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Houses of gingerbread

A something-different for the craft shows keeps decorator busy with baker's art form

By Loraine McClish
staff writer

Terri Anderson converted her living room and dining room into an assembly line of gingerbread houses and Hanukkah houses until mid-December.

Pets and little visitors are barred from entering her work space and she says her husband enters only hesitantly into the operation area that has already produced about 500 holiday houses this year.

"I've had to standardize the gingerbread walls, roof and base, to make it easier on myself while baking, but otherwise no two are the same," the Farmington Hills resident said.

At least two dozen houses are in some stage of being created constantly, from batches of dough mixed up in her kitchen that has never lost its ginger-filled aroma, to the finished product encased in its permanent storage box



with instructions that tell how to preserve it for many years of use.

The orders got so heavy at one time during the fall Anderson cancelled out the rental of a booth in Farmington Community Center's October Arts and Crafts Show. After working preholiday craft shows for many years, and all the while trying to conceive a craft idea that would be different, as well as worth her time and talent, being forced to cancel a show because of too many orders was a bit ironic.

AS FOR DIFFERENT, every minuscule piece of decoration on the colorful houses is placed by hand. Tiny spots of icing that make a flame for a candle are piped in individually. Pine trees are hand rolled and frosted with precise detail. Each tree takes a minimum of 30 minutes and its trim goes on one small bead at a time. Most recently teen-agers from the neighborhood have been hired to roll out a gum drop, for example, and reshape it for one specified spot on the house or its landscape.

The other notable something-different is the creation of a Hanukkah house that came about for no other reason than that Anderson wanted to give a gift to a child who was Jewish.

"A few Jewish neighbors helped me with that one and I've since researched it out very carefully so every symbol is both meaningful and right," she said. "The Hanukkah houses seem to be just as popular as the traditional gingerbread houses now, and if any one else is creating them I'm not aware of it. I started early on those because at least

Terri Anderson, at left, talks about her pleasure in creating her first Hanukkah house as a gift for a Jewish youngster. Since that time she estimates she's made at least 150 of them, similar to the one below.



a dozen of them were taken to Florida for the holidays. They had to be packed well for traveling and besides, I just can't bring myself to rush."

All of the houses are completely finished on all four sides so they can be used as centerpieces. As for those that are being purchased for gifts, Anderson said she believes they are going to the person on the list "who has everything," and many are going to the hard-to-buy-for young teen-ager.

"They are the ones who seem to be making the biggest fuss over them," she said.

THE TRADITION of holiday gingerbread houses stems from the Grimm Brothers' Hansel and Gretel fable and has no religious connotation.

"It was a fun custom picked up by the bakers in both Germany and England in the mid-19th century," said Anderson, who researched the history as she became more involved with the art form. "They were made for all holidays, and the bakers' guilds were quite zealous about keeping the houses for themselves. In England the guild was powerful enough to even prohibit anyone but a guild member from making one during the Christmas and Easter holidays."

The English bakers had more trouble getting spices in that period of history than the German bakers, she said.

"The Germans were getting all the spices they wanted from every port they had so everybody could bake as much gingerbread as they wanted. They were the ones who started gingerbread house contests all over the country, generally before the Christmas season, which is probably why you associate gingerbread houses as strictly a German Christmas tradition."

The history books list gingerbread houses as an art form. But Anderson does not consider herself an artist.

"The hardest thing about them is getting all the pieces of the house to bake at an even thickness. I've gone through three thermostats on the oven since I started this," she said.

ANDERSON FELL back on some sales training she had in a premarriage career to create her gingerbread house market.

Newly married, she and her husband came to live in the Detroit area at a time when the bottom fell out of the job market here. For a while she was kept busy making a new home.

"I was never an enthusiastic cook, or a baker, but I did sew all my life, both practical things and crafts, toys, aprons, doo-dads. And that was the

trouble with the craft shows. I was in a saturated market with people like me working hundreds of hours, for pennies an hour, creating the same things as everyone else. It took a long while to come up with something no one else was selling, something not seen in the craft shows," she said.

The idea to create the gingerbread houses turned into a reality when a close-up look at the commercial houses revealed them as "both standardized and not too attractive," she said. One of her houses has been created for Ramada Inn, on Telegraph Road in Southfield. She's taken a couple of special orders for churches, fashioned with her own recipe for hard candy which is used for stained glass windows. And she is toying with the idea of creating an entire village she expects will have to be started next summer.

Meanwhile she has a definite cut-off date for orders this year, Dec. 5, and that is only from nearby customers who will pick up the houses themselves. "One of my biggest surprises is that I had 50-percent return sales from my list of first-year customers. But I'm still building that customer list and after the order deadline date I'll have at least two-three weeks to finish those up," she said.

Anderson can be reached by calling 553-0649.



Even though her large number of orders for gingerbread and Hanukkah houses has forced Terri Anderson to work assembly-line fashion,

she says no two houses are ever decorated exactly alike.

Photos by
Randy Borst

Good music, talk make DJ top night flyer

By Shirlee Rose Iden
staff writer

Why wouldn't a guy who's mopped floors in a jewelry store, done the scout work for a photographer and worked two paper routes at once dote on a career in radio?

Jay Roberts, captain of WJR Radio's "Night Flight," has piloted his show more than 25 years on a station he believes says "Detroit" to the country and the world.

"How can anyone not love playing great music," he asks, "and not enjoy an intense relationship with the listener? It's like we know one another."

The all-night show, which takes off

at 11:30 p.m., provides background music for lovers, balm to insomniacs and company for those whose work keeps them active while the rest of the world sleeps.

Roberts was born in Highland Park General Hospital. The name on the birth certificate was "Sam Leftowitz," something few people remember.

One who does is Roberts' Aunt Mabel Alvin, resident of Southfield. She could hardly forget. Roberts explains his birthday was the date she had chosen for her wedding. "So we stole some thunder from one of my mom's sisters," he says.

"MABEL writes poetry and plays.

By day, Jay Roberts sleeps to noon, eats, visits friends and relatives, dines with his wife, then goes to work before 11 p.m. By night, he's a smooth-talking, high-flying player of good music on a radio station that reaches audiences awake when most people sleep.

There was always literature and music in that part of the family. We had our sisters, even my grandfather who drove a horse and wagon and went through the streets singing 'bananas, apples' and such."

Roberts has five brothers and sisters, who like his extended family, are sensitive to writing and music. He attended Zeland Powers School in Boston and studied accounting in Syracuse.

Roberts met his wife, Jo Ann, while working in radio in Arkansas. "About that time in the 1950s, there was a mystique about flying and I started a 15 minute program called 'Night Flight,'" he said. "Here I made it a travelogue."

The original "Night Flight" began in 1952 in Little Rock, Ark. By 1953 Roberts had married Jo Ann and the next year he came to Detroit to work at WJR.

"It was one of the great radio sta-

tions and I was part of a staff of eight announcers. Fred Kendall and his 10 place orchestra were with us and we gloried in 'The Hermit's Cave,' 'The Bud Guest Show,' and favorites like that."

One time Roberts' boss asked if anyone knew anything about country and western music. "The station in Arkansas I worked for had hired Elvis Presley for \$35 and I did country and western for two years."

ROBERTS recalls WJR in the 50s as a "busy place with writers, producers, engineers and great stars like Arthur Godfrey" associated with it.

"Disc jockeys played 78 rpm records and the DJ and engineers were seven floors apart," he said. "My boss came out of a hot meeting one day and pointed at me and said: 'You do the night show.'"

So "Night Flight" WJR version was

put on course, took off, and is still a much loved musical journey to listeners.

"I played big band music like that of Stan Kenton and songs of Harry Belafonte. The records themselves can't be replaced. We had no tape then," he said.

Roberts combines a mix of music and conversation, admitting he's a "perfectionist in my speech patterns." He has taught speech in university communication departments at the University of Detroit and elsewhere.

Ten years after their marriage, a daughter, Cynthia, was born to Jo Ann and Jay Roberts. "She's our miracle," her father said.

"She's an artist and writes poetry, and I even allowed her to listen to rock."

"Actually a lot of the music I play today is a reflection of the Beatles and the rock greats."

After the death of his mother, Roberts moved to Ulia to be near his family. Presently, they live in West Bloomfield.

Through the years, he has played all kinds of music. For a few years he did a program of classics and light music. "I just programmed the music, but didn't lecture people on the classics."

ROBERTS does the commercials on

his show and also boasts the only number one rating at night in the country. "The program goes everywhere," Roberts said.

"I've gotten two calls from New Zealand and others from Norway and Sweden. Once SS Hope listeners wrote in, and in any given month, I hear from an average of 38 states."

"I represent the entire Detroit metro area to people outside."

With WJR moving from the Fisher Building to Troy, Roberts' schedule will move around a little as well. But basically he gets to work before 11 p.m., goes through the wire copy, and sports material, and then is on to 5 a.m.

"Life is so backward for me," he said. "Jo Anne sleeps while I work and works all day. Until Cindy was born, she stayed up all night and critiqued me."

"I nibble on something around 4 a.m. and eat breakfast at 5 a.m., then go home and sleep until about noon."

His wife is involved in the schools, libraries, and the League of Women Voters. She is a past president of the Detroit Area LWV and of the West Bloomfield Historical Society.

With changes at the station, Roberts' slot may change, too, giving him a shot at socializing normally and living a life without his days and nights being so mixed up.

Symphony recreates 16th-century wassail

Oakway Symphony Society's third Wassail, described as "literally a feast of sights and sounds," begins at 7 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 15 in Madonna College's residence hall dining room. The college is on the corner of Levan and Schoolcraft, Livonia.

Society members will transform the hall into a winter setting of 16th-century England with lords, ladies, long trumpets and a feast.

Entertainment will come from the

Madrigal Singers of Royal Oak, an ensemble of medieval instrumentalists, and jesters. The evening will be rounded out with the presentation of the board's head, Wassail toasts and Christmas caroling.

Tickets are \$25 for each reverend, tables of six or 10 may be reserved. Reservations are taken by Rose Kachnowski in the Oakway Symphony office, 591-0286, and Sister Franceline in Madonna College, 591-5046.