

300 Years of Triple Tree



Three-Hundred Years of Triple Tree

By Mike Jones

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A few years ago, I studied history at a fine Eastern liberal arts college. To the best of my dim recollections, my professors were dour, round, wrinkled, and grey. Smart people, to be sure, but nothing to turn a young man's fancy.

Enter, stage left, Dr. Courtney Tollison Hartness. Dr. Hartness is a professor of history at Furman University. She certainly is smart, but she also is youthful, stylish and engaging, completely unlike the history professors I knew. She was the principle speaker at my first Triple Tree seminar, dealing with the murky history of "upstate" South Carolina.

Today Woodruff, South Carolina combines a small-town coziness with easy access to sophisticated lifestyles and events in near-by urban centers. But it hasn't always been that way. Before the American Revolution, western South Carolina was the wild frontier. The region was mostly unsettled and to a great degree unexplored.



In the 1750s one intrepid soul, a certain Benjamin Kilgore, moved from Pennsylvania and settled near what is now Woodruff. It's hard to imagine how difficult and primitive these times were, but one measure of the challenges might be that Kilgore's wife was scalped by local Indians and died of her wounds. Nonetheless, Kilgore persevered and began to farm. Eventually, for reasons no longer clear, a huge expanse of land was granted to him by the British King.

Land-rich but cash-poor, the Kilgore family prospered. Kilgore's grandson, Dr. Benjamin Franklin Kilgore, became a prominent local leader. He was a state legislator and served as a leading member of the South Carolina Secession Convention which precipitated the Civil War. Eventually, he served as a surgeon in the Confederate Army and may have been the personal physician of Gen. Robert E. Lee. After the war, both Woodruff and the Kilgore family settled into a century of modest prosperity surrounded by desperate rural poverty. Today the Kilgore family name survives on streets, tombstones and place names.

Which brings this tale, fast forward, to 1973. A successful businessman and G.A. pilot named Pat Hartness was passionate about model airplanes. He arranged the first “Big Bird Fly-in” at an eponymously-named air field near Greenville, SC. Unexpectedly, 5,000 people arrived and pretty much overwhelmed everybody and everything. After a few more years the neighbors had suffered enough and Hartness needed a new venue. It should be large enough for his planes and remote enough the neighbors could not complain. He found the semi-abandoned Kilgore farmlands in Woodruff and bought 440 acres in the 1990s. Early on, Mrs. Hartness noticed three enormous live oaks near the entrance to the farm and suggested the facility be named “Triple Tree.”

Most of the land was forested. Hartness and an army of volunteers cleared the land to create space for radio-controlled flying. The runway grew longer and wider every year. They laid out hiking trails, roads and campgrounds. They poured 200,000 cubic yards of dirt and concrete to dam a river creating a mile-long lake large enough for floatplanes. They designed and built a custom 38-



foot wide lawn mower to groom the burgeoning property efficiently. In 2006 they launched their first fly-in for full-scale airplanes.

As the fly-in grew in popularity, it became clear the uncontrolled but busy airspace presented a safety hazard. Hartness found a World War II control tower for sale at the Greenville Army Air Base. Hartness won ownership of the derelict with a bid of \$101. That sounds like a great deal until he confesses it cost \$80,000 to disassemble, relocate, restore and rebuilt it. Today it serves as the centerpiece of the Triple Tree aerodrome facility, usually surrounded by museum-quality WWII Army vehicles.

Eventually a corporate structure, a 501c3 not-for-profit foundation, was built to financially and legally support the physical infrastructure. Building, expanding and clearing continued. Bathhouses were installed and then expanded. A series of large hangars were built for maintenance and educational purposes; Hartness donated his elegant 80-year old Spartan Executive to serve as the keystone of the historic airplanes on display.

The Bermuda-grass runway is as smooth as a putting green and now is fully irrigated; it takes a quarter million gallons to operate one complete cycle of the irrigation system. Drainage was improved, making the full length of the 7,000 foot runway usable even after heavy rains. In 2019 new campgrounds were added as woodlands were cleared all the way to a river and beach.

Today the Triple Tree Fly-in hosts 5,000 visitors annually with between 500 and 800 airplanes flying to the event. In 2018, there were visitors from 38 states and five countries. Amazingly, the facility operates with only two full-time employees: Robb Williams is the executive manager and Matt Crane is the facility manager. Everybody else — including the leonine Pat Hartness, who still roams the terrain dreaming of improvements — is a volunteer.

About the Author

Mike Jones is a 3,000 hour commercial-rated pilot who enjoys camping next to his 1979 Cessna Centurion at airshows. His tent was destroyed at Oshkosh this year but he brought a new, stronger tent to Triple Tree only to not need it. Look for Jonesy at airshows and fly-ins across the country in 2020. He's always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

