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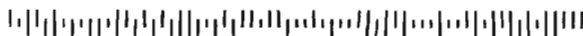
## MAKING MAGIC: THE STORY OF TRAINS, PLANES AND THE BAUTISTAS

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JUN/JUL 2014  
VOLUME 11  
NUMBER 4





## MAKING MAGIC: THE STORY OF TRAINS, PLANES AND THE BAUTISTAS

words by Summer Lane • images by Frankie Leal

team trains are magical. Since 1992, the Bautistas have been spreading that magic to Reedley residents and beyond with the Hillcrest and Wahtoke Railroad. The Christmas Tree Farm on South Reed Avenue is a hallmark of Reedley's fall and winter seasons. Few Reedley residents are unfamiliar with the miniature steam locomotives that grace the Bautista's Christmas tree farm and pumpkin patch. Thousands of adults and children alike have enjoyed the farm over the years, and as the last Christmas tree farm in three counties, it has truly become the most unique hidden treasure of the San Joaquin Valley.

The story of the Hillcrest and Wahtoke Railroad begins with Sean Bautista. Sean spent the early days of his childhood as an Air Force brat. His father was stationed at Castle Air Force Base before his family moved to Atwater, California. He attended Modesto High School, then Fresno State, where he majored in theater. Interestingly enough, it was the skies that called to Sean. At the age of sixteen, he worked as a busboy and a waiter to pay for flying lessons. By seventeen, he was a licensed pilot – studying theater at Fresno State was no longer part of the picture. "I felt like God was leading me in that direction," Sean says. His dream was to fly fighter jets, and to achieve that dream, he joined the Air National Guard in Fresno. "I was motivated," Sean tells me. "There was an age deadline. Twenty-seven and a half. I was twenty-four."



It took a few years to complete the program, but he made it before the deadline. He piloted everything from F-16s to F-4 Phantoms. Along with his wife, Melissa, the Air National Guard sent them to Texas, New Mexico, Oregon, Florida – and then back to California. As fate would have it, Reedley is where the magic of the railroad would be born.

Hillcrest Farms – which was originally owned by Ed and Bonnie Toews – had always impressed Sean. The farm “did not look like the valley. It looked like the mountains,” he says. One day, the property went up for sale. “I made the mistake of talking to the owner,” Sean laughs. “We bought the farm, sold our place in Fresno. My wife said, ‘Why don’t we try it? You be the mechanic, I’ll be the farmer.’ We jumped into something that had so much history.” It was Sean and Melissa who came up with the idea of using a train to transport customers to the Christmas trees and back

to the parking lot. “We put a small train on it [the property] to connect the upper and lower parts of the farm,” Sean explains. The farm became a novelty – a hotspot. The Christmas season exploded, and people from far and wide began visiting Hillcrest to ride the train and find the perfect Christmas tree for the holiday season.

Sean’s background in aviation and mechanics brought valuable skills to the table when Hillcrest first opened. Over the years, they have become one of the premier railroad mechanics in the nation, leaders of innovation in the railroad business. To date, they open for three seasons: October for pumpkins, Thanksgiving to Christmas for trees, and during the Blossom Trail in March – one of their newer seasons. “We just run the train; it’s a beautiful time of year,” Sean says. “The blossoms are out. We get a lot of out of county and out-of-country traffic.”





For Hillcrest Farms, the railroad was a pathway to even bigger dreams. Disney has always had a deep interest in steam trains. While visiting Hillcrest, Sean asked some of the Disney executives when they would be making a movie about trains. There were no immediate plans, they said, but after learning about Sean's background in aviation, they employed him as a technical engineering consultant on the Disney smash hit feature film *Planes*. Sean helped fine-tune the technical elements of the lead character, Dusty, in addition to the other characters in the film, making trips to Disney Toon Studios to check out animation reels and storyboards. "They called me in for all kinds of things," Sean says. "From fixing the [technical] dialogue to the air traffic controllers to the techy stuff like how could they change his engine to make him better?" It was an essential element of moviemaking that Sean was happy and excited to help provide. "Several of the aircraft sounds were actually recorded

in Reedley," Sean reveals. "The character Bulldog and Leadbottom; they were both Reedley aircraft. Dusty was from Chowchilla." Even in Hollywood, all roads lead back to the central valley.

In fact, the character of Mater, from the global Pixar hit film *Cars* in 2006, was inspired by a vehicle on the Bautista's farm. While visiting Hillcrest to see the steam trains, Disney executives came across a truck that would become the template for Mater's design. "There was a 1958 Chevy one-ton truck with a tree growing through it," Sean grins. "They took pictures of the truck and the rust." So, in a sense, Mater was actually born at Hillcrest, and it's fitting. So many magical things are born there.

For the Bautistas, the sacrifice and hard work over the years has been more than worth it. At the beginning, Sean says, "It was challenging. You pay ►►



Sean Bautista at the Reedley Airport with his air craft, a Riley TurboStream.





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out all year long, hoping people will buy trees. It really started to come into its own with Melissa's development of the pumpkin patch. It helped separate us from the other Christmas tree farms." A typical day for the Bautistas starts at five in the morning, and work begins at seven. "Melissa runs the farm side of it," Sean explains, "and I run the mechanical side of it." The Bautistas also serve as a railroad repair shop. They have worked in the Disneyland roundhouse on Disneyland steam engines. Most recently, Sean helped restore the Lily Belle for the Walt Disney Family Museum in San Francisco – Walt Disney's original backyard miniature steam engine. When it comes to trains, the Bautistas are definitely at the top of their game – the best of the best.



A Disney steam engine train rolls through downtown Reedley after getting a tune-up at Hillcrest Farms.

Hillcrest will open this year on the first weekend of October for the pumpkin patch season. Guests can enjoy rides on the steam train, walks through the forest, yummy sweets and treats and a vast array of pumpkins to choose from. It's a family event that reminds Reedley residents that fall has arrived, and with it, the railroad. In December, visitors will attend the Hillcrest Pajama Night, which allows guests to ride the steam train in the Christmas tree fields amidst the twinkling Christmas lights. "It's so serene and beautiful, the chill in the fall air. Just magical," Sean says. "We've got live music, a hot chocolate bar. We try to add more magic, if we can."

The story of Hillcrest is really a story of two people working hard, achieving their dream, and sharing that dream with the world. The Hillcrest and Wahtoke Railroad is one of the crowning gems of the nation, preserving the imagination of children and adults with steam trains, Christmas trees and thirty acres of gorgeous farmland. As a Disney executive told Sean, "If you love what you do, you'll never work a day in your life." For the Bautistas, this is not just an idea. It's a way of life.

Sean and Melissa Bautista may be reached at 559-638-2762 or on their website, [hillcrestreedley.com](http://hillcrestreedley.com)