit 31/2 years and has 111/2 years of work remaining.

Once Hubble's vision is restored and the telescope can peer back 14 billion light-years with clarity instead of 4 billion light-years, Americans will be "getting a bargain for the money invested," Leckrone said.

DECEMBER GRADS

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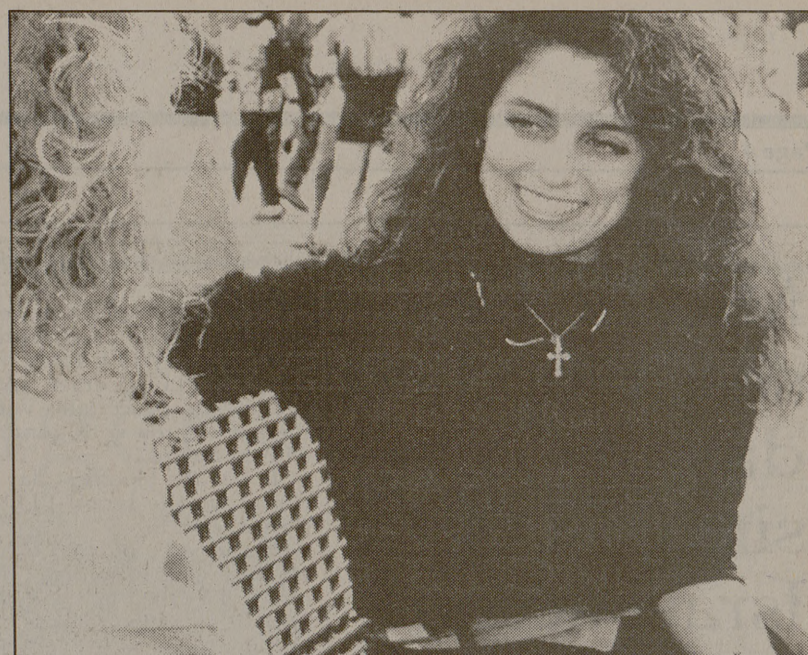
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