

Byers' Choice® Ltd.

Caroler Chronicle



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Pam Trauger, Editor

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BRINGING HOME THE TREE



by Jeffrey Byers



One of the most important Christmas traditions in the Byers' home is that of choosing the tree. Time has never been a concern when it comes to ensuring that the greenest, fullest and tallest of trees is chosen to display the cherished ornaments we have made and collected over the years. It just wouldn't seem right to settle for anything less than the perfect tree holding our memories of wonderful Christmases past.

Of all of the trees we have had through the years, the one that I remember most fondly is the first tree that I was allowed to pick. This seemed to be an enormous responsibility for an eleven year old boy, but I was ready to

face the challenge. I was up at dawn the following morning and off into the woods behind our barn. I was certain that the success or failure of that Christmas was riding on my shoulders. I passed over tree after tree for the smallest of defects until finally, after hours of searching, I found the perfect Christmas tree. I quickly chopped it down, lifted the trunk, and began dragging it through the woods and field back to our house. The entire family was waiting at the kitchen door as I arrived with my trophy in hand. The looks on their faces instantly told me that they were quite surprised with the choice I had made. When I turned

around, I discovered a long trail of small pine branches and needles lining my path back into the woods. The perfect Christmas tree was no longer perfect after the trip home. But, no matter, with the help of a few mugs of hot chocolate and lots of freshly baked cookies, we proceeded to decorate one of the most beautiful Christmas trees I had ever seen.

Our new piece for 1991, "Bringing Home the Tree" was designed to capture the important Christmas tradition of selecting the tree. We hope that it will help you to remember your first tree and the wonderful magic of Christmas past.



CHIMNEY SWEEP 1991

Many times we have received requests for the 1984 Chimney Sweep to be returned to the line. Last year, a new chimney sweep was designed. The ladder, brooms, and buckets were ordered and shipped to us and all of the patterns for his costume were cut and prepared. At the last minute, it was decided not to make him available for this year. Perhaps fate had a hand in this decision because while visiting Ellen Amen of Amen Johnson Interiors in Orinda, CA, she suggested that we redesign our chimney sweep as a child. We thought

it was a terrific idea!!! The earlier prototype was then pushed to the back of the shelf. In place of that kindly old man distributing gifts from his bucket we created a waif with a bucket of gifts that he received from the kindhearted folks who had taken pity on him at Christmas time.

The life of an apprentice chimney sweep in the 19th century was surely an unpleasant one. Chimney sweeps did the dangerous work of trying to reduce the chance of fire. During this time, a chimney sweep would earn roughly

four pence for his work at a two story building. This amounted to the price of a pineapple or a pound of cherries. In Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, the following story was reported. When a boy was taking what seemed to be a long time to clean a chimney, his employer would light a straw fire in the fireplace to hurry him up . . . many times with dire consequences. The business of chimney sweeping continued in London until the late 1830s when a mechanical device was invented to clean the chimneys.

Numbered Bases

If you look on the back of the bases of your new 1991 Caroler Families you will find something different about the way they are now being signed. This year we have added a number to our limited edition Carolers. Next to the signature and date you will find a number indicating the order in which your piece was pro-

duced in its limited group of one hundred. If your piece was the tenth piece to be produced, the number will read 10/100. When you see this numbering system on your figurine, you will know that there are only ninety nine other pieces made with that same design.

THE HISTORY OF THE SKATERS

In 1984 Byers' Choice produced its first skater figurines. The caroling man pictured here was one of just 100 such figurines made. His skating companion was a woman in a long green coat trimmed in white plush; 100 of her were also made. At that time, we were hand-fashioning the skates from matboard and bent wire. It was such a time-consuming process that the skaters were abandoned . . . but not for long.

A few years ago Bob and Joyce were invited to meet customers and sign Carolers at Wayside Country Store in Massachusetts. The day before the signing, sales rep, Bob Watson, knowing of their love for antiques, took Bob and Joyce to an outdoor market. Buried under a pile of rusty tools was one old skate. They purchased it and within a week photographs and scale drawings were sent to various sources in hopes of reproducing a skate suit-

able for the Carolers.

After examining countless skates, they found the perfect prop, which was the inspiration for children with skates introduced in 1988. These figurines posed with skates in hand. It was to take a few more years to teach the Carolers to skate.

Standing on one skate and poised as if gliding on ice, our skaters for 1991 have marked a design milestone for Byers' Choice. Our many hours of research and development have paid off, as early orders are even stronger than anticipated. And the new design has enabled us to expand our horizons. Our 1992 figures will strike poses that convey more motion than ever before.

If you are interested in adding pieces from this series to your collection, don't wait until the end of the season—our supply of skaters may be limited.



BENDABLE CAROLERS

Here is a fun display trick that will bring all of your little caroling friends to life. All of the Byers' Choice carolers have been designed so that their arms and bodies can be bent into different positions. Just take the forearms of your carolers into each of your hands and start bending. (For the most realistic look, try to bend only where there are existing joints.) So when you get the boy with a snow ball in his hand, you can bend his arm back to make it look like he's throwing it at his sister. Make your conductor look as if he's keeping his baton in perfect time. Position your favorite couple so they are standing or skating arm in arm.



You can even flex your drummer boy's arms so that he is playing his drum with feeling. The opportunities are endless, so let your imagination go wild.



Important !!! The only sensitive areas are where the head and feet are connected. Be careful when you are adjusting these areas. Otherwise, bend away !!!



FACES

What do you like most about the Carolers? “Their faces!” is the most popular reply. “The faces remind me of people I know.” “They look like such friendly people.” “This one looks just like Uncle Charlie.” “They aren’t beautiful—they look like real people.” These are but a few of the many comments I hear. And often collectors will ask me how the faces, which they say make their collections so unique, are made.



Starting with a handful of oil-based clay, I’ll capture the initial character quite quickly. My family thinks I’m an incorrigible people-watcher, and it’s true—I’m attracted to faces that have stories to tell. My favorite places to get inspirations for new faces are the airport and the theater. However, when I sit down with that lump of clay, I’m not trying to capture any face in particular; rather, I like to give each face a personality of its own.

In a short while I’ll have a half dozen faces staring up at me from my work table. Then the real work begins: reshaping and refining each face. I

knead and smooth the cheeks and foreheads; pinch and poke at eyes and noses, until I’ve established a certain amount of symmetry. Details are sharpened as the head is prepared for a plaster mold. When the plaster hardens, the clay is removed and a second refining process takes place on the master mold, which must be as flawless as possible.

Using a magnifying glass, I check the plaster for air bubbles, bumps, and scratches. When these are filled and smoothed, the mold is tested to assure proper release of the clay. Each mold is then dated and coded. Finally

a latex positive is made—this latex form will be used as a master from which to make other plaster molds.

To actually make the heads that will go atop the figurines, our artisans press special clay into each plaster mold, making sure each crack and crevice is filled. They then remove the heads from the molds and set about smoothing, shaping, and adding additional features such as nostrils. Because each artist has his

or her own method of handling the clay, each face takes on a look of its own. When the clay has hardened, fleshtone paint is added and the new face is returned to me so I can check the size and determine if any special features should be painted. At this point, I photograph each face and submit the copyright forms.

After I’ve checked and rechecked and am sure that the face is just right, I give the artisans final approval to ready the new Carolers to meet the public.

Familiar Faces

In constructing the sets for the Byers’ Choice edition of Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, Joyce snuck in some familiar faces. A framed picture of the author himself appears in stave one. And she even included two members of the Byers family. If you look closely, you’ll see a miniature portrait of her husband Bob in stave one. Their son (and Byers’ Choice production manager), Robert, appears in stave three.

Although both Bob and Robert deny that these mini-paintings bear their likenesses, those of us who know them can attest to the uncanny similarity.

Recently Joyce added another kind of “family member” to the latest gift box. A likeness of her son’s cat, aptly named Dickens, sits on the window sill of the gift box abode, which just so happens to be a replica of Charles Dickens’ house.



CRIES OF LONDON

Today, we identify the sounds of cities with car engines, loud horns, noisy construction, and heavy industry. Long before all of these distractions were a part of everyday life in the city, there were different sounds which were identified only with these heavily populated areas. Such was the sound of the local vendors as they verbally advertised their goods. The distinct sounds of yelling salespeople in the nineteenth century was apparently so overpowering in the streets of London that Charles Dickens on his first trip to New York City remarked "But how quiet the streets are there."

The lady on the park bench selling savory, ripe apples is the first piece of an exciting new series called the "Cries of London." These characters will depict the various street vendors who sold their goods in the open air markets throughout the streets of London.

Many of these "itinerant hawkers and peddlers of the day" were recorded by artists from as early as the 1500s. It was some 200 years later that the first book of

these prints was published which included the lyrics that the cries often sang. The books were later used to help young children learn how to read. Many of these songs are still sung by children today. One that you may remember is:

*Hot cross buns, hot cross buns,
One a penny, two a penny,
Hot cross buns . . .*

It isn't hard to imagine these spirited songs, rhymes and chants ringing through Olde London Towne as the housekeepers shopped for their needed goods for that day. Whether it be fresh milk, bread, eggs or even a bouquet of flowers for the table, there was sure to be a vendor willing to haggle over price to beat the competing "crier" around the corner.

A new "Cries of London" piece will be produced each year, to replace the "Crier" from the previous year. Don't wait too long to get yours or all of the Apple Ladies will be gone. We have talked to quite a few collectors who are anxious to display this piece in their kitchen all year. Our Apple vendor looks as though she would have fit in nicely with the other vendors in the streets, and might have been crying out a song that went something like this:

*Apples by the bushel,
Apples by the peck,
Apples for your frying pan,
Or any way you lek.*

Dutch Kids Bound for Holland

A new international market for the Carolers has us all abuzz at Byers' Choice these days. Joyce's newly designed Dutch children are being readied for gift stores across Holland. These kids are attired in traditional Dutch clothing, right down to their wooden shoes! Some carry baskets of tulips, while others hold a wooden shoe filled with greens.

Bob believes that new accounts in Holland "will be the perfect addition to the wonderful shops we supply right here in the USA." We couldn't agree more!





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