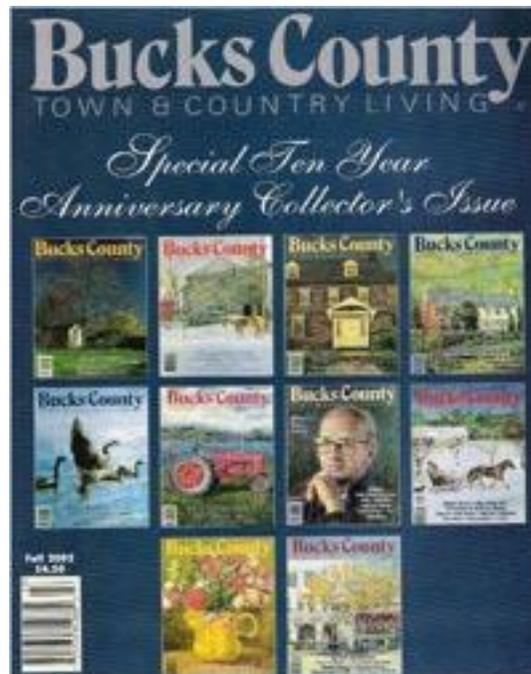


## Post People *Bucks County Town & Country Living* Fall 2002

As traffic races along Route 611, just south of Doylestown, the more inquisitive driver often slows to catch a glimpse of the whimsical world of Post People created by Karen McKenna.

For more than a dozen years now, McKenna has carved her playful people from white cedar posts, ordered in from Canada, a half truckload at a time. "You can smell the wood coming a mile away," she says.

In the beginning, McKenna "borrowed" actual fence posts from her husband's business, Doylestown Fence, which still is located at the site near the intersection of Route 611 and Edison-Furlong Road.



Her first creations were simple reindeer made as gifts for family and friends. With the post for the body, stick legs, and a smiling face accented with a big, red bow around the neck, these deer were a huge success at Rice's Market, where she attracted so many buyers, she had to put customers on a waiting list.

When she placed the reindeer around the entrance to her husband's shop, passersby wanted to know if they were for sale. At about three-feet tall and \$20, the reindeer sold rapidly, even though no one was there acting as a salesperson.

"I had a slot in the front door, and people would just take the deer and leave the money in the slot. We worked three years on the honor system and never lost a penny," she says with obvious pride. "People would leave me notes and come back with the money if they were short of cash. One time more than \$400 was stuck in the door as customers kept coming by and shoving money into the slot. But no one took it."

Sticking with her Christmas theme, the next year McKenna created a Santa Claus and sold him and the reindeer at craft shows. She says she felt her way along, trying out different designs, new paints, and experimenting with different shapes and colors for beards and colors for skin tone. She would take pictures of kids posing with the deer or Santa, and through word-of-mouth, McKenna's business was off and running.

"Now I'm a little more relaxed," she says. Off the craft show circuit, and with no advertising, McKenna has built a devoted client base – regulars who come back each season to see what new creation she has come up with. "I just have the cream of the crop of customers. I have found all the nicest people."

Although she credits 85 percent of her ideas to these customers, McKenna says the balance of her designs just come to her, often while running in her free time.

She likes to use people from everyday life as inspiration. Then she'll expand on what she sees, creating something of a gentle caricature. Her pool boy and girl are the perfect example and come in several styles. Their squat bodies wear colorful swimsuits. With visors or hats, sunglasses, beach towels, beach balls, and swim goggles, they are ready for some fun in the sun.

The Birdseed Lady and Birdseed Man also make a charming couple. She sports a straw bonnet and gingham dress, and he wears a bandana and holds a corncob pipe. Fill their metal bucket with seed, and they'll be all set to feed their feathered friends.

McKenna doesn't receive shipment of the logs one day, and start carving the next. Just like a fine wine, the cedar needs time to age to be at its best. Several months pass while the wood sits outside in the sun and rain, getting wet, then drying out and

developing cracks and other signs of aging. McKenna knows a post is ready for her saw and paintbrush when it shows a long crack up one side. This feature is not a flaw, rather it is its “breathing room”, allowing the post to expand and contract, what McKenna calls “the nature of cedar.”

Trained as a dental hygienist, the diminutive, dark-haired, perpetually smiling McKenna learned about wood and woodworking from her husband, Jim, who supported her desire to stay home and paint and create, while raising their two children.

“He taught me to use all the tools in his shop, and then my business really got started. He didn’t think people would like them (the figures) but was supportive, and just said, ‘Honey, now don’t work too hard.’” She laughs at the memory of her husband’s miscalculation.

While both her children have helped out at the shop, it’s her daughter, Courtney, a senior at Hatboro-Horsham High School, who shows an affinity toward art, painting murals on the inside of the shop, and planning to study art in college. Jim Jr. studies computers at Montgomery County College and will attend Penn State next year.

Although every post person has the same roots, each is different and develops its own unique personality as McKenna wields her saws – circular, table and small chain saw - and drills, nail gun, and just about every other tool in the shop. Finally, she paints their faces and applies clothing and other finishing touches.

The single piece of cedar is the centerpiece of each post person. The logs are delivered in eight to 10-foot lengths with a diameter of four to six inches. While most Post People are smooth, some, like the large Santa and leprechaun, are carved first with a chain saw. Then McKenna adds a pine base for balance, and sometimes arms, noses, and other wooden additions. McKenna buys certain items pre-made from a craft store. While most of each character is made to endure a life outdoors, some accessories, like the Spanish moss hair or straw bonnet, may fray from exposure. McKenna offers to replace any such accessory that comes apart. “That’s how I learned what would work and what wouldn’t over the years,” she explains. “I’d tell customers to bring anything back (that broke or fell off) and I’d fix it for them.”

In order for her characters to withstand the elements, McKenna uses three coats of specially mixed outdoor paint from the Sears Hardware store right down the street. With the help of Le Zdepski there, McKenna works to find just the right tint. The blue on her Uncle Sam, for example, is a special deep blue, that is now in Le’s computer titled “Sam.” The same is true for Uncle Sam’s skin color and beard. Le’s computer lists nine custom colors under “Post People.”

“I give each coat time to dry, then paint on details until the people take on lives of their own,” she says. She sprays on a final polyurethane coat for extra protection and to ensure the paint will last.

McKenna changes her outdoor display with the seasons, but indoors, all seasons are represented all year ‘round. Upstairs and down, rooms are filled to overflowing with Post People celebrating every holiday. A witch, whose expression is somehow simultaneously glowering and smiling, wears a black, pointed wooden hat atop scraggly hair made from Spanish moss. McKenna carves the long, hooked nose, completing it with a mole. The witch’s faithful black cat sits nearby.

A thin version of Santa Claus, wearing a dark-red, full-length robe lined with white is one of her more ambitious projects. His beard and hair are hand-carved with a Dremel rotary tool, creating fine, detailed lines. Santa’s nose and eyes are carved out, giving him a realistic expression. An oversized version of St. Nick can be seen standing sentinel to Doylestown at the south end of town during the Christmas season.

A bright white snowman with his black stovepipe hat, happy smile, and corn cob pipe is one of her customers’ favorites. She sells so many of this popular guy during the winter season, that she admits she can grow tired of painting the same thing over and over, even though she loves what she does.

In her small workroom, a line of half-done carolers waits for finishing touches of plaid, red, or green scarves, and faux-rabbit fur caps. She becomes a one-woman assembly line as she completes several of one type of character at one time.

All the detail work is done freehand, something at which she’s gotten better over the years. “I’m more relaxed and unafraid now, which has made me more creative,” she says.

Max and Ruby, a pair of pastel Easter bunnies, are based on the children’s book which McKenna used to read to her children. With hair made of mops, these figures – among her first - taught McKenna a couple of valuable lessons. She used to hot-glue on

the hair and other items, but found out through Max and Ruby that the glue eventually disintegrates or melts in the sun. Now she uses heavy-duty staples to attach such items. The cedar slats she originally used to give the couple moveable arms used to break off, so now they are permanently attached as well.

Inside the "Fall Room" a pair of Pilgrims stands near some scarecrows made with corn-colored raffia hair. The male Pilgrim holds an ax and his partner, a wreath. The "Angel Room" is full of shining and sparkling white or off-white, praying or singing angels. The angels' lace collars and bows, gold stars, gold highlights on their wings, and bright faces make this a very popular room.

While prices for the Post People vary by size, most of her characters are about three-feet tall and run about \$40. The larger, carved posts and those with more intricate designs are priced up to \$200.

By far, her most popular figure in the months since September 2001 has been Uncle Sam, which she has carved and painted in several different styles and of which she has sold about 50. The larger ones have white pants with red stripes, for example, while the smaller ones have solid, red bottoms. Initially, McKenna placed a cloth flag in Uncle Sam's hand, until she could no longer find the little flags in stores, and she gave him a wooden flag to hold. Today, customers get their choice.

"I needed a way to channel my sad energy, and lots of people slow down here, and some honk and give a thumbs up for my Uncle Sam," she says, pointing to the 13-foot tall version of the American icon standing tall outside her shop.

*Karen McKenna's Post People shop is open noon to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. She will open on Sundays and says to call first if making a special trip: (215) 646-8905.*

*Brenda Lange is a freelance writer living in Doylestown.*