

Byers' Choice® Ltd.

# CAROLER CHRONICLE

SUMMER 1989



Volume II, Edition 2



## JUST FOR FUN

Where can you find the Groundhog Princess of 1989? Why, in the dressing department of Byers' Choice, of course! When Jill Ott, our dressing supervisor, suggested celebrating Groundhog Day (February 2) in style this year, her idea was met with much enthusiasm.

At Byers' Choice, we always put a little bit of fun into work. This attitude is especially evident when we throw one of our "special events," be it a holiday party or a trip to a theatrical production. Each occasion helps make Byers' Choice a unique place to work, and brings us all a little closer. But just watch out when the event calls for unleashing the creative energies of dressers, feature painters, headers, and sewers.

Take, for example, our annual Halloween Party, an event important enough to be reported in local newspapers. The party begins a few days before Halloween when a truckload of pumpkins is delivered to our door step. Byers' Choice artisans magically transform them into intricate jack o'lanterns, fire breathing dragons, haunted houses, and even Cinderella carriages. On the day of the party, everyone brings their carved pumpkin to be judged, and when the costumes go on, the factory becomes a giant fun house. Last October there were mermaids, clowns, a rat, two Mr. Potatoheads, and even your favorite Caroler® Figurines. We can't wait to see what this year will bring!

But Groundhog Day and Halloween are by no means our only celebrations. Birthdays and Valentine's Day are regularly observed, and this year saw our first Chinese New Year party, complete with egg rolls and fortune cookies. Happily, almost any

*(Continued next page)*

## JOYCE REMEMBERS

Christmas in July! The Byers family spent many years celebrating just that. A long-time interest in Christmas prompted me to join with a friend to bring the Christmas customs and lore of the Pennsylvania Dutch to thousands of people from all over the world, who would visit Pennsylvania Dutch folk festivals.

We occupied a large tent. In one corner was a wood stove in which we baked gingerbread boys, rosettes and Whoopee Pies. The gingerbread smelled wonderful and put everyone into a Christmas spirit. The rosettes were festive and enjoyed by those looking for a light treat, but the favorite was the Whoopee Pies. These are an old Pennsylvania Dutch treat. The story goes that when baking chocolate cakes, a mother would pour several large spoonfuls of batter onto a cookie sheet and bake them as cookies. When cooled, she sandwiched two together with vanilla icing. The kids seeing the treats upon returning from school would scream "Whoopee!", thus the name Whoopee Pies.

Another corner of our tent displayed a tree decorated in the old style. The first recorded Christmas tree in America was in Pennsylvania in 1822 or 1823. The Germans and Dutch brought the tradition with them from Europe just as Prince Albert took the tradition to England when he married Victoria. The early trees were quite modest. Usually no more than three or four feet in height, they were placed on a table in the center of the room. We used a cedar or a juniper tree which could be found growing in many local fields. Our tree was decorated in the manner popular in the early 1800's with strings of popcorn, pretzels (for good luck), ginger cookies of all shapes (decorated with colored icings and sugars), schnitz (circles of dried apples), nuts, beeswax tapers, and small handmade toys and gifts.

We made ornaments so that visitors could take a little bit of our old-fashioned Christmas home. One of my favorite decorations was sheep recreated from those described in old Moravian writings. Clay formed the body and head of the sheep, with matchsticks dipped in black wax for legs, and real wool sewn on the body.

Our young boys—donned in calico shirts and straw hats—demonstrated how to make cookie ornaments from salt dough. Distelfinks (good luck birds) and pretzels were the most popular designs. On weekends our husbands helped sell cookies and lemon sticks.

Lemon sticks are another Pennsylvania treat. Children would break the end from their candy canes, cut a small hole in the top of a lemon or orange and insert the stick into the fruit. The soft sugar center of the stick would dissolve as the acidic juice was sucked through it, flavoring the juice with sweet peppermint. A visitor from New York told me as a child she did the same thing

*(Continued next page)*



### Just For Fun (continued)

excuse for a twist of fun is enough, and pizza parties and lunches with four-foot long hoagies are not uncommon. When an ice cream machine was installed in the cafeteria, everyone got a free sample, and, of course, girl scout cookie time means a day of taste testing.

### DID YOU KNOW?

According to the October 1988 issue of Giftware News: Carolers by Byers' Choice tied with Lenox ornaments as the fourth most important Christmas collectible.

### Joyce Remembers (continued)

using a large dill pickle instead of a lemon. Sounds rather awful to me, but she said it was delicious.

The Belsnickel is an important part of the Pennsylvania Dutch folklore. My association with the festivals prompted me to create a version of this character. (Look for the picture and history of this figure below.)

Unfortunately, as Byers' Choice grew, we were forced to give up our participation in folk festivals. The memories, however, will always remain.

I would love to hear from you about Christmas traditions which you remember, both old and new. If you have the time to write us, please do, and we will share them with our other readers.



### BELSNICKEL

On Christmas Eve in the 1700's, children of the Pennsylvania Dutch heard a rattle at the window, a knock on the door, and in would burst the Belsnickel. His face blackened with burnt cork, clothed in ragged garments and furs, he would make a tremendous racket by shaking sleigh bells and rattles and cracking his buggy whip. Frightened children would hide behind their parents as this fearsome character demanded they tell him if they had been naughty or nice. With as much commotion as possible, he scattered nuts and candies onto the floor. As the children scur-

ried to pick up the treats, he snapped his whip over their heads and commanded them to recite Bible verses. Then he was gone in a flurry to frighten the children in the next home. This was the custom brought to the New World from the Rhineland by the "Gay Dutch."

The early Episcopalians brought with them from England a tradition called Mumming. On Christmas Eve, early Mummers dressed in masks and costumes and performing skits traveled from house to house. A reward of drink, Christmas sweets and small coins was expected from each homeowner.

These customs intermingled in the new colony and by the 19th century evolved into a custom uniquely American. The Belsnickels no longer were frightening characters. Instead, they became fun-loving masqueraders who traveled in small groups from house to house spreading merriment and cheer. Towards the end of the 19th century these groups became organized, and in urban areas they actually formed parades. The masks and costumes became quite elaborate as Indians, clowns, and minstrels became popular characters. The Belsnickel costume took on the appearance of a Victorian Santa Claus. These groups would sing and play musical instruments as they walked through the streets spreading alms and good cheer.

Philadelphia, of course, is noted for its Mummers Parade held each New Year's Day. Aspects of this spectacle are reminiscent of the 18th century Christmas Eve tradition.

The Byers' Choice Old World Santa is a figure based on the 19th century Belsnickel. His clothing was similar to that of a Victorian Santa, and yet he carried the switches and bells of the 18th century character. He was called Old World Santa rather than Belsnickel because we believed this early Christmas character to be relatively unknown.

*The Belsnickel, or Old World Santa, was one of our original Santa Clauses and was retired in 1987. We hope to continue to inform you of the background behind some of our pieces in this column.*



## CAROLERS CAN NOW STROLL ALONG VICTORIAN STREET

The idea of a backdrop for the Carolers has been in existence for quite a while, but it took the work of Lloyd Garrison to bring it to life. "I think that his colors, themes, and attention to detail captures the spirit of the Carolers," says Joyce.

Lloyd Garrison, an artist from Rahway, New Jersey, has worked a great deal depicting scenes from the 18th and 19th centuries. Dicken's *A Christmas Carol* is one of his favorite subjects. He is probably best known as a professional chronicler of the American Revolutionary War and Colonial Life. He attributes his success to a number of factors: imagination, motivation, study, practice, and being able to relate the feelings of others through his work. Lloyd considers himself lucky to have been

an artist for the past 20 years. He says that he has enjoyed every moment of it.

For our backdrop, Lloyd painted a mid-19th century street scene bathed in the soft, subtle colors of dusk. Shop interiors glow from behind windows filled with toys, silver and Christmas geese. Along the lane decked in Christmas greens, holiday shoppers pause to converse and ponder the purchase of a special Christmas gift. The scene invites a group of caroling figures to stroll through it.

*Backdrops will be available this fall. Ask for them at your favorite store.*

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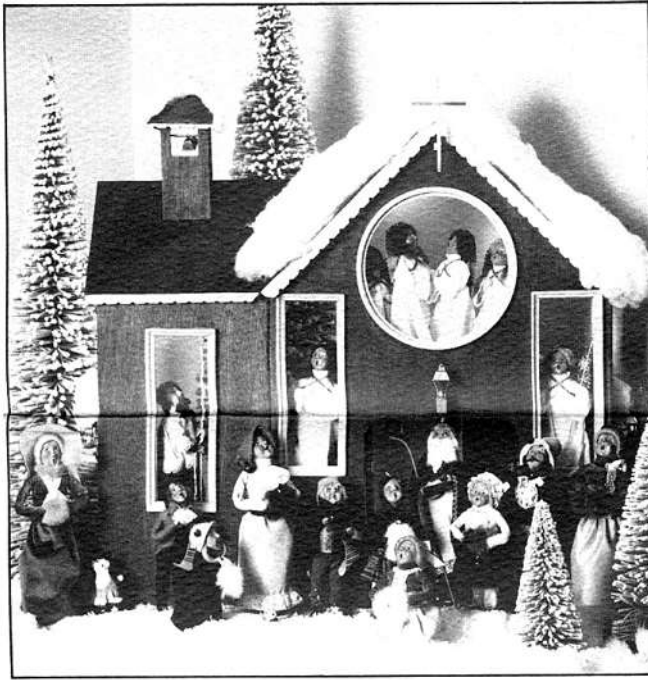
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## PENNSYLVANIA COUPLE CRAZY FOR CAROLERS



Joe Griffies felt like he had called half the Byers in Pennsylvania before he finally reached the right Bob and Joyce.

About seven years ago, Joe and his wife Colleen first spotted the Carolers in a small trinket shop. "When we first saw the Carolers, we went crazy over them—the detail and how well they

were done—and they're getting better each year," says Colleen. Already ardent Christmas collectors, the Philadelphia couple purchased their find and set out to personally congratulate the doll's creators on the excellent care and craftsmanship they saw in the product.

After nearly two years of detective work, Joe finally tracked down the small, but growing, company. Joe's phone call to Bob began a warm relationship between Bob and Joyce and two dedicated Caroler fans. When the Byers and the Griffies first met shortly after that phone call, Byers' Choice was just starting to make its gift boxes. "Bob thought it was a good idea that people could use the gift boxes as a display behind the dolls," says Joe, but the Griffies thought they might be able to come up with something even better.

They solved the display dilemma by creating wooden backgrounds for their own collection. The first simple church they built has evolved into a whole town of Caroler-sized buildings, including a three-story house complete with lights, chimney, glass windows, curtains, and a brick sidewalk.

The Griffies have also animated several characters. In the church, for example, a Caroler boy was set in motion pulling the spire bell. Other Carolers turn with the help of moving disks.

Six months of each year see the Griffies traveling to Christmas shops all over. Even on their honeymoon, one of the first things Joe did, according to Colleen, was look up Christmas stores in the phone book. "That kind of set the tone," she laughs. "It's an enjoyable hobby and something my husband and I share. Some couples play golf together and some go bowling. Well, we do Christmas."

Although they have accumulated lots of Christmas decorations during their years together, the 75 or so Carolers remain an integral part of their collection. Says Joe, the Carolers "are the most perfectly made Christmas decoration on the market."

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## MEET PATTY BARANY



At 27 years old, Patty Barany is one of the Byers' Choice "old timers." She started with the company ten years ago, while she was still in high school. Back then, the company had less than a dozen employees and was located in a small workshop. Today, as a dresser, she helps more than 80 other handcrafters bring the Carolers to life in a large, modern facility.

### How did you come to work for Byers' Choice?

A friend in one of my art classes in high school had worked at Byers' Choice, and at the time I was looking for a job. She said, "Oh, Patty, I know the perfect place for you to work!" I went for an interview and really liked it, and I've been there ever since.

### Have things changes much in the last ten years?

Well, when I first started they had a line of about ten different dolls. Now there are so many characters, it's unbelievable. I still get a shock every time I see a new design.

I also remember back in the old building the bases we made

were just awful compared to what they are now. They looked like oatmeal cookies—all lumpy and bumpy. Now they're so nice and smooth. Even the faces look nicer; in everything, the quality has gotten much better.

### You must have witnessed the increasing popularity of the Carolers. When did you start to notice that the company was growing?

The Carolers started to become popular when we were in the old building. We were starting to make more and more. We got to the point where there were bolts of fabric all over the sewing room floor, which was already small, and it started getting really crowded. It was right about then that Bob announced we were moving to a new building.

### What did everybody think when you moved to the new building?

Well, it wasn't like the old building at all. When trucks drove by the old building, all of the Carolers rattled on the shelves. The new building was much larger. We thought, "Wow, what a big building! Are we ever going to be able to fill this building up?" The top floor was connected to a lower floor by a conveyor belt, which Bob gave us all a ride on. After a few years, we filled up that building and had to move again. So it's really growing. If it keeps up, we're going to need a bigger building yet!



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# Byers' Choice® Ltd.

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