

It's a Cookie Cutter Christmas

BY JENNIFER NELSON

So many holiday memories include the sweet aroma of freshly baked cookies. Remember helping mom and grandma stir the batter, then peering through the oven window eager to decorate the cookies? Icing, chips, sprinkles would spill and smiles would light up the house.

For the women of the Rocky Mountain Cut-ups, these holiday memories of baking and decorating cookies have spilled into a lifelong passion. The RMCU, the regional club for the National Cookie Cutter Collector's Club, has 37 active members from the western states who are passionate about collecting cutters and often search far and wide to add to their already vast collections.

I was unaware until a few weeks ago that such a club existed and then was astounded to learn that there are approximately 650 members internationally in the national club. Many of the current RMCU members were also unaware of the club before they joined. June Sturm-Roller, a former president of the national club, thought she was the only person who collected cookie cutters until a friend invited her to a local cookie cutter meeting. The club members immediately welcomed her and handed her a goodie bag that included a cutter, of course. June was hooked. "How many places do you go where people just welcome you in?" June said.

And it's true. The members of RMCU are generous, friendly and full of passion. I met women from the club on three occasions, and each time they gave me a small cookie-related gift. Also, when I called June to interview her, I was immediately invited to a birthday party for two of the collectors and then to June's house to see her collection. I felt a little hesitant because I was barging in on a party for women I had never met, but my qualms were immediately put to rest. The evening was a riot. These women, who ranged in age from the mid-20s to the late 70s, were lively and full of joy and generosity.

During the party, one of the birthday girls, Hazel, received a rare set of Snoopy cookie cutters as a gift, and every- [continued on page 17]



Mae Jane Keller (left) and June Sturm-Roller enjoy showing off a few of their favorite cookie cutters November 5.

(Left) Cutting out cookies is a holiday tradition in many homes.

[continued from page 16] one was excited for her. "Everybody wants these; they're much sought after," June said. "I had one but I thought it would have a lot more meaning to Hazel than it does to me. I knew it would make her very, very happy. It's that type of friendship within the group."

And the generosity doesn't just stay within the club. The members watch for opportunities to brighten other peoples' lives. Recently, two members baked 500 cookies in one day and mailed them to soldiers in Iraq. Another member, a doctor who used to work in Cañon City, would make cookies, decorate them and take them to his patients who always looked forward to his visits. At each meeting for the RMCU, members donate items to a selected charity. At the 2005 fall/winter meeting, RMCU members filled shoeboxes with goodies for Operation Christmas Child. The quarterly national newsletter also publishes ways to help others in need. The most recent issue reminded collectors to continue baking and mailing cookies to soldiers stationed overseas.

Because of these kinds of activities, June's favorite part of the club is the friendship and stories shared between members. Each woman has a unique tale about how she began collecting cutters. Some inherited a few cutters from their mothers and were fascinated by them. Joyce, one of the birthday girls, had a tiny oven with little cookie cutters and cookie sheets. She grew up making miniature

cookies and loved it so much she began collecting cutters. June inherited a few from her grandmother. Arlene Lipman, the RMCU president, said her mother always had a few cutters around. She bought a handmade tin whale the year she graduated from high school and slowly began developing her collection, which now numbers in the thousands.

After the birthday party, I went to June's house to see her amazing collection. She didn't just have a few in her

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kitchen; they were displayed in almost every room of the house. Her dining room table and kitchen counters were decorated with Halloween cutters; a cutter of the Golden Gate Bridge was part of her living room collection. Even the laundry room and bathrooms were decorated with cutters. June said she enjoys decorating with cutters and just can't envision leaving them in boxes. "It's great fun to have them as part of your décor because you can display them and everybody gets a chance to see the much coveted cookie cutters," she said.

June's passion was indisputable as she gave me a tour of her collection. "One of the things cookie cutter collectors like most is talking about cookie cutters," June had said to me earlier. She was right. June described where she found each cutter, who made it or why she liked it. Her favorite cutter is an egg-shaped cutter made by the Egg Baking Powder company in Buffalo, New York, in 1900. "They made the EBP company cutter, and if you bought baking powder you got a cutter," said June. "And since I'm from Buffalo, I desperately wanted this cutter with all my heart." After much searching, she found the cutter. "It's exciting to find a cutter you've been searching for for a long time, whether it was at a garage sale, at a store or an antique shop," said June. "It's just very exciting to find them."

One reason June believes that collecting cutters is special is because anyone can do it. "It goes across every walk of life," said June. "And what's fun is that you never know if the new person you're talking to is a doctor, nurse, stay-at-home housewife, etc. People from all walks of life get involved — they're just great people." June said she even knows a priest at a monastery who collects cutters.

Within this diverse membership, RMCU is lucky to have two tinsmiths who often make beautiful, one-of-a-kind cutters for other members, as well as the public. Elenna Firm, a tinsmith in Haxton, lives on a farm and now makes cutters mostly as a hobby. Karen Morrison, of the Victor Trading [continued on page 18]



Rocky Mountain Cut-Up members share their love of all things cookie at the spring 2005 meeting.

[continued from page 17] Company in Victor, has made it part of her main income.

Elenna's cookie cutter story begins with her children. While her boys were growing up, she often baked and decorated cookies with them. "They loved to cut out shapes and decorate them," said Elenna. "I would ask the kids what shape they'd like to use, and they would say something like 'a bee,' which of course I didn't have." So she ended up ordering a kit that had strips of tin and soldering equipment. She began making tiny cutter pins to learn how the process worked. Then, at a national convention in Ohio, a vendor demonstration taught her more about making cutters.

This hobby, though, quickly turned into a steady job. A fellow tinsmith made cutters for a mail order catalog. When he became ill, he recommended Elenna to the company. She started off making about 300 cutters a year, but the company quickly grew and the work became too much for her and multiple other tinsmiths. Now, she has moved back to making cutters as a hobby, although she still makes them for the RMCU and the national club, as well as for people who call with special orders.

Elenna has collected cutters for 26 years. She inherited a few cutters from her husband's grandmother and joined a cutter club. In the first club newsletter, she saw a photo of the cutters she inherited and was hooked. Now she has about 5,000 cutters in her basement. "I probably have more, but I'm kind of conserva-

tive in telling how many I have because I lose track of them all," said Elenna.

Throughout the years, Elenna has made a variety of cutter shapes. Her favorites include a running gingerbread boy and a gnome. However, her absolute favorite and something of a trademark is a heart. She says she has piles of them in her basement because she makes them out of scraps left over from other cutters. She will often give them away as gifts or to people who are having a party to use as favors, ornaments or napkin rings.

While Elenna focuses mostly on simple designs that can be made over and over, she also creates intricate cutters that make beautiful stained glass cookies. These cutters will cut out shapes within cookies so you can sprinkle crushed Life-savers® inside those shapes. When baked, they create a gorgeous, colorful glass effect within the cookie. June had one of these displayed in her kitchen for Halloween.



It was a pumpkin with diamond-shaped eyes, a circle nose and a heart mouth cutout all filled with candy stained glass.

Because Elenna usually doesn't make the detailed cutters, she often sends those type of requests to Karen at the Victor Trading Company. The shop, owned by Karen and her husband, Sam, definitely takes you back in time. In addition to making cookie cutters, Sam and Karen make brooms with an old broom winder, cards with an 1894 foot-powered letterpress, candles and various tin products. The catch is that most of their equipment is pre-1900. While Karen works in other areas of the shop making brooms and helping customers, she spends a good deal of her time crafting the cookie cutters. The process is simple but very detailed. It can take hours to make the more intricate cutter patterns. Karen's process is similar to Elenna's. They each use a line drawing of the design, bend strips of tin into the shape desired and then solder a flat piece of tin onto the cutter as the back. In addition, Karen attaches a brass tag that identifies it was made at the Victor Trading Company, while Elenna etches her name on the back.

"Our tin is real distinctive," said Karen. "We joke because people will turn it over like a Hallmark card to see if our tag is on the back. That's how they know we made it."

Some of Karen's cutters have gone around the world and assisted bakers in competitions. One baker from Massachusetts requested certain [continued on page 19]



Roseanne Thompson (left) and Joyce Vestal decorate cookies for the *Colorado Country Life* cover, one of their favorite pastimes.

[continued from page 18] cutters from Karen for a baking competition in France. Karen still isn't sure how the baker used them but was told that because of her cutters, the baker finished in time and won a silver medal.

Unlike the other RMCU members, Karen's passion lies not in collecting the cutters but in collecting the cutter designs. She currently has more than 2,700 designs and is always searching for more, finding them in books and quilt patterns, from customers and from any photo that can be simplified to a line drawing.

"I had no idea how passionate some people were about cutters," said Karen. She says she's met collectors who have between 10,000 and 12,000 cutters, but she knows of one collector in Cañon City who has 50,000 cutters. She has also heard of a cutter that sold for \$6,500 at a folk art auction, the highest known price at an auction for a cutter. This 13.5-inch cutter, a detailed image of a large man with a top hat and tails, was made in 1875.

The passion of both the cookie cutter tin-smiths and club members turn cookie cutters into works of art and highly valued items. So when you bake cookies this Christmas, remember that many people enjoy doing the same thing. And if you decide to collect cutters or just want to meet people who do, visit a RMCU meeting. I guarantee you'll have more than just a little fun.

Jennifer Nelson, husband Jeff— who can bake a mean batch of chocolate chip cookies — and their beagle, Tinkerbell, live in Lake-wood. Jennifer recently graduated from Texas A&M University with a bachelor of science in journalism and a master's degree in management. In a few years, she may be collecting cutters with the best of them.



For more information on the cookie cutter clubs and tips on making delicious and beautiful cookies, go to www.coloradocountrylife.coop.

Victor Trading Company

Cookie cutters were not the focus when Sam and Karen Morrison opened the Victor Trading Company in 1990. The couple had simply fallen in love with Victor, Colorado.

Just a few miles south of Cripple Creek, Victor didn't have a lot of activity, but Sam and Karen saw the building that was once the Star of the West Saloon, and knew it was the perfect place to work. After years of lugging their antique equipment around the state to various craft shows and fairs, they were excited to open a shop of their own.

Since 1984, Sam and Karen had used equipment that dated from before 1900 to make beautiful brooms, cards, beeswax candles and many tin items. By settling in Victor, they gave the equipment, and their business, a home.

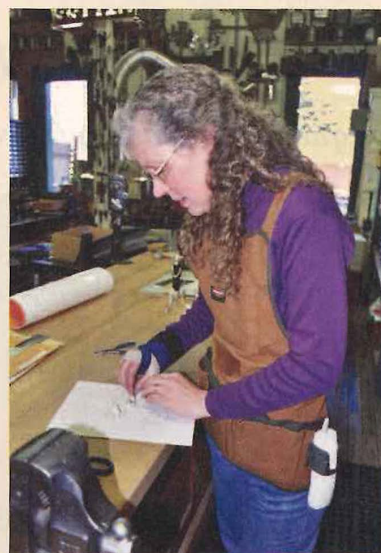
Today they own multiple foot-powered letterpresses, a few broom winders, and more tin-working equipment than you can imagine. Their shelves and walls are lined with tin boxes, cans with gorgeous old labels, candle holders, chandeliers, signs, whistles, mugs, shot glasses and cookie cutters. And it all bears a distinctive brass tag showing it was made at the Victor Trading Company.

Karen explains that the shop always lures women in first. Then they'll entice their husbands to come in. "'Honey, come look at this,' they'll say," said Karen. "Then you can't get the guys out. They see all the equipment — the letterpress, the broom winder — and just love it."

People like the items in the store because they are made as the customers watch. "How often can you buy things that were actually made where you bought them," said Karen. By word of mouth, people have come to visit the store and look for the brass tag. Sam and Karen will be more than happy to show you around the shop. While there, don't miss the famous broom wall, the tin cans with beautiful old labels, the fascinating brooms (almost too decorative to use), the wonderful biscuit cutters, the miner's lunchboxes and the two cats.

And, once in Victor, there is more to see. Check out the restored Victor Hotel, which has the oldest working elevator in Colorado. Sam and Karen can then tell you more history about Victor and the surrounding area. Ask them about George Rogers and his saloon, the fires that swept through Victor and Cripple Creek and the gold mines that surround the area. It will be a trip worth remembering.

Visit the Victor Trading Company online at www.victortradingco.com or call 719-689-2346. Order a cookie cutter catalog by sending \$7 to PO Box 53, Victor, CO 80860.



Karen Morrison uses a strip of tin, a line drawing, her hands and occasionally a pair of pliers to create cookie cutter works of art.