

Almond trees and old soldier survive killer frost...to bear basket of nuts and memories



Major Robert H. Davis, ret. Photo by Ed Correy

In the evening when stillness descends on the front porch at the home of Major Robert Davis, you can hear the ripe fruit hit the ground in the orchard next to his house.

Davis, since he retired from the Army in 1958, has been living on his Hungarytown Road farm raising beef and studying his favorite subject, trees—especially those fruit and nut trees that survive the odds and beat the killer frost.

“Let me show you the almond trees,” said Katherine Davis, who had been telling people about these two trees that had miraculously escaped the freeze last January to bloom and bear nuts. This had only happened once before in the 20 years since they planted the trees.

“He (her husband) threatened to cut the trees down because they bloom so

early that the frost kills the blossom...There’s one,” she said, pointing to a nut that looked like a peach see. Almonds were hard to find in the grass and harder to crack after you gathered them. Back at the porch, Mrs. Davis had collected a basket full of them.

Major Davis had taken his seat on the porch when we got back. The afternoon light etched his years in deep nut-like grooves on his face. He had escaped the killer frost and he wanted to talk about the trees and the men he knew who hadn’t.

“When I first came here, Prior Jones was Sheriff. He had a big fig bush in front of his house, and that fig bush must have been 25-years-old. He bragged about how this fig bush had lasted while all the others had been frozen.

“But this very year that one was killed by the freeze! He thought it was old enough to survive the winter...Jones is dead now...”

Thump..thump..went the fruit falling on the orchard floor...taking Davis back to the thump of distant mortars exploding on the scorched hills of North Korea when he was guarding Chinese prisoners during the first years of the Korean War.

The terrible killer frost was on the move then, flowing over the hills like a deadly fog cutting young men down like trees before they had time to bear fruit.

“War is for young people,” Davis mused. “Young people are reckless and very aggressive. I had a jeep driver who wanted me to transfer him to a combat infantry outfit so he could make promotion points...’Yes, but you can get killed real quick,’ I warned him ‘You have a child you have not seen and you’re safe with me.’

“But he thought I was depriving him of being a hero. My biggest trouble was keeping my men in a non-combat outfit. I never did let him go.”

Another man, however, did get his wish. When Davis got back to the states, he learned that he had been killed on Heartbreak Ridge. “He had his promotion,” David said with finality. “I was trying to save their lives...Old men aren’t as anxious to get promoted.”

Davis laughed with the suggestion that some of these men might be sitting on some porch now, just like him, contemplating their fruit trees and the killer frost they had escaped.