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CURRENTS

magazine

VOLUME 11 ISSUE 1 • NOVEMBER-DECEMBER, 2016
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Letter from the Publisher

When it comes to the fiddle, the story is better than the notes

Craving a taste of humble pie? Pick up a fiddle and try to learn to play it. Call it a violin if it makes you feel more polished and accomplished. Either way, veteran musician or beginner, this instrument may have the inside track on the knock-down punch.

What a challenge.

I have dabbled with musical instruments, both wind instruments and stringed instruments, since I was 10 years old. I am not great at any of them, but I know a couple of chords and can get a sound above a honk out of most of them. With that said, no one wants to hear me play. I play for the challenge of it and my own escape.

After doing some research and talking with this issue's cover story subject, Jim Walker, I learned how most fiddles, even broken down flea market violins or dust collectors in the attic, are truly vintage instruments. In most cases, they were made in Europe more than 100 years ago and, in the right hands, play as good today as they did new.

So I picked up a fiddle and decided to give it a try. I really feel a connection to the hand-made history and the music these old fiddles bring. Can't be that hard, I thought.

The reality: It's a four-stringed demon. It has an extremely tiny neck, very unfriendly to fat fingers. Fretless. Frustrating. Tuning a violin is like wrestling a squirrel and trying not to get scratched. Then after a few seconds playing, I wonder why I even bothered. I can't find the notes anyway.

You're completely supporting the fiddle under your chin, your left hand is trying to finger the notes, while your right arm must hold position and keep the bow straight and moving. If I put cymbals between my knees and a tambourine around one ankle, me playing the fiddle would be a full-blown, sidewalk sideshow. It's the most frustrating instrument I've ever encountered.

I do like the feel of a 100-year-old violin in my hands, but I'm not worthy of the craftsmanship or the sound of the ages. We decided on the artisan theme for this issue based on the number of people in our area who have very unique talents and create some really unique things. We thought we might discover enough for a feature story or two, but the more we asked around, the more unique things we discovered and it was obvious this was a noble theme.

I hope you will read Jim Walker's story and learn about his craft, as well as the other artisans who capture a lost art and still create magnificent things.

There are a lot of interesting people living around us and we're glad to spotlight them in Currents. We are the magazine of Life in Natural Florida and we are Lake City's original magazine. This issue marks the beginning of our 11th year of publication. We thank our advertisers and our readers for their support through the years. We have several exciting things planned for this year and we're honored to provide these through your Currents magazine.

Thanks for reading!

Todd Wilson

Todd Wilson | PUBLISHER

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ON THE COVER



Jim Walker tunes his fiddle while leaning against a tree on his property in southern Columbia County. Walker is one of the most sought-after luthiers in North-Central Florida.

PHOTO BY BRENT KUYKENDALL

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Putting the

zoo

IN 'PETTING ZOO'

By KAYLA LOKEINSKY | Photos by KATRINA POGGIO





Lake City's A&A Exotics brings extraordinary animals to the people of Columbia County

When visitors at the Columbia County Fair walked into the tent marked "Petting Zoo," they were expecting the typical assortment of farm animals. However, what they got was a close-up look at some of the cutest and most exotic animals on earth.

Different species from South America, Africa, India and other parts of the world sat in cages around the tent, mixed with the petting zoo regulars like ponies and goats, ready to be fed and greeted by excited children and adults. Monkeys leaped from one end of their cage to the other while a baby water buffalo nuzzled up to children petting its nose. For many, this was the first time they had ever seen animals like this.

These exotic animals are closer than local residents might think. Right here in Lake City, Dwayne and Debbie Aldridge run their business, A&A Exotics. For over 12 years, the Aldridges have been raising different species of

monkeys, lemurs and other exotic animals, including capybaras, giant tortoises and blonde raccoons, just to name a few.

"A lot of people, unless they go to a zoo, won't see animals like this," Debbie said.

A Growing Hobby

What started out as a hobby quickly grew into an exotic animal business when the Aldridges started buying and raising different species of monkeys.

"It just got so big we had to start selling," Dwayne said.

A&A Exotics has over 100 different species of exotic animals. Among their species of monkeys include baboons, batis monkeys and snow macaque. In addition to all their exotic animals, they also have their farm animals that make appearances at local fairs.

"We never thought we'd turn into this," Debbie said. "I just never dreamed."

Running an exotic animal business is not easy. For each new animal they decide to take in, the Aldridges must obtain the proper permits and follow the USDA-certification codes.

They also have to be careful who they sell their animals too. When A&A Exotics is contacted by individuals or zoos that want to purchase

A lot of people, unless they go to the zoo, won't see

animals like this.

LEFT: A baby water buffalo peeks its head over the gate. **ABOVE:** Jenna Richards, 9, kisses Ally the monkey while her grandma, Debbie Aldridge, holds the monkey's hands.



one of their animals, they put them through an extensive screening process to make sure that they have the proper permits and experience to take care of an exotic animal.

“Some people want to buy them and don’t know what they’re getting into,” Debbie said.

Part of the Family

However, these animals aren’t just part of the business for the Aldridges; they’re part of the family. Every animal has a name, and Debbie and Dwayne can tell you anything about each one, from where they came from to what their personalities are like.

Another member of the family who can tell you anything you need to know about A&A Exotics’ many animals is Debbie and Dwayne’s granddaughter, Jenna Richards.

Jenna, 9, has the magic touch with animals. She isn’t afraid to wrangle a monkey, she knows all the details about many of the animals and she even helped break in one of the miniature ponies, Precious, on her own.

“It’s fun it really is,” Jenna said. “Almost every weekend I go over to their house and I learn new things every time I go over there. I learn a lot and I’ve been doing this since I was a little baby.”



LEFT: A llama stares at the camera. **RIGHT TOP:** A lemur reaches for a piece of fruit. **RIGHT CENTER:** Jenna Richards lets her miniature pony, Precious, lick her hand. Jenna helped train and raise Precious, and she helps out with the other animals that Debbie and Dwayne Aldridge raise. **RIGHT:** A blonde raccoon rests on a chair in its cage. **INSET:** Dwayne Aldridge feeds a black-buck antelope that is featured in the A&A Exotics Petting Zoo at the Columbia County Fair. The blackbuck antelope is primarily found in India, and is one of the smallest antelope species of the exotic breeds.



Every petting zoo I've ever been to in my life had **just farm animals,** so we wanted to bring **something different.** It's a lot of work but **it's a lot of fun.**

— Dwayne Aldridge, A&A Exotics

A&A Exotics only started doing petting zoos four years ago. When they decided to start setting up at fairs, they wanted to bring more to the table than just cows, goats and ponies.

“Every petting zoo I've ever been to in my life had just farm animals, so we wanted to bring something different,” Dwayne said. “It's a lot of work but it's a lot of fun.”

Since they have so many exotic animals to choose from, every year A&A Exotics tries to bring different ones so that visitors can get a new experience. Next year, they are planning to add a parakeet enclosure where guests can go inside and feed the birds. They also hope to add a camel that children can ride.

“We try to change every year because who wants to come to the same old thing?” Dwayne said. “We just want to keep it cool for the kids and the adults too.”



TOP: Debbie Aldridge hugs Ally, a 6-month-old monkey. Ally loves to be held by Debbie. **BOTTOM:** Two goats stick their heads between the gate rungs at the Columbia County Fair petting zoo put on by A&A Exotics of Lake City.



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MEET *the* CARTERS

Lake City resident Sheri Carder shares her experience of meeting President Jimmy Carter

By TAYLOR GAINES | Photos Courtesy of SHERI CARDER

Despite arriving three hours early to Sunday School class at Maranatha Baptist Church, Sheri Carder and her husband were sent to overflow.

This is because President Jimmy Carter was teaching from the pulpit again, for the first time since his brain cancer diagnosis. People had begun lining up outside the church at 5:30 a.m. for the 10 a.m. class, Carder said.

Lake City residents Carder and her husband, Larry Gunter, had been planning to make the journey to Plains, Ga., to attend President Carter's Sunday School class for years but had repeatedly put it off.

"After he got brain cancer, we realized, 'he's 92 years old,'" Carder said. "If we're gonna go, we better go now."

They weren't the only ones who traveled to see Carter speak on that Sunday last August. Carder said people sitting around her in church were from Michigan, California and even China.

Carder recommends the trip to any local resident because of the rare opportunity to see a U.S. president, plus Plains is only about three hours from Lake City.

More than a year later, President Carter, now 92 and free of cancer, still serves as the primary adult Sunday School teacher for Maranatha Baptist Church, according to the church's pastor Jeremy Shoulta. He said that Carter still teaches about 40 times per year, even at his age.

On top of that, he remains involved with the Carter Center, a human-rights organization involved in more than

"It's an inspiration to all of us, you never give up or stop what you're called to do. There's plenty of ways to serve your community and the world, and we've all learned something from that."



80 countries around the world, according to its website.

"I think people everywhere are very aware and in awe of the amount of commitments they keep at their age," Shoulta said. "It's an inspiration to all of us, you never give up or stop what you're called to do. There's plenty of ways to serve your community and the world, and we've all learned something from that."

Carter and his wife, Rosalynn, 89, have been members at Maranatha since 1981. Shoulta said they joined the church the Sunday they came back from the White House.

Meeting the President

Carder and Gunter stood in the church kitchen waiting for the president to begin his lesson. Because the small church was at capacity, Carter's Sunday School class was going to be streamed onto the television for those in the overflow room.

And then in walked Jimmy Carter.

He wanted to come say hello to everyone who had come to see him, as he does every Sunday. But so many had come, on the heels of his brain cancer diagnosis, that there were too many people to even fit into the overflow room, and some of them had been sent down the road to the Jimmy Carter National Historic Site. The lesson was also going to be aired on the televisions there.

But that wasn't good enough for him.

"During church, he went over there and taught another Sunday School class," Carder said. "Secret Service had

FACING PAGE PHOTOS: Sheri Carder (left) and Larry Gunter pose with a cutout of President and Mrs. Carter on bicycle while in Plains, Ga. **Middle:** Larry Gunter poses in front of a "Jimmy Carter for President" sign in Plains, Ga. **Inset:** Maranatha Baptist Church is seen. **Bottom:** Sheri Carder (from left) President Jimmy Carter, Rosalynn Carter and Larry Gunter pose after President Carter's Sunday School class at Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Ga. Carder and Gunter made the three-hour trip to Plains to watch the former president teach his Sunday School class.



a connotation, they weren't set up to do that. He insisted because of all those people that came to hear him preach."

Afterward, President Carter came back to church to pose for pictures with his wife. Carder and Gunter were blown away.

"He is such a decent human being," Carder said. "Whatever you thought about him as president, he is the most decent, most honest guy. He will touch your heart. Because he believes in making this a better world. And at 92, he's still building houses and hammering nails."

You can find President Carter's teaching schedule on the Maranatha Baptist Church website. He is expected to teach frequently



A downtown street of Plains, Ga is seen above. The top polaroid shows a replica of the living conditions of the people who receive aid from the Carter Center. The bottom polaroid shows a replica of the schools that the Carter Center builds in more than 80 impoverished countries around the world.



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President Jimmy Carter serves as the primary adult Sunday School at Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Ga., teaching about 40 Sundays each year, according to the church's pastor Jeremy Shoulta.

If You Go:

What: Jimmy Carter's Sunday School Class

Where: Maranatha Baptist Church,
148 GA-45, Plains, GA 31780

When: 10 a.m.

(Upcoming dates: Nov. 27, Dec. 4, 11, 18, 25)

Seating: The church begins seating at approximately 8 a.m.

A Tip from Sheri: "If you don't stay for church afterward, then he won't have his picture made with you."

For more info, visit www.mbcplains.org.

over the next few months.

There are plenty of additional things to do in the area around Plains, Ga., including the National Prisoner of War Museum at the National Historic Site of Andersonville, Ga., the Habitat for Humanity's Global Village & Discover Center and several Jimmy Carter-themed places in and around Plains.

Carder said it's best to make a weekend out of it. She recommends booking a hotel the night before in order to make it to the president's Sunday School class on time.

"You never know how many more opportunities you'll have," Carder said. "It could be crowded."



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T H E M A Y O R O F

Fiddleville

Story and Photos by TODD WILSON

The fiddles are silent when they come to Jim Walker.

Neglected and dusty, they represent a disregarded journey, a vanished spotlight moment, a time long gone.

They show abuse, cracked wood, unbound glue. Their bodies are warped by time and elements.

The instruments are broken.

Walker is ready and eager to help. A renowned violin repairman, Walker has worked on restoring and building fiddles for more than 30 years. He'll fix a fiddle or a violin, whatever you want to call it. It's the same instrument. The name differs by preference, usually depending on the style of music.

Through the years, he has worked his fiddle-repair craft from the The Violin Shop in Gainesville, then his most recent venture, the Second Fiddle Shop, which he owned and operated in High Springs. Now, Walker has a shop on his property in southern Columbia County where he works his magic on the primitive stringed instruments. He has named his quiet paradise "Fiddleville" and he is the mayor.

"These fiddles all speak to me when I finish them," Walker, 69, says. "They all have a different voice. They all have a story behind them, too."

He sees fiddles that were discovered in dark corners of attics, or discarded in cases in damp corners of garages and storage sheds. Some are in OK condition, others are forsaken trash. He nurtures every one of them back to fiddle fitness. Hanging in his shop are no fewer than 25 restored fiddles, most of them at least 100 years old and a couple date back to the early 1800s. They all are for sale and range in price from \$200 up.

He repairs splits in the wood grain. He

replaces tail pieces, pegs and bridges and resuscitates the instrument.

"My quest is to bring all old fiddles back to life," Walker says. "A dusty fiddle in the attic does not do anyone any good. Uncle Joe's fiddle just sitting around doesn't do justice to a family's history. These fiddles need to be taken care of and preserved."

The common violin has a body and ribs made from maple and a pine top. Most of the necks are maple. Maple is a common choice for violin makers and it is readily available across Europe and North America. Maple and pine were used in the first known violins made in Europe in the mid-1500s.

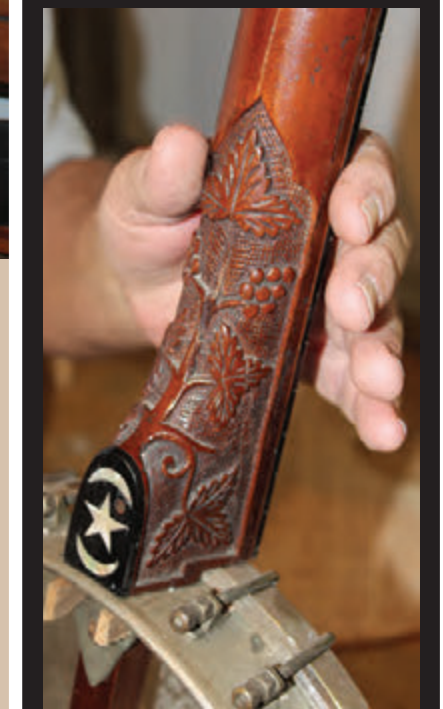
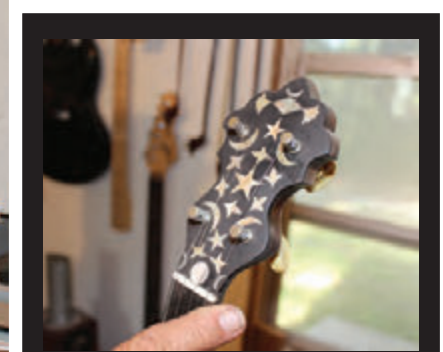
"Maple is used because it is as hard as ebony, but not as brittle," Walker says.

Tuning pegs, the tail piece, all are hardwood and the bridge is usually custom carved from thin-shaved maple. The sound post, which is a small dowel that is wedged vertically between the back and top of the violin, is usually made from spruce, a very lightweight, very strong pine.

"You need a hard, dense wood in a fiddle," he says. "The beauty of a fiddle is important and it is unique. It is one of the most beautiful things man has crafted with his hands."

Since the 16th century, violins have been held together with hide glue, an animal by-product that can bond wood and hold for centuries. Walker uses a natural hide-glue powder that he mixes with water to form the same glue when he restores the instruments. The mixture is heated to 150 degrees and has the consistency of honey when it is applied.





While he has repaired thousands of fiddles during his 30-plus years in the business, Walker says he's probably hand carved around a dozen fiddles.

It's the challenge and the method that relaxes him.

"You start with three pieces of wood and then you have something that plays music," Walker

says. "That's the most satisfying thing about this."

Walker will use a power saw to cut the basic shape of the fiddle, but beyond that, it's hand tools at the work table and time ... lots of time.

"This is 16th-century technology," Walker says, as the methodical *scrape, scrape, scrape* of a brass finger plane shaves pine from a fiddle top that is under construction. "I was in sales and I was not a patient man, but this has taught me patience. This is relaxing to me. This is what I like to do."

Walker's custom fiddles are

VISIT JIM WALKER

Jim Walker is one of the most sought-after luthiers in the region. He owns and operates the Second Fiddle Shop on his property in southern Columbia County. He always has several refurbished violins for sale, most of which are at least 100 years old and of various qualities. Prices start at \$200 and up. A few of his instruments date to the early 1800s.

Walker can repair any stringed instruments and is widely known as an expert violin maker and repairman. He also works on both acoustic and electric guitars, banjos and mandolins. People interested in visiting his shop can schedule an appointment by calling him at (386) 365-0706. He says he welcomes any questions about stringed instruments. Visit www.secondfiddle.com.

Top: Intricate wood inlay on a 1890s banjo. Bottom: A finger plane used for shaping a fiddle top.

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crafted freehand, meaning he does not copy famous violins or use patterns beyond basic width and length measurements that he needs for selecting the proper blocks of wood. He has wooden molds that must be used once the glue is applied to all the pieces, but he made the molds himself, too.

He uses finger planes, block planes, wooden mallets, hand chisels, picks, a dovetail saw and X-ACTO knives for the finesse work sometimes needed on the F-holes or bridge carving.

“A computer can cut anything perfectly, but it doesn’t have the same appeal as something that is hand made, something that will last, something with history,” Walker says.

When staining the wood, he primes it with a thin layer of hide glue or oil varnish, the same as craftsmen six centuries ago would have used. This process seals the wood and allows varnish to build up for a finished look, rather than soak into the wood. He knows the tricks of

the ages, to use the spice turmeric, called “ground,” rubbed on the wood in the early stages if you prefer to create a sunburst finish.

“Once the varnish is on and it sets for several days, I use glass paper for polishing it up,” Walker says. “You can make it really glossy, put as much shine on it as you want.”

Walker the Luthier

Aside from his fiddle repair and building skills, Walker is one of the most well-known and sought-after luthiers in North Central Florida. A luthier (pronounced LOO-thee-ur or LOO-tee-ur) is a person who repairs and sets up any stringed instrument. The word’s origin comes from “lute maker,” the medieval craftsmen who made lutes, the gourd-shaped stringed instruments that predate the mandolin and guitar.

Walker was born at Jennings and grew up on a farm near White Springs until he was 12 and the family moved to Palm Beach County.

He grew up in a household with six brothers and from the age of 7, he learned how to string and repair the family’s one guitar.

“My oldest brother traded a bicycle for a guitar and we all learned how to play it,” Walker says. “We had to learn how to string it and work on it. I was always interested in how it was put together.”

Walker can repair and “dial in” any stringed instrument — acoustic or electric. He lowers the bridge, adjusts the truss rod to improve the action, and does any type of repair needed to get an instrument in playing condition. His shop is full of customers’ guitars, mandolins and banjos, in addition to the classic fiddles. An electric Gibson SG project guitar hangs on the wall beside an open-backed banjo dating to the 1890s.

“I’ve never had any formal training, but I have worked on stringed instruments my whole life,” Walker says. “I read a lot of books on how to do repairs and I have talked to a lot of luthiers about how to do things.



Now I do a lot of research on the Internet.”

Luthiers are disappearing from the music culture, especially in rural areas, Walker says.

“You usually find real luthiers in bigger music shops in larger cities like New York, Chicago or Los Angeles,” Walker says. “City shops may have four or five working luthiers. You just don’t see them in small towns any more.”

Can he play?

Walker is quick to point out he is a craftsman, a wood worker, possibly even an artisan, and he is honored to fill this role as a traditional violin maker.

“People think that just because I can build a fiddle, I must be Charlie Daniels,” Walker says. “That’s not the case at all. I know about four songs. I can tell you if the fiddle sounds good. I can keep up with my buddies, maybe play along, chording a little, but that’s it. I’m certainly not a musician by any stretch.”



Antonio Stradivari

A VIOLIN OR A FIDDLE?

They are the same instrument. The difference in the name comes solely from the type of music that is being played on the instrument. The term “fiddler” has been noted back to the mid-1500s at the origin of the violin, so the two terms have existed together since the instrument’s invention.

In the early days, fiddle players were noted as folk musicians who learned the craft through aural tradition, meaning they were taught by ear, rather than formal training with written music. This tradition carried over to immigrants who came from Europe to North America and brought their folk music with them. This evolved into mountain music, bluegrass and eventually country music styles.

Early accounts of fiddle players also denote the style of music included short notes and distinct rhythms suitable for dancing. This is very different than a classical style of violin playing that includes written music, longer melodies and a lot of vibrato.

VIOLIN ORIGIN

The violin or fiddle as we know it today originated in Italy. The violin was first seen in popular culture of that day in a 1530 painting by Gaudenzio Ferrari, though the instrument portrayed in this image has only three strings, where a violin has four.

The violin originated at the hands of craftsmen in and around the town of Cremona in Northern Italy, near Milan. The Amati, Gasparo, Maggini, Stainer and Guarneri families were known for expert craftsmanship during a period of about 200 years from 1550-1750.

The kingpin of all violin makers was Antonio Stradivari (1644-1737) who had a workshop in Cremona, a small town where his family had roots dating back to the 1100s. Stradivari was famous for his attention to detail and his selection of the proper wood. Stradivari was an expert craftsman and woodworker, but not a musician. Historical accounts say he produced around 960 violins during his lifetime, the final instrument made after he was in his 90s. Around 500 of these instruments survive today, some still being played by virtuosos, some in private collections and some in museums. Stradivari violins are worth millions at auction.

Stradivari was an Amati apprentice and a luthier, or stringed instrument maker and repairman. He also was known to craft approximately 200 other stringed instruments during his lifetime, including a few violas, cellos, harps and primitive guitars. Luthiers are mentioned in the Bible in Genesis, Chapter 4, Jubal is noted as a harp maker.

WHY A STRADIVARI?

Antonio Stradivari became the expert and set the standard for handmade violins for 300 years. The wood makes the quality sound in a violin and Stradivari is given expert credentials for picking out the best wood for carving instruments.

Some experts speculate the “Little Ice Age” experienced during the 1500s-1600s in Europe, which was not an ice age, but an extended cool weather pattern, slowed the growth of trees and caused tight growth rings in maple and other hardwood trees from which Stradivari would have access. The cause would have been unknown to Stradivari, but the quality wood would have been readily available to him. This theory has been studied at length by experts who have examined the density of wood in Stradivari violins compared to other violins from other regions and time periods. It is known as a “possible” reason for the sound quality, but it remains an unproven theory.

VIOLINS COME TO AMERICA

Nearly all violins before 1920 were crafted in Europe and brought to America by immigrants seeking a better life. The violin was the source of family entertainment and considered a prized possession. From the late-1800s on, violins were mass produced on assembly lines in factories across Europe, with Germany, Italy, France and the Baltic States leading the way. The instruments were still crafted by hand, but used some machines for the major cuts and shaping of the wood. These violins, or fiddles, are made with quality craftsmanship and are very durable. Many are still in circulation and played regularly today.



ANN OPGENORTH: A FIERY PASSION

Local artist's welded sculptures come from her heart

By NICK ROLLISON | Photos by KAYLA LOKEINSKY

As White Springs resident and sculptor Ann Opgenorth bends down over her latest creation, the welding torch in her hand announces its bright flame to the world with a small boom. The sound breaks the otherwise quiet nature of her workshop and echoes through the woods that surround her peaceful home located behind the historic Florida Trail.

Opgenorth is in the process of working on a new piece: a steel statue of a graceful girl, whose bent back and raised arms will be forever frozen in time.

With the help of her torch, the heat causes the metal to bend to her will as she shapes

and molds it into the figure she imagines. She doesn't work from a sketch or a photo; she works from her heart.

"I enjoy what I do," Opgenorth said. "I get up in the morning excited to get over here and work on whatever I'm working on."

Made from fire, copper and steel, Opgenorth's welded art inspires and delights those who have had a chance to see her works. However, no one gets more excited to see them than Opgenorth herself.

"It's fun to take a box of rods, this is the way they come, fifty pounds in a box, and take a pile of sheet steel and stand over there and turn out what you want," Opgenorth said. "It's exciting to look at these just plain things and make something out of it that's in your mind."

Some of Opgenorth's welded sculptures range from realistic, colorful depictions of wildlife to more abstract, graceful welded works of people.

When Opgenorth isn't welding and creating her beautiful metal sculptures, she indulges her other artistic aspirations. Opgenorth is also a quilter, whose giant quilts, which take a year to make, are full of bright colors and details so accurate the quilts look like photographs. Additionally, she is an accomplished painter, creating beautiful scenes and portraits of people and places she knows well.

From a young age, Opgenorth has pursued her passion for the arts.

Ann Opgenorth uses her blowtorch to make the metal she is using for her sculpture of a girl pliable as she creates her latest creation.

Opgenorth's workspace is a large garage covered in tools and scraps of metal.





Some of Oppenorth's statues are prominently on display in Columbia County, including the Chief Alligator statue at Alligator Lake and the wolves at Florida Gateway College.



"It's born into you," Oppenorth said. "My first memories of life as a child was that I had a little blackboard, and we spent a lot of time in the kitchen in the colder part of winter in Wisconsin. I had a little box of colored chalk and I probably was three years old and I was doing little pictures in color on my chalkboard...and that's my first memory! That and clashing

some pots and pans!"

Oppenorth has stayed true to her artistic roots over the years, and you can still find a few pieces of chalk, her first medium, on her worktable among the scraps of metal and abundance of tools. With her current piece of the young dancing girl, she uses the chalk to help create the initial shape, then uses her hands to do the rest.

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“You came at a good time because I had this piece started,” Opgenorth said, gesturing toward the steel woman statue. “I start with what I call an armature and I start with the torso, but everything is measured in figure-drawing by heads. A normal figure is about 7 and a half heads high, adult. Children are four and five heads high, so you get a little squatty thing, but you can see how I do the figure.”

This Wisconsin native has been welding since she was 19 years old, ever since she discovered the fiery art by taking an advanced sculpture class in college. In 1964, Opgenorth went on to open her own welding studio with her friend and fellow sculptor Donna Marihart.

Living most of her adult life in Iowa, Opgenorth and Marihart moved to White Springs so they would have more space to weld, and so they could keep horses and grow hay.

“We had a really good business up there,” Opgenorth said. “But the problem was, we had a workshop about this size. In the winter time, we had a little stove and we used to heat it. We were doing a lot of work with cooper, doing some big exterior pieces, and by the time we ended the day you couldn’t even see across it with the fumes from this stuff. And we coughed and it was terrible, and we finally decided that we were killing ourselves and had to quit. So we moved down here where we had air.”

Their business thrived when they moved to White Springs, and some of Opgenorth’s statues that she worked on with Marihart are prominently on display in Columbia County. Some of her most recognizable pieces around Lake City include the “Risen Christ” statue, which hangs above the alter at Epiphany Catholic Church, the Chief Alligator statue at Alligator Lake and the Florida Gateway College wolves, which have become a symbol that greets all new students to the campus.

“We are proud to have a local artist’s work on display on the Florida Gateway College

campus,” said FGC President Dr. Larry Barrett. “Her work is beautiful and compliments the campus landscape.”

Although Marihart passed away several years ago, her memory lives on in the form of her artwork. Some of Marihart’s copper and steel creations are also on display both inside and outside of Opgenorth’s and her husband, Monroe Morrell’s, home, which is so open and full of light from large bay windows it makes the place feel like an art gallery.

Formerly a junior high art teacher and assistant college professor of art at Marycrest College, Opgenorth says that she is attracted to welding because of the versatility it offers compared to other forms of sculpting.

“With steel you can make something all out of rods if you want, you can make it open and airy, and floaty,” she said. “It can be heavy and solid, it can be anything you want. You’re not limited by the medium you’re using as much.”

While Opgenorth says she no longer works on large sculptures due to her arthritis, which she fears may stop her from wielding one day, she keeps pursuing her passion for creating beautiful handmade sculptures. Opgenorth continues to weld every day, as well as work on her quilting and painting.



Some of Ann Opgenorth’s welded statues, including this one of an angel and a young boy, are on display at the Lake City Gateway Art Gallery.

Did You Know?

Did you know that welding has been traced all the way back to the middle ages? The earliest evidence of welding can be traced back to the Bronze Age. The earliest examples of welding are welded gold boxes. The Egyptians also learned the art of welding, and several of their iron tools were made by welding. While during this time most welders were what are now known as blacksmiths, this method of welding remained more or less unchanged until the dawn of the 19th century, when the use of open flames helped transform welding into what it is today.



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PAINTING THE TOWN

Debra Laughlin paints acrylic scenes of Columbia County

Photos and Story By KATRINA POGGIO



Debra Laughlin poses in her backyard with a large acrylic painting she did of a Lake City residence.

With a stroke of her paint brush, Debra Laughlin is able to take her memories and create realistic acrylic scenes of the place she calls home.

Through her ability to capture detail with stunning, realistic accuracy, Laughlin is able to depict images of the natural landscapes and rural lifestyle of Columbia County in her paintings.

In fact, she puts so much effort into the details of her paintings that she sometimes doesn't know when to stop and say it's complete.

"Sometimes it's knowing when to quit because I like details so much," Laughlin said. "I like the tiny, tiny, tiny spots of color and the fine lines."

Seeing the familiar in new light

After living in Lake City for 30 years, Laughlin enjoys painting local scenes that she's familiar with.

"I like the challenge of opening eyes to what really is here if we just look," Laughlin said. "That's where anyone lives. They're surrounded by some beauty there to be enjoyed."

Over the years she learned that she most enjoys painting landscapes



and nature.

"I actually like the challenge of seeing a scene that is very appealing to me and seeing if I can reproduce it and capture what it was that appealed to me in the first place," Laughlin said.

Laughlin usually paints on canvas and works with colored pencils. In the past, she has also created murals and explored working with different mediums such as oil paints.

However, Laughlin's most unique method of creating artwork is paint-

ing on slates commonly used for roofing. After her son gave her some slates from his roofing company, Laughlin started painting some of her nature scenes on the unconventional art surface.

New surface, new creations

The challenge was learning to paint on this new, uneven surface, but Laughlin says it works well for natural subjects like rivers, foliage and mountains. A few of her slate paintings have been on display at the



I like the challenge of opening eyes to what really is here if we just look.

Lake City Gateway Art Gallery.

“People a lot of times like something that’s a little different,” Laughlin said. “They tend to appreciate it or take the time to look at it more.”

The rustic stone surface combined with the soft, natural scenery of Laughlin’s slate paintings pops due to their small size, and they’re perfect for decorating a small space.

“It’s easy for people to tuck them on a shelf or night stand somewhere and fit in some more artwork, and it’s unique,” Laughlin said.

Capturing happiness

One of the things that has really inspired Laughlin as an artist is her newfound passion for documenting moments of joy, peace and happiness through her artwork. Laughlin’s new eye for her subject matter developed when she became a Christian.

“What do I want to paint?” Laughlin asked. “I like to paint, but what do I ever want to paint? And then it’s just like all of a sudden, you have eyes to see gifts from God that you were

overlooking, probably all the time.”

According to Laughlin, any artistic form will provoke emotion from people. She says she wants her art to have a positive impact on the world.

“That should be a positive impact,” Laughlin said. “Not a desire to pull somebody down. Something to strengthen people. Something to help them enjoy how good life could be.”

One of her pieces of artwork that she is exceptionally proud of is a painting of her grandchildren flying kites, because it brought her so much joy when she was creating it.

“When I look at a 9-year-old who says, ‘Yeah! I’ll help you get that up in the air,’ and the 5-year-old says, ‘Oh,

I wanna fly a kite, I wanna fly a kite,’ and I think of them just being so willing to buddy up together so that kite can get up there, I just think, ‘Well that just blesses me,’” Laughlin said. “It’s not that particular moment. It’s just glimpses of joy, peace, happiness; more feelings like that.”

When she’s not actually painting herself, Laughlin enjoys teaching art classes to others. She has led classes at Lake City Gateway Art Gallery in the past, and she is currently trying to start a new venture of teaching after-school drawing classes at Belmont Academy Charter School.

“Oh I love teaching. I really do,” Laughlin said. “I think it’s so rewarding just to see their eyes light up and think, ‘Oh, I get it! Oh, that’s so neat.’”

Laughlin says if someone wants to learn something new and the desire is there, then there is a strong chance that they can be successful in that venture.

“It’s fun to see somebody else get a handle on it because I remember how fun it was for me,” Laughlin said.

LEFT: With reference from a photograph, Debra Laughlin works with colored pencils on her lush foliage piece while inside her at-home art studio space. **BELOW:** One of Debra Laughlin's paintings hangs at Gateway Art Gallery on Marion Avenue. These unique paintings are on pieces of slate used for roofing and serve as a rustic surface for her painted natural scenes.



Painting on slate:

Varieties of slate are available at stores such as Home Depot and Michaels craft store. It's fairly inexpensive and makes a unique surface for subjects with natural textures such as trees, rivers, rocks, foliage and mountains. Don't plan on using it for still life or portrait painting because the rustic surface is uneven. Apply a good undercoat of primer before you start painting your scene. Finish it off with a high quality varnish to make your completed artwork more weather-resistant if you're displaying it outdoors. Instead of a frame, drill a couple of holes at the top and use knotted leather straps for hanging to complete the rustic look.

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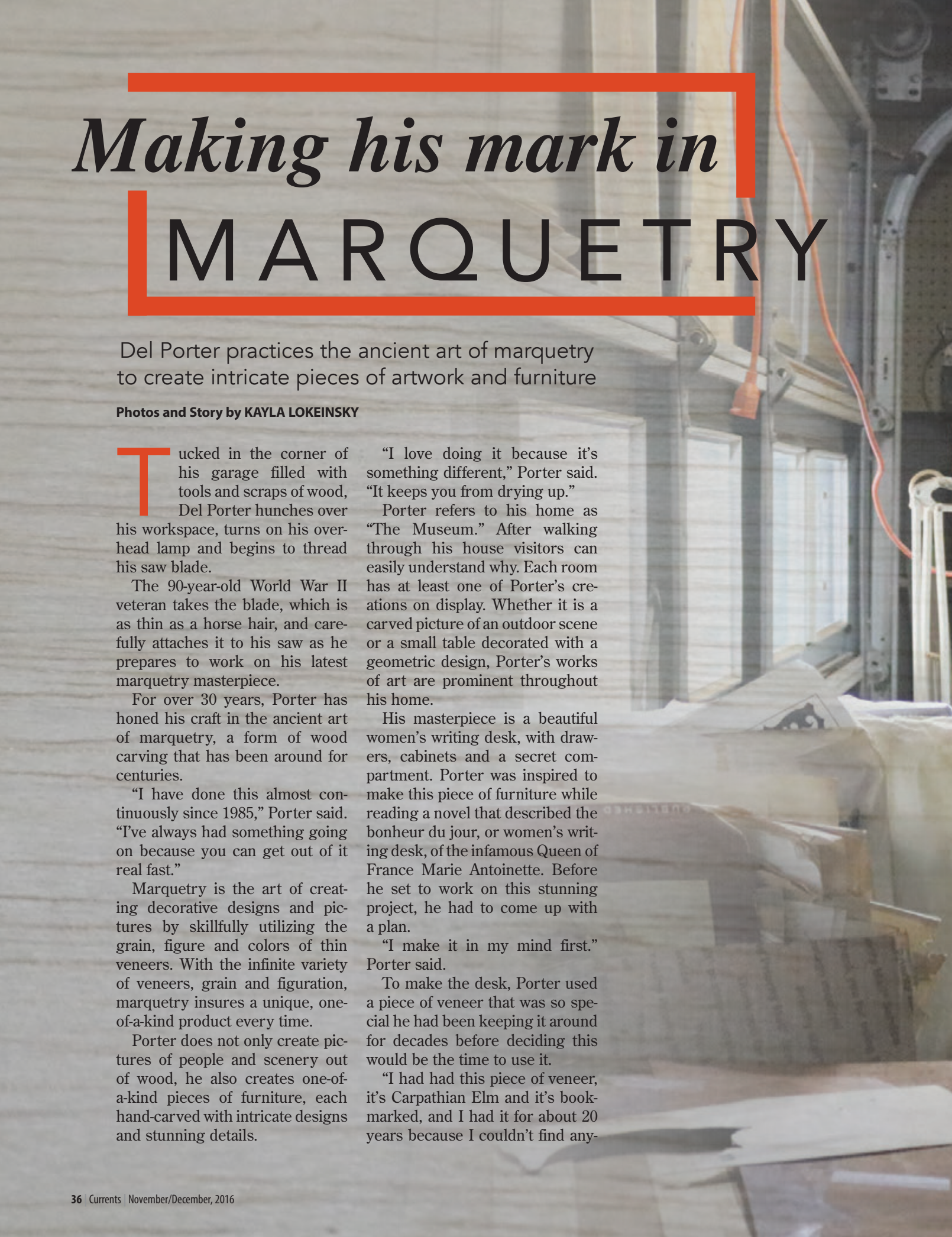
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Making his mark in MARQUETRY

Del Porter practices the ancient art of marquetry to create intricate pieces of artwork and furniture

Photos and Story by KAYLA LOKEINSKY

Tucked in the corner of his garage filled with tools and scraps of wood, Del Porter hunches over his workspace, turns on his overhead lamp and begins to thread his saw blade.

The 90-year-old World War II veteran takes the blade, which is as thin as a horse hair, and carefully attaches it to his saw as he prepares to work on his latest marquetry masterpiece.

For over 30 years, Porter has honed his craft in the ancient art of marquetry, a form of wood carving that has been around for centuries.

“I have done this almost continuously since 1985,” Porter said. “I’ve always had something going on because you can get out of it real fast.”

Marquetry is the art of creating decorative designs and pictures by skillfully utilizing the grain, figure and colors of thin veneers. With the infinite variety of veneers, grain and figuration, marquetry insures a unique, one-of-a-kind product every time.

Porter does not only create pictures of people and scenery out of wood, he also creates one-of-a-kind pieces of furniture, each hand-carved with intricate designs and stunning details.

“I love doing it because it’s something different,” Porter said. “It keeps you from drying up.”

Porter refers to his home as “The Museum.” After walking through his house visitors can easily understand why. Each room has at least one of Porter’s creations on display. Whether it is a carved picture of an outdoor scene or a small table decorated with a geometric design, Porter’s works of art are prominent throughout his home.

His masterpiece is a beautiful women’s writing desk, with drawers, cabinets and a secret compartment. Porter was inspired to make this piece of furniture while reading a novel that described the *bonheur du jour*, or women’s writing desk, of the infamous Queen of France Marie Antoinette. Before he set to work on this stunning project, he had to come up with a plan.

“I make it in my mind first.” Porter said.

To make the desk, Porter used a piece of veneer that was so special he had been keeping it around for decades before deciding this would be the time to use it.

“I had had this piece of veneer, it’s Carpathian Elm and it’s book-marked, and I had it for about 20 years because I couldn’t find any-





Del Porter repairs his broken saw blade while working on a marquetry project. The blade of the saw is as thin as a horse hair, and needs to be threaded very carefully to prevent it from breaking.



thing good enough to do with it," Porter said.

He used the Carpathian Elm to create the tabletop of the desk, and it's naturally intricate pattern is a showstopper itself. He also used cherry and river-recovered cypress to create the desk, which took six months to complete.

Although he has the skill set of someone who has been doing marquetry for his entire life, Porter didn't pick up the trade until he was in his late 50s.

After he got out of the army, Porter worked in the medical field until his retirement. He was a medical laboratory director and ran hospital laboratories in New York before moving down to Florida. He continued to run medical laboratories in Miami until he was able to retire.

"I spent my life at something that I loved doing," Porter said. "I got my first chemistry set when I was eight. But I was always interested in art even as a kid. After I retired I did what I loved to do: wood working."

Even before he got into wood working, Porter had been a wood collector for many years. Whenever





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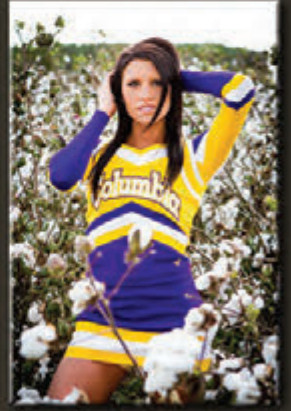
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Del Porter pulls out all the drawers that are a part of his handmade women's writing desk. The desk took porter six months to make, and also includes a hidden compartment.



he would go to a new city, he would always look to see if there was a wood importer there who could add to his collection.

Once he retired, Porter joined a club for marquetarians while living in South Florida. It was there that he began to hone his craft, and eventually he joined the American Marquetry Society and the British Marquetry Society.

Porter has had work published in publications for both societies, and he also wrote an article for *World of Wood*, one of the most popular publications in the world for wood carvers.

Porter has spent years becoming the marquetarian he is today, and he was able to get to that level through lots and lots of practice.

"It's not something you can read a book and do because there's so many tricks to the trade," Porter said.

With modern advances in technology, marquetry done by hand is

becoming more obsolete, with many modern marquetarians using lasers to create their works of art. However, Porter plans to stick to the original form of marquetry.

"Now you can do things with lasers instead of spending months making something like this," Porter said when referring to one of his hand-carved pieces of art. "You can do such fast work with lasers but it doesn't have that touch."

Porter periodically enters his artwork into contests, where he continues to outshine his competition and win prize after prize.

"In Miami or Palm Beach, whenever you did a competition you would get ribbons," Porter said. "Up here, they give you checks. Checks are much better."

While Porter does earn cash prizes

for his artwork, he does not usually try and sell them. Instead, he prefers to give them as gifts to his friends and family, which includes Dolores, his wife of 67 years, and their four children, seven grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren with one on the way.

"I don't try and sell them because I know I can't sell them for what it costs to make them," Porter said. "I just give them to special people,"

Some of Porter's artwork is on display at the Lake City Gateway Art Gallery. Porter also teaches a marbling class at the gallery. While he is always willing to share his experiences with marquetry, he does not teach a class in it.

"It's hard to teach a class in this because you learn by doing," Porter said. "You do it over and over again."

The History of Marquetry

While the exact origins of marquetry are unknown, it is known that ancient artisans devised techniques to create objects decorated with exquisite inlays of wood, stone, metal, shell, bone, ivory and other exotic materials.

The art of marquetry can be traced back to the ancient Egyptians, where artifacts including hieroglyphs and paintings were made using the art form.

In the mid-16th century, innovations in spring-driven clocks resulted in the development of the fretsaw, a handheld tool which could be used to precisely cut inlay elements. With the ability to now very accurately cut thin sheets of wood, bone, ivory, shell and other materials into nearly arbitrarily complex shapes, 16th-century craftsman began to piece together these materials and shapes into more complex images.

Over the next few centuries, marquetry schools were established in France, Germany and Holland.

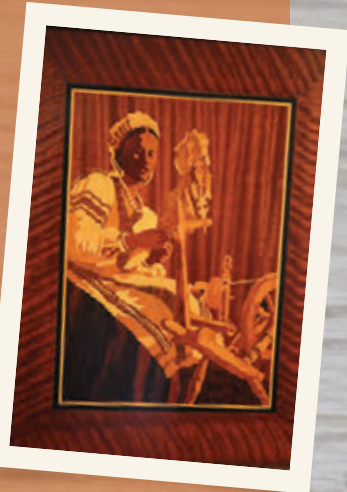
During the 16th to 18th centuries much exquisite work was focused primarily on decorating furniture, especially for royalty.

By the early 17th century, marquetry largely replaced inlaid decoration in furniture.

Geometric patterns (often referred to as "parquetry") were also quite popular.

Today there are a handful of professional marquetarians. However, it is often the amateur who produces

some of the finest work. Unrestricted by commercial concerns, they are able to develop new techniques which are often labor intensive, advancing this unique art form to new standards.



The Brooks family of Dead Wood Studio creates handmade, colorful works of art out of found driftwood

Photos and Story By
KATRINA POGGIO



Wooden carvings of fish, birds and turtles covered in bright, bold colors fill the walls inside a blue shed off an unpaved Fort White road. Inside, a family of three artisans creates wooden sculptures out of driftwood they find along the area's surrounding rivers.

Dead Wood Studio started when Randy Brooks tried to carve a wooden fish just for fun. Since he is retired from the post office, he was looking for something to fill his time.

"The first one I made was cute," Randy said. "Well, then I want to make another one."

What started as a hobby turned into a business after he and his son, Isaac Brooks, and his daughter-in-law, Bridgette Brooks, saw a strong interest in their pieces. Over time, each of them developed sculpting, painting and business skills so they could all participate in every aspect of the business.

Now that the whole family collaborates on the wooden sculptures, it's become a way of life for them. When they're out together on the river, they're always searching for a new materials for their creations.

"It's hard now to even put the boat in the river

ABOVE: Randy Brooks (from left), Bridgette Brooks and Isaac Brooks pose in front of their Dead Wood Studio shed, which serves as their working space. Bridgette shows her painted palms after painting one of the carvings.

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ABOVE: Isaac Brooks (left) and Randy Brooks (back) work on carving the wood before it gets painted. Isaac is preparing a sea turtle carving, a popular item at Dead Wood Studio.

They're **a lot of fun** to make and when they sell they're really exciting and you're **really flattered & giggly** and everything else.

and go up and just cruise in the boat without stopping to get four, five pieces along the way,” Isaac said. “Your whole world changes with something like this.”

Isaac’s wife, Bridgette, says their children even point out potential art pieces in raw driftwood before it’s been sculpted. “Look mom there’s a bird,” they say to her.

After finding a quality piece of wood, they chop, saw, grind and sand it down as a vision begins to emerge within the wood. Using her fingers to blend yellow and blue paint on a mahi-mahi, Bridgette pointed out that the wood needs to be smooth enough so they can work on it without getting splinters.

When she’s not attending nursing school at Santa Fe College, Bridgette works on her art as a therapeutic getaway from her studies.

“If I’m upset or stressed out, I want to paint,” Bridgette said.

But they each have their own unique painting styles. Bridgette says she’s been working with pastels, but Randy paints in more whimsical colors. This painting style started as an accident, because Randy is actually partially color blind.

Bridgette and Isaac remember when Randy was painting the beak of pelican sculptures a teal color because he thought it was yellow, but the customers loved it.

“They were selling and now people ask for the whimsical colors,” Bridgette said. “They don’t ever want a regular color pelican. We

A Tip From Dead Wood Studio

Always start out with a bigger piece of wood than you think you’ll need, because you can always sculpt the wood smaller later on.



don’t sell regular colored pelicans.”

While they sell a lot of bird pieces, custom orders are usually for sea turtles or mahi-mahi, Isaac said.

Figuring out what works best for the wooden pieces of art has been a lot of trial and error, but they figured out cypress trees make great wood. Other challenges have included business strategy and pricing as they travel to art festivals around the country to sell their artwork.

“So it’s really been an adventure, to say the least,” Randy said.

For about four years now, the trio has been attend-





Bridgette Brooks blends shades of yellow, green and blue as she paints a wooden mahi-mahi fish carving.

ing more than 30 art shows per year. Isaac said creating the sculptures has opened a lot of doors for them, such as exploring new places around the country while they show and sell their artwork.

“No matter where you go, it’s something different, it’s something new, it’s something exciting,” Isaac said.

But before the rise of their business, the family was actually facing some financial difficulties, Bridgette said.

“It’s been more of a God-given gift than a talent I think,” Bridgette said.

The business has enabled them to live a stable life in Fort White.

“We pray a lot about it, though,” Bridgette said. “There’s been shows that we’ve gone to that sell only one or two things and we haven’t even made our money back, you know and it’s

like, ‘What are we doing? Why are we still doing this?’ But then the next weekend, bam! We had a great show and we’re like, ‘Thank you, God. That was awesome.’”

This financial freedom comes with the proper pricing.

While some of the smaller pieces are priced below the \$200 mark, the larger sculptures can be priced around a couple thousand dollars. The sculptures take days, even months, to finish depending on the size.

“They’re a lot of fun to make and when they sell they’re really exciting and you’re really flattered and giggly and everything else,” Randy said. “It’s still awfully exciting.”



Helping You Make the Transition

**CARETENDERS OF LAKE CITY HAS A VARIETY OF SERVICES
THAT AID SENIORS IN MAKING A LIFESTYLE CHANGE.**

The life changes that come with age can be at once mystifying and frightening. Whether it's something as minor as new glasses or as major as a move to assisted living, Seniors are often concerned that lifestyle adjustments can lead to lack of independence. Thankfully, Mederi Caretenders of Gainesville has a variety of programs aimed at answering questions and easing the transitions that Seniors face.

"As with anyone, when a senior is faced with one or more major life changes - such as a move to an assisted living community where they're changing their lifestyle to accommodate some limitation, or they lose a loved one - this can be very scary and overwhelming and can possibly lead to decline in physical and/or mental health," said Susan Swirbul, a patient care liaison at Caretenders.

Caretenders has a variety of services specifically designed for clients undergoing a stressful period of change. These Seniors might be experiencing new limitations on mobility, cognitive deficits, effects of medication or other challenges that necessitate a change in lifestyle. When combined with declining overall health and other factors, clients can easily become depressed and feel as if they are losing control of their lives.

One such service, the Transitional Care Program, assists in a Senior's transition to an assisted living facility. A physician's order is placed for a comprehensive geriatric needs assessment, which is conducted by a nurse who

is thoroughly trained to identify the imminent needs of the patient.

Once the client is settled in, the program professionals help manage medical needs and communicate with families, assisted living staff and other people involved with the client's care. The program includes a team of psychiatric and medical nurses, therapists and social workers, all of whom have extensive experience and training in working with Seniors in transition.

For patients dealing with loss of mobility or cognitive abilities, Caretenders provides occupational therapists to help them re-learn and perform everyday tasks. They can also ensure that Seniors are using medical equipment correctly - for example, they can demonstrate proper positioning in a wheelchair.

All of these changes can take their toll on a Senior's morale. Psychiatric nurses provide emotional support and teach clients how to deal with their feelings of frustration and helplessness. They also partner with other Caretenders professionals to provide education and moral support to caregivers, as they play a crucial role in a Senior's outlook on life.

"Having an expert team of Caretenders clinicians that specialize in working with senior adults needing transitional support can help seniors sustain good health by incorporating proven techniques, like thorough mental/physical assessments, support counseling and engagement in meaningful activity," said Swirbul.



"I wondered if my family could manage all the care I needed after leaving the hospital."



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Winter Wonderland

Experience all the holiday cheer Columbia County has to offer

By NICK ROLLISON

The holidays in Columbia County are filled with festive activities that are fun for the whole family. From parades to lights to a day spent in the snow, there is no shortage of holiday cheer. With all of these seasonal events offered in Lake City and the surrounding cities, the area is truly a Winter Wonderland.



Downtown Lake City

Lake City's downtown area becomes a haven of lights, fun and the holiday spirit during the winter months. Each merry season begins with the hanging of the downtown lights, which are turned on November 25, the day after Thanksgiving, and remain lit until the New Year.

"Ohhh" and "Ahhh" your way through our downtown area as it is transformed with the addition of some 300,000 lights that are hung throughout the streets.

The Christmas Card Lane, an addition by the Chamber three year ago, has quickly become a community favorite of the festivities. Lake City businesses send community Christmas cards filed with best wishes to customers, friends and neighbors, and those cards are then placed around Lake DeSoto for everyone to see.

Santa Clause himself will start appearing in person on December 1 until his departure on the 23, from Mon-Sat, 6-8 p.m., at Olustee Park in the center of downtown. Every little tyke that visits Santa Clause will receive a free candy cane.

Lake City Snow Day & Christmas Parade

Its very rare that Floridians will have the chance to play in real snow. In Lake City, that dream can become a reality at the city's annual Snow Day, where on December 10 residents will have a chance to play in about 30 pounds of man-made snow.

The annual event is held by the Chamber of Commerce and sponsored by Busy Bee B&B, and both adults and children will love playing in the piles of snow and sledding down snowy hill.

Locals can

start the event off by participating in the "Dashing to the Snow" 5K-race, which typically attracts somewhere between 200-250 runners.

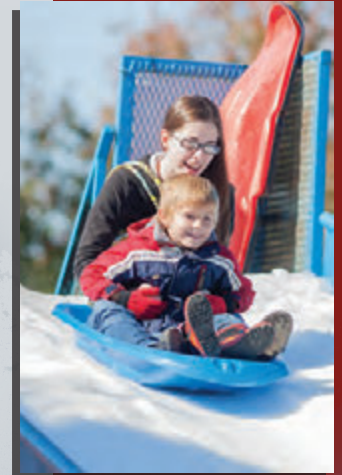
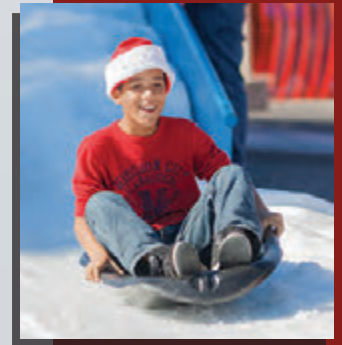
Bounce houses, live music and cash prizes will also be in store.

Also on December 10 will be the Christmas Day Parade, hosted by the Rotary Club of Lake City, with parade applications by United Way.

The parade will feature local dance groups, community leaders and, of course, Santa Clause.

"I love the Christmas events we put on in Lake City," said Dennille Decker, the executive director of the Lake City-Columbia County Chamber of Commerce. "It is unique to our community, and, let's face it, there aren't many places you can go in Florida and see snow in December! On top of that, this time of year it is more apparent than ever how many generous business and people we have in our community. From the sponsorship to bring Santa to the park nightly to Snow Day, our community is always ready to make the season special. I also think it is fun that we can celebrate as a town for the entire day! Start off early with our Dashing to the Snow race and get your exercise in and then head down to Darby Pavilion for a day full of fun with Snow Day and then finish the evening with the Christmas Parade."

For more information on all of Lake City's holiday activities, please visit the chamber website at lakecitychamber.com or call their number at 386-752-3690.





Spirit of Suwannee Music Park presents Suwannee Lights

Over 6.5 million lights weaved into festive holiday displays are sure to leave anyone who visits the annual Suwannee Lights event at the Spirit of Suwannee Music Park in Live Oak filled with holiday cheer and excitement.

Drive or walk through carefully-sculpted holiday scenes and characters in this month-long event that runs from December 3-24, beginning nightly at 6 p.m.

Photo opportunities, campfire karaokes, hot and tasty s'mores, plus the Puppetone Rockets, a children's dancing puppet show, make this one event that you'll want to bring the family back to again and again.

The SOSMP will also hit those holiday high notes with their 2016 Santa Jam Kick-Off Weekend on December 2 and 3. Come to the park to enjoy live music and raffle prizes, with all donations and toy benefits going to local charities like Love Inc. and Sparky's Kids.

The Spirit of Suwannee Music Park is located at 3076 95th Drive in Live Oak.

Christmas on the Square

Live Oak's downtown area will collectively wish you a Merry Christmas on Saturday, December 3, with the 32nd annual Christmas On The Square event.

Hosted by the Suwannee County Chamber of Commerce, "Lighting the Way to Christmas" is this year's theme for a holiday spectacle that features over 270 arts and crafts vendors, live music, dancing, a fun run, car show, agriculture exhibit and so much more.

Be sure to get to the festivities early on December 1, at 6:15 p.m., for the Jingle Bell Fun Run/Walk, which takes you through downtown Live Oak.

Put off hanging that Christmas stocking for another day or two and get ready for Saturday's vendors that will shower you with unique hand-made displays of

wood works, quilts, furniture and other crafts. Take in some live entertainment at Millennium Park, visit the agriculture exhibit to see antique farming equipment or continue your trip down memory lane with a lineup of classic muscle and custom antique cars at the car show.

Remember to visit Santa at the Gazebo in Santa Land in order to tell him your Christmas wishes and be sure to stick around as night falls for the Annual Christmas Parade of Lights, which begins at 6 p.m.. Floats will march and roll their way down Ohio Ave for a chance to wow the crowd and win one of the numerous float titles given out each year.

For more information on the Christmas On The Square event, please visit suwanneechamber.com or call the Suwannee County Chamber of Commerce at 386-362-3071.

The Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center Festival Of Lights

Set near the banks of the historic Suwannee River, The Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center will once again be adding some holiday cheer to the town of White Springs and the surrounding area with its month-long Festival of Lights event.

From December 2 to December 24, experience the park as it is bathed in more than five million lights, in a light show that was named as a Top 20 Event in the Southeastern United States.

"The lights are special not just to the park but to the community," Florida State Parks Service Specialist Andrea Thomas said. "It brings people together and creates a proudness that can be felt all over town. It is such a great event to work on and you are able to work with so many different people from all over. We are always looking for volunteers





too!"

Those volunteers and park staff start hanging the lights in September, decorating oak tree light displays that can only be described as magical. An antebellum museum with holiday cheer, a gingerbread village, candy cane forest and a North Pole with Santa's workshop will delight any family looking for that special holiday outing.

This year the park is trying something new. There will be 14 nights of the Classic Festival of Lights, featuring free hot coca, popcorn and marshmallow roasting, a bonfire, craft activities, snow flurries, train display and an appearance from Santa Clause. The new addition to the Festival of Lights this year will be eight nights of their Holiday Drive-Through, where you can load up the family and enjoy the beautiful light displays from your vehicle.

From December 2-18, the Holiday Drive-Through will be held Monday-Thursday, while the Classic Festival of Lights will take place Friday through Sunday. From December 18-23, the Classic Festival will take place. December 24th is a drive through only and the official end of the Festival of Lights.

For more info on Stephen Foster, please visit their website at floridastate-parks.org/park/stephen-foster or call 386-397-2733. The park is located at 11016 Lillian Sanders Dr in White Springs, FL.

Classic Festival of Lights:
\$3 per person. Children under 3 are free.
Drive Through Only Nights:
\$2 per person. Children under 3 are free.

tis the Season to Sparkle & Shine!

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PREPARING *your garden* FOR WINTER

T

he end of 2016 is fast approaching. The last two months of the year bring us so many special times. Not only do we have the

much-anticipated and welcome cooler weather, we have election day and the privilege of voting for our choices. Football is still going strong and the best teams are rising to the top.

Thanksgiving is probably the oldest and most truly American of our national holidays, and allows us to give thanks for our many blessings. I have such fond memories of my mom cooking for days preparing the wonderful Thanksgiving meal enjoyed by our extended family. I loved her cornbread dressing and I hope I had the good sense to tell her how much all her efforts meant to me. When we're living special times I suppose we don't realize it until they're just a happy memory. If all children had a happy and safe childhood I'm sure many problems of this world wouldn't exist.

We certainly can't say the Christmas season sneaks up on us. The stores have a compulsion to introduce the commercial trappings earlier each year.

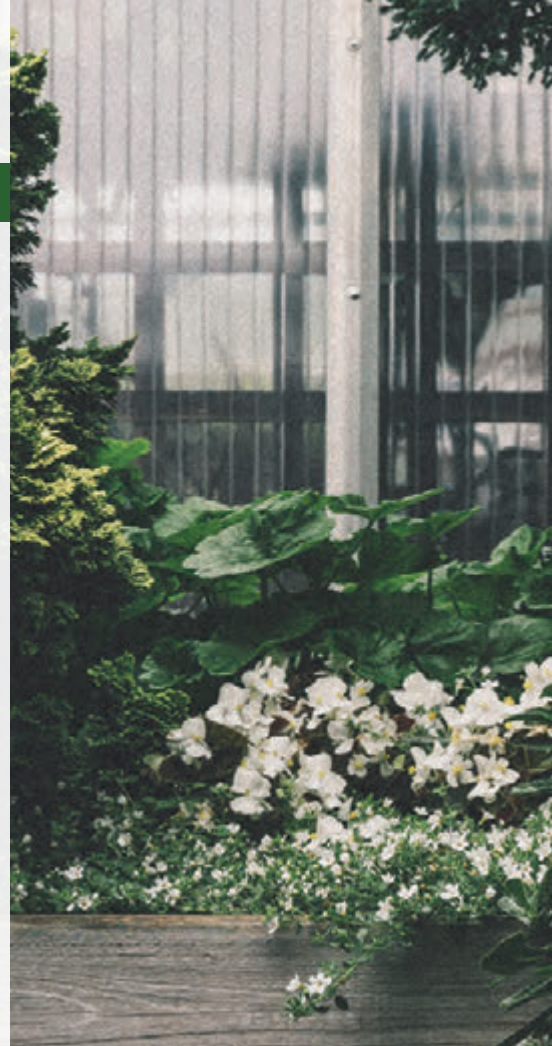
With all these special things going on, gardening can't help but be way down the list of things to do. North Florida is a wonderful place to live. We have just enough change in temperatures to know when the seasons change, but

we never get snowed in. Even when the temperatures are still warm, the plants tell us that colder weather is coming. The summer annuals begin to look tired, the caladium leaves have yellowed and fallen over, the grass is slowing and the leaves have started to fall.

What to plant

Fall is a good time to plant shrubs and trees from containers or to reno-

Even when the temperatures are still warm, the plants tell us that colder weather is coming. The summer annuals begin to look tired, the caladium leaves have yellowed and fallen over, the grass is slowing and the leaves have started to fall.





winter HERBS FOR PLANTING

- **Cilantro**

Cilantro is an annual herb. All parts of the plant are edible, but the fresh leaves and the dried seeds are the parts most traditionally used in cooking.

- **Comfrey**

Comfrey is a perennial herb with a turnip-like root and large broad leaves that bear cream or purplish bell-shaped flowers.

- **Dill**

Dill is an annual herb with slender hollow stems and finely divided, softly delicate leaves.

- **Fennel**

Fennel is a hardy, perennial herb with yellow flowers and feathery leaves. It is a highly aromatic and flavorful herb with culinary and medicinal uses.

- **Garlic**

The garlic plant's bulb is the most commonly used part of the plant. With the exception of the single clove types, garlic bulbs are normally divided into numerous fleshy sections called cloves.

- **Oregano**

Oregano is a perennial herb, with leaves opposite each side of the stem and flowers purplish in color. Oregano is related to the herb marjoram.

- **Parsley**

Garden parsley is a bright green, biennial, plant in temperate climates, or an annual herb in subtropical and tropical areas.

- **Sage**

Sage is a perennial, evergreen subshrub, with woody stems, grayish leaves, and blue to purplish flowers.

- **Thyme**

Thyme is an evergreen herb with culinary, medicinal, and ornamental uses. It is a relative to oregano.

fennel



parsley



garlic



thyme



vate parts of the garden, but wait until January to transplant them when they are dormant for best results. January or February is the best time to transplant because the roots will have a chance to become established before having to put their energy into new growth when spring arrives.

Plant cool weather annuals in the fall so they'll have a chance to put out a better root system by bloom time. Dead head spent blooms so plants won't waste energy producing seeds and will keep blooming.

Pinch back fall-planted snapdragons when they are about five inches tall; do this several times for bushier plants.

Water 24-48 hours before a hard freeze is expected. Moist soil will absorb and hold heat better than dry soil.

Cold, hardy annuals include: pansies, violas, dianthus, sweet alyssum, petunias, lobelia, snaps, diascia, nemesia and calendulas.

If you want to start some of your plants from seed, bachelor buttons, California poppies, larkspur and sweet peas are easily started from seed.

Cold weather vegetables include: beets, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, collards, onions, radishes, turnips and lettuces. Harvest just the outer leaves of the lettuces and they will continue to produce.

Herbs for planting in winter: cilantro, comfrey, dill, fennel, garlic, oregano, parsley, sage and thyme. Herbs started easily from seed are cilantro (cilantro seeds are coriander), chives (rebound after a freeze and benefit from trimming) and parsley.

The Poinsettias we enjoy during the Christmas season prefer bright light, but not direct sunlight and temperatures around 70 degrees and not below 50 degrees.

Avoid placing them in drafts or near excessive heat. Water when soil feels dry and drain well. Never let them sit in standing water. If you plant them in the garden after cold weather is over don't plant where artificial light will reach them during dark hours or they won't bloom the next year. Trim them back several times through August.

Wishing you all a very happy Thanksgiving, Merry Christmas and the best in the New Year.

■ Martha Ann Ronsonet is an avid gardener and the author of *Gardening in the Deep South and Other Hot Pursuits*.





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Wishing you health & happiness
during this festive season!

Happy Holiday!



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THE BUSINESS OF BEES and Honey

Photos and Story by KATRINA POGGIO

Michael Thomas remembers a time back in 1959 when he bought his first hives full of buzzing bees.

He started beekeeping as a hobby around the age of 25. Years later, he's running his own honey production and pollination company. Lake-City based Thomas Honey Company has been providing locals with fresh, natural honey for nearly 50 years.

A Jacksonville native, Thomas made a new home in rural Lake City and shortly after he took over a beekeeping business in 1968. Established at 600 hives, the company quickly grew to about 1,600 hives.

"I've had good times and bad times," Thomas said. "I like the challenge. And, all farming is gambling and all farmers are always looking for the big hit and so the anticipation of the crop is certainly something I look forward to and most farmers do."

Thomas explained that bees gather two things from flowers: pollen and nectar. Bees produce honey in the wintertime to generate heat to keep the hive warm.

"They will store a great deal more honey than they need to survive on because that's nature's way," Thomas said.

After Thomas collects the extra honey, he filters it through a sheer sheet of nylon fabric that gets rid of stray bits such as small bees, twigs,

[Bees] will store a great deal more honey than they need to survive on because that's nature's way.

or dirt. While they do filter their honey, Thomas Honey Company doesn't process their honey like commercial honey companies.

"We don't filter our honey through a filter press because part of the benefit of the honey is the pollens and things

that are in that honey," Thomas said.

Although the shelf life is extended when it's artificially filtered, Thomas wants to retain the natural state of the honey as much as he can. Additionally, Thomas doesn't heat his honey above 120 degrees because any higher temperature will kill the enzymes that are naturally in it and killing it is an artificial process, Thomas said. According to him, his honey is marketable as raw honey.

"When I started bottling honey and selling honey, that was my niche in the market, that I kept the honey separated," Thomas said. "Most of the honey that you buy in the market is either clover honey or a blend of honey. It's just marketed as pure honey and the reason for that is it's very, very difficult to keep it separated. What I'm dealing with is four individual products."

The four different honey varieties he offers are Gallberry Honey, Orange Blossom Honey, Clover Honey and Wildflower Honey. It's sold throughout North-Central Florida in grocery stores, farmers markets, produce stands and health food stores.

While he still makes his honey, beekeeping isn't what Thomas remembers it used to be.

Beekeeping is more challenging now because there are more pests





Thomas Honey Company has been in business for more than 40 years and established with 600 colonies of honey bees and quickly expanded to roughly 1,600 colonies of honey bees.



ABOVE: Mike Thomas, owner of Thomas Honey Company, puts his fingers in a crowd of bees on a hive. He started beekeeping as a hobby when he was in his twenties. **LEFT:** Thomas Honey Company produces several varieties of honey including gallberry, orange blossom, clover and wildflower. They also produce Tupelo Honey, which only comes from the panhandle of Florida.

and diseases affecting bee colonies. The mass dying of bees, known as colony collapse disorder, has greatly contributed to those issues. However, Thomas has continued to stay in beekeeping and adapt to the changing industry.

“The price of honey has gotten very high and the price of honey has caused a lot of beekeepers to lean toward making honey rather than pollina-

tion, but there are a large number of plants that need to be pollinated,” Thomas said.

Farmers pay Thomas Honey Company to have the bees pollinate their crops. Locally, Thomas has a lot of blueberry field contracts, but pollination is also beneficial for watermelon, cantaloupe, citrus and cucumbers.

“Obviously the farmers would not pay me to put bees on their field if it wasn’t beneficial to them,” Thomas said.

Cross-pollination helps at least 30 percent of the world’s crops and about 90 percent of wild plants to thrive, according to National Resources Defense Council.

“I got a great deal of satisfaction out of watching the crops grow,” Thomas said. “When I put my bees in, the crops are in their infancy and I see them grow and mature and I see them harvested and then I see them plowed under and then I get my bees and move out.”



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HOLIDAY GIFT GUIDE

Deciding on the perfect holiday gift can be a daunting task. How can you be sure that the present you picked will be the best one to give? Before you go on and make your shopping list, take a look at our Gift Guide. THESE WILL PLEASE EVEN THE PICKIEST PEOPLE ON YOUR LIST.

Gifts for the Grandparents

The best tip for buying gifts for grandparents is to keep it personal. Anything homemade will always be a hit. If you're looking for a store-bought gift that comes from the heart, here are some great options:

1) Personalized Apron

Whether Grandpa is out manning the grill or Grandma is in the kitchen making her famous Christmas cookies, a personalized apron is the perfect gift for any grandparent who likes to cook. You can personalize it with their name, a funny saying or even a photo of the whole family.

2) Grandparent and Grandchild Letter Book Set

Brimming with personal prompts, this nostalgic set of 40 cards is meant to be sent and shared between grandparents and their grandchildren to create meaningful and lasting memories. This gift will allow them to keep in touch through generations, and is a gift that keeps on giving.



3) Smittens Mittens

These cozy-cute Smittens let you hold hands inside a mitten. This gift is perfect for grandparents when they take cold walks with grandchildren or with each other. It's a gift that is both a little silly and adorably sweet.



5



6



7



4



1



3



8



9

Gifts for Kids

For children under the age of 12, these presents will be sure to please:

4) Pokemon Z-Ring Interactive Set

Pokemon is back and bigger than ever. Your kids can experience the thrill of battle in a whole new way with the with this interactive game.

5) 3D Art Set

The IDO-3D Vertical Five Pen 3D Art Set combines the fun of drawing with the technology of the future. Children can make mind-blowing 3D creations with this art set, from bridges to castles to animals.

6) Fisher-Pice Bright Beats Dance & Move BeatBo

Shake it baby! This toy is the perfect playtime pal for singing and dancing with your little one. BeatBo gets the dance party started with fun songs, learning content and dance moves.

Gifts for Teens

Teenagers can be heard to impress, but any of these gifts would do the trick:

7) Wireless Earbuds

Finally, a way to get your teen to unplug from their iPhone- sort of. Wireless headphones are the perfect gift for any teen who likes to jam out.

8) Smartphone Projector

This cardboard smartphone projector will upgrade your teen's laptop-on-pillow setup to an at-home movie theatre. It's compatible with iOS and Android phones and projects up to eight-times your smartphone's screen.

9) Double Ladderball Game

This game is a great way to get your teen outside and it's fun for the whole family.

For the Adventurer

These presents are perfect for any of your friends or family members who love the great outdoors.

10) YETI Sidekick

Storing your keys, cash and other gear during a day in the wild is much easier with this YETI Hopper accessory. It's the perfect way to store your valuables while you're on the go and it's completely water-resistant.

11) Tinder on a Rope

This is a fun stocking-stuffer for your adventurer. You never know when you're going to need to start a fire, and tinder on a rope is the ultimate and natural way to state a fire in any weather.

12) Portable Chair

The Thermarest Treo Chair has big-chair comfort in a compact, lightweight package. This chair folds up small enough to fit into a backpack or large purse, and is great for taking breaks while hiking or fishing.



For the Foodie

For your family members and friends who are always in whipping something up in the kitchen, or even the ones who just love food.

13) Toaster Grilled Cheese Bags

With these fun little stocking-stuffers, making grilled cheese has never been more simple. These will allow your loved ones to simply put their cheese sandwich into one of the bags, pop it in the toaster and enjoy a perfectly melted, golden brown grilled cheese.

15) Homemade Infused Olive Oils

Olive oil is an essential ingredient for any chef, and these infused olive oils will give their dishes an extra kick. The fact that they are homemade will make the gift that much more special. Recipes can be easily found online.



14) Zoku Ice Cream Maker

For all your ice cream-loving friends, this gift sure is sweet. Make creamy, delicious soft serve ice cream in as little as 10 minutes thanks to this innovate ice cream maker.

For your Co-worker

Whether they're your office best friend, your lunch buddy or the new guy you barely know, these gifts are great for any co-worker this holiday season.

16) Stress Buster Desktop Punching Ball

This present is just the thing to get your co-worker who needs a healthy outlet for those work stresses. While it can be used as a gag gift, it will definitely come in handy when your co-worker needs to let off some steam.

17) Dip Mix Ornaments

This is a cheap and easy last-minute DIY gift that your co-worker will actually like. Fill some empty, clear ornaments with some fun and unusual spices, wrap a bow around them and you now have a great gift for your workplace's holiday gift exchange.



18) Funny Coffee Mug

This is a great gift for the co-worker who needs their morning jolt. A coffee mug with a funny saying will be sure to perk up their day.



THE YEAR'S BEST TECH GIFTS

19) Apple Watch Series 2

Price: \$369

Apple iPhone users in your life will love the latest Apple Watch Series 2. Yes, it looks like its predecessor, but it comes with many new improvements. It is fully waterproof, equipped with GPS and it packs a bright display that's visible even under direct sunlight. There are many variants to choose from, including Apple collaborations with Nike and fashion house Hermes.



20) Amazon Fire HD 8 Tablet

Price: \$90

Amazon's recently refreshed Fire HD 8 Android slate is a great gift for friends or relatives who haven't experienced the joys that tablets have to offer. The colorful device has a bright design, lightweight body, an 8-inch HD display and a snappy processor, making it function faster for common tasks.



21) HP Sprocket Portable Photo Printer

Price: \$130

This portable printer is a great gift for anyone who is constantly taking photos on their phones. This cool portable photo printer will enable your favorite social media aficionados to get physical copies of their best mobile photos. This printer works with both Apple iPhone and Android smartphones via a free app.



22) Microsoft Xbox One S Gaming Console

Price: \$300

The latest Xbox S by Microsoft is a solid gift for both gamers and people who like high-quality home entertainment. In addition to being slimmer and more sleek than the Xbox One, this gaming console also has upgraded hardware.



23) FitBit Alta

Price: \$130

This is a perfect gift for any fitness aficionado. The FitBit Alta takes a stealthy approach to activity and sleep tracking. This new version of the popular fitness tracker blends in more with everyday clothing, and is also available with leather bands to quickly transform it into a fashion accessory.



24) Amazon Echo Dot (2nd Generation)

Price: \$50

The Echo Dot is a hands-free, voice-controlled device that uses Alexa, Amazon's intelligent personal assistant, to play music, control smart home devices, provide information, read the news, set alarms and more. This device basically acts like a live search engine with voice interaction, and can assist the user with any question they may have. The Echo Dot comes in a convenient, compact package that is perfect for transport.



Holiday Designs

DONE ON A DIME

When it comes to decorating your home for the holidays, the costs can quickly start to add up. Holiday decorations can be incredibly expensive, and while many people may go the route of making their own holiday decorations, sometimes things don't go according to plan. In some cases, you may end up spending even more on the things you need to create your own decorations than you would spend buying pre-made ones. Or, maybe you're not the craftiest person, and you might struggle to make even the simplest decorations.

Conquering the task of having a do-it-yourself holiday season is not easy. These five holiday crafts are the answer to your DIY fears. Not only are they easy to make, they're also easy your budget. Every piece of decor costs less than \$10 to make! Most of the materials used in these projects can be found at any dollar store or in the craft section of Walmart. These craft ideas are the perfect holiday designs on a dime.



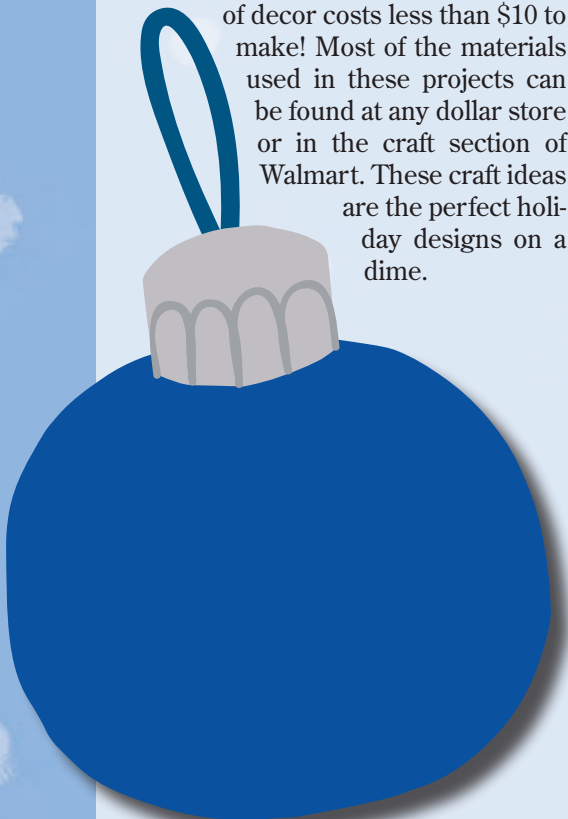
Christmas Countdown Chalkboard Charger

MATERIALS:

- Chalkboard paint
- White chalk marker
- Plastic charger plate

HERE'S HOW:

1. Paint black chalkboard paint in the center of the charger, leaving enough space around the edges for a border.
2. Once dry, write your countdown on the chalkboard with a white chalk marker. You can use other colors as well to decorate.
3. You can embellish your countdown chalkboard with bells, ribbons or other holiday decor.





Glam Garland Wreath

MATERIALS:

- Garland
- Wreath Foam
- Push Pins

HERE'S HOW:

1. Wrap your garland around your wreath form.
2. Use your push pins to secure your garland into place.
3. If needed, use a piece of ribbon to hang.

Ornament Magnets

MATERIALS:

- Ornaments
- Small, round magnets
- Glue

HERE'S HOW:

1. Glue you magnet to the back of your ornament.
2. Place ornament on refrigerator or any magnetic surface for a fun holiday punch!



Wine Glass Candle Holders

MATERIALS:

- Plain wine glass
- Spray glitter
- Battery-operated tea light candle
- Bells • Ribbon or twine

HERE'S HOW:

1. Turn wine glass upside down
2. Spray wine glass with spray glitter, covering completely
3. Glue tea light to top of wine glass.
4. Decorate with bells and colorful holiday string or ribbon



IDEA: *You can use any color paint or glitter to turn your wine glasses into any holiday character. Use white for a snowman, blue with white snowflake stickers for a classing winter theme or red and green for Christmas.



Hungry for the HOLIDAYS

These holiday party recipes from Taste Buddies columnist Genie Norman are easy to make and even easier to eat.



Holidays are such busy a busy time. A very simple item for a meal or to make party sandwiches or sliders with is the Crock Pot ham. The ham is so moist, tender and tasty you'll probably never cook ham your way again. Put it on in the morning and forget about it. It'll be ready 6-7 hours later.

The best way to serve it is sliced really thin using an electric knife. It almost melts in your mouth.

3 pkg. phyllo pastry cups (frozen)
1/2 to 3/4 cup mayo
1 pkg. (4 oz) real bacon bits (soft)
1 cup grated Swiss cheese
1 can rotel tomatoes with green chiles, drained

Rotel Cups

Directions

Place pastry cups onto a large cookie sheet. Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Mix all other ingredients together and use 1/2 cup or less of mayonnaise, mix and if it stays together that's fine. If it doesn't add a little more mayo until it sticks together. You don't want it to be mushy. Spoon into the cups. Bake at 375 degrees for 15-20 minutes. They should be bubbly, lightly brown on top and the cups should feel crispy. Serve hot or at room temp.

Ingredients

Note: Original recipe called for Swiss cheese but you can substitute for whatever cheese you like. Also, try serving with a dollop of sour cream on top after baking. The recipe makes enough to fill 45 cups (3 phyllo packages).



Coca Cola Ham

Ingredients:

- 3/4 cup brown sugar
- 2 Tbs. yellow mustard
- 1 can of coca cola (can be diet)
- Ham

Directions:

Thoroughly combine brown sugar and mustard moistened with just enough coke to make a smooth paste, reserving remaining coke.

Rub entire ham with mixture.

Place ham in crock pot



and add remaining coke.

Cover and cook on high setting for one hour, then turn to low setting for 6-7 hours if ham weighs 3 to 4 lbs. and 8 - 10 hours if ham weighs 5 plus lbs.

Another crowd pleaser is Rotel Cups. I make these anytime I have people over. They are a major hit, especially with teenagers or when watching football games. You mix the ingredients together, place the mixture in the refrigerator so it can blend and then it's ready in minutes.



If you are having a holiday brunch, this coffee punch is memorable and delicious. Linda Chambers and Libby Rhoden shared this recipe with me a long time ago and I look for occasions to make it. I could actually take a very long straw and stick it in a punch bowl and just sip. It's simple, yet, oh so elegant looking and so delicious.

Coffee Punch

Ingredients:

- 1/2 cup dry Instant Coffee e.g. Tasters Choice
- 2 cups hot water
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 gallon milk
- 1/2 gallon vanilla ice cream
- 1/2 gallon chocolate ice cream

Directions:

Heat water, coffee and sugar and bring to a boil.

Once cooled, pour coffee mixture into punch bowl and stir in milk and add ice cream. Stir until blended.

Note: It is easier to boil the water, coffee and sugar the night before and refrigerate it until you're ready to use it the next day. You can also use decaf coffee and low fat milk/ice cream if you want to make this healthier. Also coffee ice cream can be used instead of vanilla or chocolate. Serves 35-40 small punch cups.



During the holidays we all need a quick recipe to make that is easy but also delicious and decadent. Brownies are the perfect solution, but these brownies take it over the top and are true crowd pleasers. They're a great treat to bring to school parties, luncheons, pot lucks or to give to neighbors as gifts. My mother made her brownies from scratch and she always added the marshmallows and icing on top. While I use brownie mix, I make my Coca Cola icing from scratch, and it comes out almost as good as Mama's.

Brownies with Marshmallows

Prepare the brownies as described on box in 9x13 sprayed pan. Bake as directed. I use Duncan Hines Chewy Family size mix.

Use a cake tester and when they are done, sprinkle about 3 cups of mini marshmallows on top and leave in the oven about 4 more minutes until marshmallows are puffy and lightly brown. Remove from oven and using a fork spread the marshmallows covering the top of brownies. Pour coca cola icing over brownies.

Coca Cola Icing

Ingredients:

- 1 stick margarine or butter
- 2 Tbs. Cocoa
- 6 Tbs. Coca Cola
- 1 box powdered sugar
- 1 tsp vanilla
- Pinch of salt
- 1 cup chopped pecans (optional)

Directions:

Heat margarine, cocoa and Coca Cola to boiling point.

Remove from heat, stir in powdered sugar, salt and vanilla. (It's easier to use electric mixer.)

Add nuts (optional) and pour icing over the brownies and spread to edges.

Let cool before cutting, icing will harden when cool. Can be stored in refrigerator.



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12 LAST-MINUTE HOLIDAY PARTY TIPS

By KAYLA LOKEINSKY

Last-minute gatherings happen all the time around the holidays. Whether it's an unexpected invitation to a party or a spur-of-the-moment get-together at your house, there's no shortage of celebration when the holidays come around. To keep yourself from getting blind-sighted during holiday season, follow these 12 last-minute holiday party tips.

1 Keep A Gift Grab Pile

Whether it's a neighbor bringing you an unexpected gift or a scramble to find a present for the person you forgot to put on your shopping list, sometimes you are forced to give a last-minute gift. When holiday shopping, always grab a few extra, neutral gifts for those unexpected occasions. Some go-to staples include holiday cookie sets (because who doesn't like food) and a variety of gift cards with small amounts on them. These are great for giving to the mailman, your neighbors, teachers or as secret santa gifts. By keeping gifts on-hand, you'll never have to rush to find one at the last second.



3 [Invest in an Ugly Sweater]

Ugly Christmas Sweater Parties are a growing trend. It may seem silly to buy a sweater that you'll only wear maybe once or twice a year, but by keeping one on-hand you won't have to rush to the store when you get invited to one of these parties and realize you have nothing to wear.

2 Make Gifts in Bulk

Homemade gifts are almost always more personal and cheaper than store-bought ones, plus they're great for a holiday gift exchange or as favors for a holiday party. When it comes to homemade gifts, it's best to make them in bulk, this way you'll never be without when going to a holiday event. Whether it's a sugar scrub, or homemade candles or even just holiday cookies, you can't go wrong with making more than enough. This way, you have plenty to spare if you have to give a last-minute gift.

HOMEMADE SUGAR COOKIE SCRUB

Ingredients:

- ½ cup coconut oil
- 1 tsp. vanilla
- ½ cup white sugar
- ½ cup brown sugar (add more if you want the scrub to be more grainy)
- small mason jars

Directions:

Mix all the ingredients in a medium size bowl and scoop into small mason jars. Seal the jar and decorate to give as a holiday gift!





4 Don't Be Afraid to Order Out

Sometimes it's easier to pick up a phonebook than a cookbook. No one expects a last-minute holiday party to have all the bells and whistles. Not everything has to be homemade and look like it came off the cover of a lifestyle magazine. If you find out you are hosting holiday guests without much notice, reduce your stress level by ordering in food or picking up pre-made party platters. If you have a couple days of notice, you can even have your party catered by your favorite restaurant.

5 Create a Hot Chocolate Bar

Turn a casual movie night or small gathering into a real party with a hot chocolate bar. You'll look like the hostess with the mostest with this easy breezy party plan.

On a table, set up mugs, hot cocoa (you can prepare a big batch in a slow cooker) and lots of fun toppings like whipped cream, marshmallows, candy and hot fudge. The possibilities are endless. A hot chocolate bar pairs perfectly with a chilly night and good company.

6 Have A Cookie Decorating Station

If you're looking for a last-minute activity to have at your holiday party, you cannot go wrong with a cookie-decorating station. All you will need is a pack of plain sugar cookies, either homemade or if you're really stretched for time store-bought, and some different colored icing and sprinkles. This is a good holiday party activity to have when you have children to entertain. They will love getting to decorate their cookies, and they'll especially love eating them!



7 Light Up Your Table

If you have holiday company coming over at the last minute, you might not be prepared to have it all decked out in festive decorations. To light up your holiday gathering in a pinch, create a simple centerpiece using strings of light. If you take an empty class vase, or several if you want to make a large centerpiece, fill it with battery-operated Christmas lights and add in ornaments, pinecones or other seasonal nature items, you will have a beautiful centerpiece without having to shell out a lot of money or time.



8 Kill Two Birds With One Crockpot

Slow cooker dips are a huge party hit, but even the best appetizers have trouble lasting throughout the night. So, to make double the dip with half the mess, simply create a divider in your slow cooker with aluminum foil. Make a strong wall to place in the center of your slow cooker that won't falter when the cheesy dips are poured in. Reinforce it by pressing the ends all the way up to the sides of the slow cooker so that not one drop finds its way to the opposite side. Now you have two delicious dips without the extra cleanup.



9 Set Up A Holiday Photo Booth

Photo booths are always a blast at events, and now it's easy to create your own in a matter of minutes. To create a background, use some of that extra holiday wrapping paper you have lying around and tape it to the wall. Next, use construction paper to cut out classic holiday shapes like presents, antlers and even a Santa beard. Attach them to sticks and there you go, you have your own homemade photo booth. Guests can use their own phones or cameras to take the photos, and this easy photo booth will be great entertainment for both



10 When In Doubt, Make A Tree

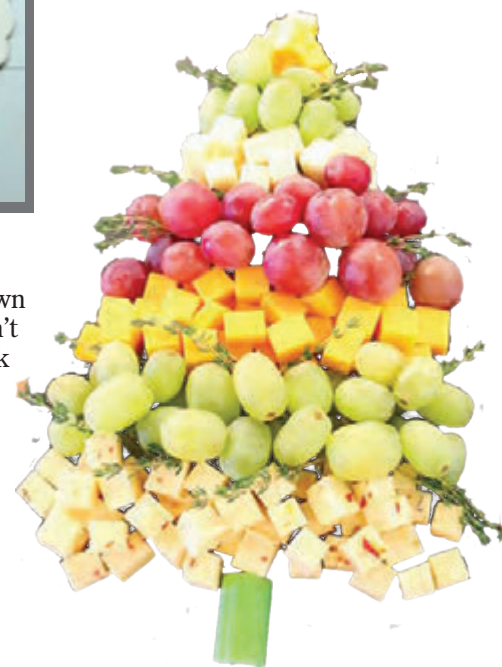
Have you ever been invited to a last-minute Christmas party and not known what to bring? You want to look like you put a lot of effort into your dish but you don't have a lot of time? If that's the case, the easiest thing to do is to make your dish look like a tree. Whether it's box-mix brownies cut into triangles covered in green frosting, tree-shaped cookies with candy ornaments or a cheese plate in the shape of a triangle with a celery stump at the bottom, almost any food dish can be made to look festive. This trick is an easy way to put a little extra holiday sparkle into your dish without having to put in hours of effort.

11 Keep Extra Holiday Cards on Hand

One of the best things about the holiday season is opening your mailbox and seeing a pile of Christmas and holiday cards. If you typically send out holiday cards, you should consider ordering at least a dozen extra. They're perfect for accompanying last-minute gifts or giving to the host of a holiday party you didn't think you'd be invited to. Plus, if you get a holiday card from someone you didn't expect one from, you won't have to worry about not having enough cards to send them one in return. It's always better to have too many than not enough.

12 Have A Party Game On Deck

If you're going to host a party at the last minute, you should have some form of entertainment on-hand. Even if you don't think you'll be hosting a holiday party anytime soon, you can always bring it to someone else's party or play the game at home with your family. Some ideas include "pin the tail on the reindeer," or "pin the nose on the snowman," a holiday scavenger hunt or a marshmallow toss (similar to a water balloon toss). All of these activities are easy to store until they need to be taken out for unexpected guests and also easy to transport, making them perfect for bringing to any holiday gathering.



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