

Growing Up In Gaithersburg

By Marien Helz

Gifts and Giving



We're all familiar with the aphorisms that we use to try to teach children generosity, such as: *It's better to give than receive*. The trouble is that when we try to make holidays and special days fun and memorable for kids, we inadvertently teach them that it's pretty darn good to get—and since it's easier to get than to give, especially for young children, what they learn about first is getting.

The second thing we try to convince people of is that handmade gifts are better than bought ones. We voice this adage with a silent grimace as we recall poorly made conglomerations that said, “craftsy” rather than “craftsmanship”—as though any piker's badly thrown together effort is a good substitute (that says “I care about you”) for a carefully chosen item fashioned by experts who use the knowledge of the ages to create something exquisite.

Of course, if the recipient is a mother—or a father—and the giver a child, any primitive drawing or sculpting fashioned by the tiny hands and conceived in the young mind is equivalent to the products of the finest artisans of the ages.

Occasionally, a gift idea occurs that is the serendipitous convergence of the *handmade* and *better to give* maxims. When the perfect gift can't be found for purchase and exists only in the mind of the giver who is able to produce the abstract idea, then there is a joy in giving that cannot be equaled. This occurred once for my father and once for me. Both times, it was his wood shop, and specifically his drill press that enabled the production of the conceptual ideal.

I was about six when my father was making a Christmas gift for me in his shop. I knew that he was making something for me, but I didn't know what. One time, my brother and I went into the shop, and my father told my brother that I couldn't stay because the gift was there. In the tradition of children trying to find out what their gifts are early, I quickly looked around to see if I could find it. There seemed to be nothing around that could possibly be a gift.



I was old enough to feel a little guilty about trying to find out what my gift was ahead of time, but we children took some pride in being able to skillfully investigate gifts by opening a corner of the wrapped package so that it wouldn't show or carefully unwrapping and then re-wrapping it. We had done that once when the family was celebrating the holidays with grandparents. We tore away a small corner of a wrapped package and found a hard metal corner that we figured must be a jack in the box for the youngest. It turned out to be a toy cash register for me.

It wasn't until we were well past the age at which the game of sneaking into gifts early was no longer appealing that my father revealed that when he was a child, he managed to crawl down a laundry chute to hear what his father and a neighbor were making for him. He never mentioned what the gift was; the fun of out-witting adults was superior to the gift.

I wouldn't have been able to figure out what the gift was for me until it was fully assembled, however. It was

a doll house, but one that my father conceived of and designed himself. He made the walls of acrylic and the floors and roof of thin plywood. He drilled dozens of tiny holes into the side of the thin acrylic to attach the walls to the floors. Any mistake would have cracked the plastic walls, and he would have had to start all over.

The house has transparent walls, so you can see all the furniture in it. The roof lifts on hinges to reveal an attic where furniture can be stored when it's not being played with. I gave the house to my daughter when she was about the age I was when my father made it for me. It now sits waiting for a young hand to play with it again—years after its creator has ceased to walk the earth.



My father's shop was his hobby and had interesting power tools. He had made rules for using the equipment so that there would be no tragedies. The power saw was something that none of us could ever use, and he made us nervous enough about it that we didn't have a desire to, and the lathe was something I never really figured out a use for, but the drill press was really neat. There were rules for that too, but it wasn't as dangerous as the other machinery. It had a wheel on the side with three wooden handled spokes that was like a ship's steering wheel. You would use that to move the heavy steel column down that held the drill. It was precise, and you could drill very small holes or big ones. It drilled all those tiny holes in the thin acrylic of my doll house.

When I was in graduate school, I was looking for a miniature Parcheesi set for my sister that would be like the fancy portable chess sets I'd seen. We played chess and Monopoly and card games as children, but in my

family we played what, years later, my astounded husband referred to as tournament Parcheesi. We played hard and rough—no talking, just the rattling of the dice barrels in a mental full contact sport. I looked everywhere for a portable set, but no one had ever heard of one.



I noticed a thick block of scrap wood in my father's shop that was about six by six inches. Since no one else was allowed to use the saw, I had my father cut the block in half. I marked off the many lanes and used a compass to draw the home spaces. I used the drill press to make two tiny holes in each rectangle that the pieces progressed through and holes on the home spaces. For the playing pieces, I found wooden matches and cut the tops off. I used a wood burning set to mark the board

and also to decorate the outside after which I painted the board with different colors of enamel, painting also the match sticks to differentiate the pieces. It all worked perfectly, but I wanted a place to keep the pieces and needed to drill large holes in the side of the block where the playing pieces could be kept along with ivory dice I got from my grandmother that I planned to give along with the game. Everything could have been ruined if drilling the large holes in the side went wrong. The game could have been cracked or destroyed in a number of other ways. With trepidation, I tried it, and it worked. After putting several coats



have made for myself. It was the perfect gift.

of varnish over the entire game, I put hinges on the back and used a scrap of copper metal to cover the holes and hold the pieces in. The copper pieces were held by screws so they could be moved aside to open and close the storage spaces. I braided metallic strings, attached pearls on the ends, and screwed them on the front to make ties to hold the blocks closed.

Finally, I found some broad brocade ribbon that my mother had and used her sewing machine to fashion a cover for the set and put in a zipper.

I don't know if my sister had any idea of the months of planning and work that went into making the Parcheesi set, and I don't know if she still has it. It was, however, something that I would have loved to have but never would