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January/Febuary 2027
ad booking deadline November 23, 2026

Publication Mail Agreement No. 44091548

November/December 2026 • Volume 32 No. 1

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More Than a Tree Topper

by Becky Van Vleet

Every year the same angel takes her place at the top of our Christmas tree. She's made of plastic, more than seventy years old, and a little worse for wear. She still lights up, though her outdated cord is crinkly and twisted. I'm amazed she still works.

But to me, she's far more than an old tree topper. She's a piece of my childhood.



When I was growing up, we always had a real Christmas tree, and decorating it was a family affair. My sisters and I helped hang the ornaments, Mother supervised with a camera in hand, and Daddy tackled the silver icicles. Those slippery strands seemed to cling to his fingers more readily than to the branches. He'd fling them toward the tree, sending plenty to the floor along the way. Getting them to let go of his fingers was half the battle—and part of the fun.

Our tree also held those wonderful bubbling candle lights. Once they warmed up, we watched the bubbles rise inside them. Then, when the decorating was nearly finished, Daddy would place our angel on the highest branch and plug her in. Only then did our tree feel complete.

As a little girl, I loved gazing up at her. I imagined she was singing Christmas carols just to me. She was beautiful. Angelic.

Years later, after I had a family of my own, my father passed the angel topper along to me. I was thrilled. Since then, we've placed her gingerly atop our own Christmas trees, carrying a little of my childhood into each Christmas.

These days, as our grandchildren enjoy Angelina, the name we've given her, one of her wings is broken and held together with Scotch tape. But when I look at her, I still see the angel of my childhood—and I remember Daddy placing her on top of the tree.

If I had to guess, I'd say she cost less than a dollar back in the 1950s. Her value today? Priceless!

Becky Van Vleet, a retired school administrator, lives near Colorado Springs with her husband, Troy. They are the parents of four grown children and enjoy spending time with their nine grandchildren. Becky is a children's picture book author, and her website is devoted to family stories and creating memories: www.beckyvanvleet.com.

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Holiday Magic: Stitched Into the Memories We Make

There is something about the holidays that seems to bring our memories a little closer to the surface.

Perhaps it is familiar music, the smell of something baking, a treasured ornament pulled carefully from its box, or a well-loved quilt that appears every December. Suddenly, we are reminded of the people and traditions that have shaped our lives.

For those of us who create with our hands, those memories are often stitched right into the things around us.

We remember handmade stockings, embroidered ornaments, knitted mittens and quilts made for people we love. There is a different kind of value attached to something handmade. It isn't measured by the cost of the materials or the hours it took to make. Its value comes from knowing that someone spent their time creating something with one particular person in mind.

That's a little bit of holiday magic right there.

I was reminded of this recently when my mother celebrated her 90th birthday. I wanted to make something for her that was more than simply a new quilt—I wanted it to hold a piece of her story.

For years, I had treasured embroidered pillowcases and linens made by her mother, my Grannie. Rather than leaving those beautiful hand-stitched pieces tucked safely away, I incorporated the embroidery into a quilt for Mom. Some became the centres of traditional quilt blocks; others found their own special places throughout the quilt. Then I added my own stitches through the quilting.

As I worked, I thought about the hands involved. My grandmother's hands had held the needle and embroidery floss decades ago. My mother's hands had used and cared for those linens. And now my hands were giving them another life.

Three generations. Countless stitches. One quilt.

When I presented it to Mom, it was so much more than a quilt. It was a piece of our family's history—something she could see, touch and enjoy.

Perhaps that is where the real magic of handmade things lies. They allow us to leave a little piece of ourselves for the generations that follow.

The holidays have a way of reminding us how precious those connections are. Families grow, traditions change and people we love may no longer be sitting around the table. Yet memories remain—sometimes held in the simplest things: a handwritten recipe, an old photograph, a Christmas stocking or a piece of embroidery lovingly stitched long ago.



As makers, we have an opportunity to create some of those memories for the generations that follow us. It doesn't need to be an elaborate heirloom. Holiday magic can be found in a handmade ornament, a favourite recipe shared, or an afternoon spent teaching a child or grandchild how to sew.

Perhaps the greatest gift we give isn't the finished object at all.

It is our time.

So amid the shopping, decorating, baking and seemingly endless things to do this holiday season, leave a little room for magic.

Make something. Share something. Teach something. Spend time with someone you love.

Because years from now, someone may hold a handmade treasure, smile at the memories it carries and think of you.

And really, what could be more magical than that?

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Become Inspired - *By Annice Bradley Rockwell*



Anticipating the Wonder

Often one of the most anticipated times of the year, the holiday season is filled with plentiful opportunities to create spaces that welcome and inspire. With themed gatherings planned for family and friends, we often feel a great sense of anticipation to share our creativity and to beautifully transform our homes to suit the season of celebration.

Charming Authenticity

In order to design a seasonal space we can often use some of our favorite classic antiques accented by elements of nature to surround us with charming authenticity. An antique lift-top mule chest in early red paint can be heightened and enhanced by stacking a smaller antique box in blue on top. Nestling boughs of evergreen between a primitive trencher and a blue decorated stoneware jug adds a balancing touch of nature to our vignette.

Antique sleds that radiantly reveal their use from age can be adorned with a spray of fresh hemlock, red berries and twinkling white lights to brighten the corner of the hearth. Centerpieces created by using a large divided carrier filled with greens and cones can feature a glass chimney to hold an antique hogscraper or one of our favorite scented country candles like "Orange Clove Pomander" or "Balsam Christmastide."

Early punched tin lighting that has come to represent tradition and comfort can be used to cast the beautiful play of light it was intended to create. Petite cedar trees in various sizes can be placed in crocks, firkins, early kegs or baskets to enliven a seating area or even brighten a country bathroom. Handmade country stockings fashioned from woven coverlets in bright red can be filled with greens and hung on our mantel or an interior door to add texture and color to our rooms.

Embracing the Magic

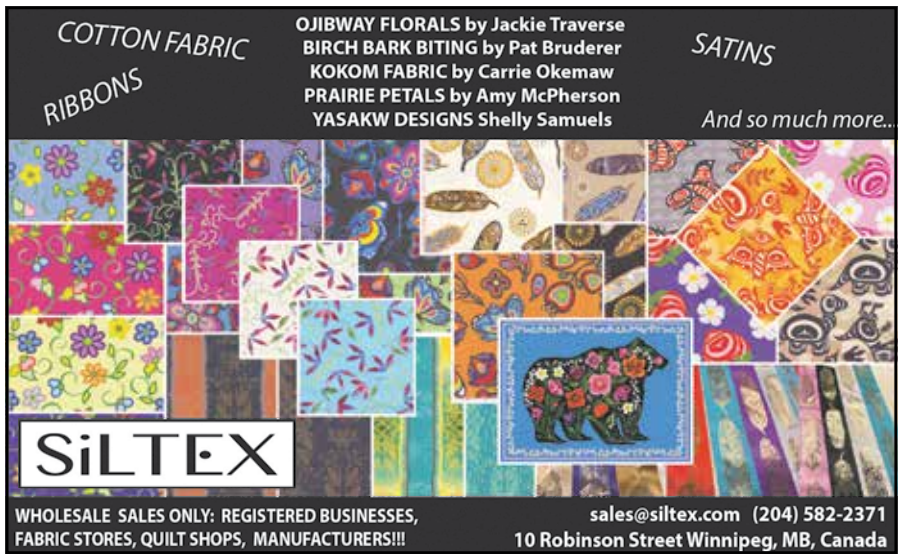
One of the blessings of the holidays is planning a festive night out with friends to take in the sights and sounds of Christmas. Main streets of small towns become magical and unusually alive on an Open House Night when storefront windows gleam with the glow of Christmas. Through the front windows we can see freshly decorated inviting displays of antiques, textiles, scented candles and decorations that deeply appeal to our country style. As we enter these local shops the music of the dulcimer plays traditional tunes while we take in a cup of hot mulled cider while we browse. We know that the hand-selected purchases we make are even more special because they are local and support the shops that provide us with a sense of genuine connection.

After finding the perfect treasures to give as gifts or the ideal antique to enhance our displays, we can visit a local restaurant that promises to be a memorable part of our night. Taking time to plan a festive, local night out is time well-spent as we share in the abundant blessings of giving.

This season, enjoy the anticipation of creating magic. Transform your home to include the splendor of a country Christmas. Spend a treasured evening with friends embracing the sense of wonder that this spectacular season always brings.

--Annice Bradley Rockwell is an educator and owner of Pomfret Antiques. She is currently working on her book, New England Girl. NewEnglandGirl2012@hotmail.com

Wholesale



Wholesale



Think Sustainable

by Bizz McKilligan, The Green Thimble, Victoria

HOLIDAY SHOPPING

It's peak shopping season, so before you go out there to stock up for all your winter crafting, let's talk shopping bags!

If you've ever wondered whether reusable bags are actually better for the environment than single-use bags, the answer is… it depends.

That's right! Reusable bags are rarely better if they aren't actually reused enough. Counterintuitive, right?

A reusable bag has to be used a certain number of times before the environmental impact of making it is lower than that of using single-use bags. Exactly how many times depends on what the bag is made from, whether the material is new or recycled, how it was manufactured, how it is transported, and what happens to it at the end of its life.

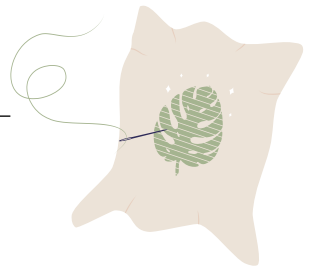
But the general pattern is pretty interesting.

The slightly thicker plastic reusable bags may need to be used around 4–10 times to break even with single-use plastic bags, while one consumer survey found that the average low-density polyethylene reusable bag was used only about three times. Instead of becoming permanent shopping totes, they can end up as slightly sturdier trash can liners or simply be thrown away.

Polypropylene bags can require roughly 11–37 uses to break even, depending on the type of bag and what environmental impacts are being measured. One survey found that the average consumer used a standard non-woven polypropylene supermarket bag about 15 times.

Paper bags can require around 3–8 uses to have a lower climate impact than a single-use plastic bag, depending on the bags being compared and how they are produced and disposed of. In reality, they are usually used once: they carry your groceries home and then get recycled or discarded. Paper also has a relatively high carbon footprint compared with lightweight plastic, although recycled content and how the paper is produced can make a significant difference.

And then there are cotton totes. Structurally, a canvas tote can easily last for years and withstand hundreds of washes. But cotton has a much larger environmental footprint to produce, so estimates for the number of uses needed to break even are typically around 130 or more.



Using this style of tote once a week for three years is reasonable to accomplish if it is taken care of. But keep in mind how many free promotional totes most of us have accumulated.

The numbers vary because every bag is different, and the answer changes depending on what environmental impact we are measuring. But the takeaway is pretty consistent: a reusable bag needs to be reused enough times to make up for the environmental impact of producing it. For some bags, that might be just a handful of uses. For others, particularly cotton totes, it can mean using the same bag dozens or even hundreds of times.

I don't want you to start thinking "why bother?" because reusable bags are better… when used sufficiently! Often, this becomes difficult because we forget to bring them with us when we need them and then collect another reusable bag to add to our stash.

Here are some tips to get more use out of yours:

• Don't keep them under the sink. Put them somewhere they will be when you actually need them. Keep some in the car, in your backpack, in your purse, or in your bike pannier. If you can't or don't want to store them in your bag, keep them next to your keys.

• When you're done emptying the reusable bag at home, hang it on the doorknob so you remember to bring it back out the next time you leave.

• Choose bags that work for you. My husband loves box-like folding bags for groceries. These live in the car. I like nylon ones that fold up super small and can live in my backpack.

• Keep the ones that make you smile! Maybe it's your favourite colour or has an inspirational quote. Anything that makes you happy to use is a win.

• Repair them instead of replacing them. A broken handle or small hole doesn't necessarily mean a bag has reached the end of its life.

Hopefully, this helps you remember to bring your bag with you next time you shop, because the most eco-friendly bag is the one you already own and actually use.

And if you do need another bag, consider asking a friend who might have too many, making one from materials you already have, or upcycling something that no longer functions as it was originally intended. Give it another life, and then another, and another.

Gingerbread Houses

In the 16th century, in Germany, gingerbread houses were created. These houses had gingerbread walls and were with decorated foil and gold leaf. When the Grimm's fairy tale Hansel and Gretel was written in 1812, the popularity of gingerbread houses rose.

Victoria, BC



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Christmas Traditions

The Christmas Witch

Italy's La Befana, sometimes called the Christmas witch, delivers gifts the night before Epiphany, leaving her presents in shoes set by the fireplace. While La Befana wasn't making widespread deliveries in the early United States, other mythical holiday gift-bringers were.

Netherland Traditions

December 5 is a major celebration especially among children because it is the time when St. Nicholas or Sinterklaas visits them and puts candies and treats on the clogs they placed by the fireplace or windows.

Nativity Scene

Switzerland is home to one of the biggest Nativity Scenes in the world at Diorama Bethlehem located close to the Monastery in Einsiedeln.

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The Holiday Hustle - *By Barbara Kalkis*

There is no season more intense than the final 92 days of the year. Surely, no one escapes the speed with which the days fly by, like geese honking farewell as they race toward warm weather.

Businesses understand the fourth quarter (Q4) months are the final push to lure customers, raise annual sales, and post earnings revenue "in the black". Artisans know these days culminate a year of sewing, painting, quilting, knitting, crocheting, making, baking, creating the unique items they will sell before December 31st.

The last quarter begins with sunflower bouquets and brightly colored leaves, corn stalks and pumpkins, craft fairs and harvest festivals. We then pivot to Jack O'Lanterns, ghosts, witches, black cats, scarecrows and Halloween treats for one fun-filled night. The next day, everything orange and black is tossed back into storage to make way for Thanksgiving. Pumpkins lose their scary smiling faces and become fancy décor items in shades of white, sedate sage and – aptly named – pumpkin orange. To live the moment to the max, decorations set the scene for traditional turkey dinner with all the trimmings of stuffing, sweet potatoes, corn, green beans, cranberry sauce – whole or jellied and – what else? Pies! With leftovers stored, we take advantage of Black Friday sales. And that begins the final seasonal crunch.

Our homes become the setting for poinsettias, wreaths, bayberry candles, greeting cards and photos (if one is fortunate), train sets, gaily wrapped secret packages, outdoor light displays and the tree in a place of honor, glittering with decorations.

I think we cram the most energy and effort into making this fourth season memorable. Every one of our five senses seems to be heightened: feeling the morning chill, smelling pine-scented trees and wreaths, gobbling down fresh-baked cookies and milk, seeing homes sparkle with decorations, listening to holiday music.

I believe in a sixth sense that is our emotions. When I recall Christmases growing up. I think of our family adventure of driving to a farm to find our pine tree. We would jauntily set off in the snow to find the perfect tree. The "winner" had to be approved by all, so this process was time-consuming. Too small. Too tall. Too skinny. Too "fat" for my father's flimsy saw. Too "bushy" for my mother's dangling ornaments. Too full to push through the kitchen door.

After a thorough search of the woods, we would find the winner. Primarily, because we were all exhausted from trudging through the snow and were as cold as popsicles. Finding our way back to the barn – which some years seemed to an iffy thing (my parents were city people) – we slogged into the barn and rushed to warm ourselves with cocoa and hot apple cider. Satisfied that the main seasonal purchase was accomplished, we'd arrive home to waiting lights and a warming fire.

It's easy to romanticize these last days of the year, but they are truly memorable. In all other seasons, there are special holidays, but those last 92 days cram the most work, memories, emotions, scents and feelings of putting an imaginary "bow" on the gift that is life.

When I was young, I used to stand at my bedroom window and look out into the night, trying to spot Santa Claus entering the neighborhood. Now I stand at my window and look out at the black night and feel the contentment of a year that delivered all kinds of events, but which ended once again in the gift that Life gives us every day. However, you have raced from Autumn to Halloween to Thanksgiving to Christmas to the New Year, Celebrate!

©Barbara Kalkis, 2026. Barbara is a marketing consultant, teacher, and author of "Little Ditties for Every Day: A Collection of Thoughts in Rhyme and Rhythm." Contact her at BarbaraKalkis01@gmail.com.

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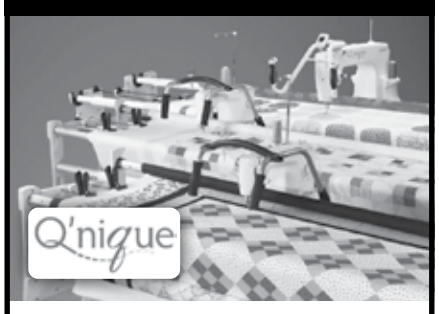
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by Kirby Gust

This story was first published in the Dec/Jan 2021/22 issue of the Manitoba-Saskatchewan Country Register.

Regular readers of *The Country Register* know that Carl and Mary run the country store in Mary's hometown, and that the store sits smack dab on the Saskatchewan/Manitoba border. Locals know the store as Borderline Goods, but since the "s" fell off the sign, people passing through town on the highway only see "Borderline Good." Usually, this makes them slow down for a second look. Some have to stop and turn back. Most are surprised to see that the small-town store is actually open for business. Carl has a slogan inside the store that reads "Our quality service is borderline good…our goods are borderline quality." Christmas in their small town hasn't changed much over the years; part of that is because the local store is still open.

Carl and Mary always loved working Christmas Eve at the store. They knew most of the community spent the bulk of their Christmas dollars in the larger centres, but they could always count on Christmas Eve to make up for the lack of December sales. For most residents, stopping in had become a holiday tradition. Mary would set out Christmas cookies and homemade eggnog on the deli counter, and Carl always had a pot of coffee on.

Some old friends would stop in just to wish them good cheer, but most who stopped by to say "Merry Christmas" had forgotten to get at least one thing before the big day. Christmas oranges were always the biggest seller that day, since most locals didn't trust the big grocers to sell fresh ones, even though Carl ordered his from the same warehouse. Other things that only small-town and rural folks considered Christmas must-haves, like Cheez Whiz, celery, garlic coil, Ritz crackers, After-Eights, mixed in-the-shell nuts, ribbon candy, pimento-stuffed olives, and smoked oysters, also sold well on Christmas Eve.

Until the age of big box stores and the plastic pop bottle, soda was always a huge seller, especially those large 1-litre bottles that seemed huge in their day. Not that many years before 2-litre bottles appeared, soda, or pop as most Canadians call it, was mostly for special occasions. Many a kid looked forward to the last day of swimming lessons, report card day, and, of course, Christmas for a chance to have a glass of pop, or, even better, a whole glass bottle to yourself. Carl always says that if someone had told him in 1990 that, in the not-too-distant future, pop in glass bottles would be a specialty item, bought only as an expensive treat, he would never have believed them. He longs for the 'olden' days when kids would come into the store to exchange armfuls of clanking bottles. On the other hand, he doesn't miss the broken glass or the sticky sugary mess they made when one broke.

Carl had decided to do something special last Christmas Eve. The year 2026 was just around the corner, and he wanted to make sure he ushered out the old year in a way that would make the upcoming year proud. Little did he know that when he rented the chocolate fountain, he would be doing just that.

It all started last summer when they attended a wedding in Winnipeg for Mary's sister's youngest daughter. Carl knew most of the older family members, but there were about as many young adults at the reception as there were people in their small town back home. The music was so loud that the older guests had given up trying to yell conversations at each other. Instead, they sat there watching the younger crowd have a good time. Carl was accustomed, for the most part, to being by himself in the store most of the time. Carl had never heard any of the music that was blasting out of the speakers and was starting to get a headache from the noise. Carl was not having an especially good time.

Carl got up to find a bathroom, not that he needed to use one, but he thought it might be quieter in there. On his way, he discovered the chocolate fountain. Carl had never seen a chocolate fountain before, or had good chocolate for that matter. Carl was used to the stuff that was standard in your average candy bar, like the ones they sold at the store. So when he saw this smooth, lava-like chocolate flowing into what he first thought was the bowl of the Grey Cup, he had to investigate.

He started by watching the smooth chocolate flow down the fountain; it was relaxing and seemed to block out some of the loud music. He then watched as others came up, used strawberries on sticks to dip into the flowing chocolate, and ate them. That's when he noticed the platter full of wafer cookies, marshmallows and fruit such as strawberries and grapes.

Back at their table, Mary realized Carl had been in the bathroom for a while, so she decided to check on him. She found him, not in the bathroom, but at the buffet table. He had a sparkle in his eye and chocolate on his chin. Stains on his tie showed Mary that Carl had dripped chocolate on it and then tried to lick it clean.

In Carl's left hand, he held a chocolate-covered piece of banana. In his right hand, Carl had a pretzel stick. He dipped the pretzel into the chocolate, let it harden a bit, and then dipped it in again. Mary realized Carl wasn't just playing with the chocolate; he was trying to see how many dips he could manage before the pretzel broke. The crowd of older gentlemen gathered around him and cheered him on, making it even more exciting for Carl. They, too, each had a pretzel and waited collectively for their turn. As Mary led Carl across the dance floor and back to their table, he looked longingly over his shoulder at his new friends and the fountain.

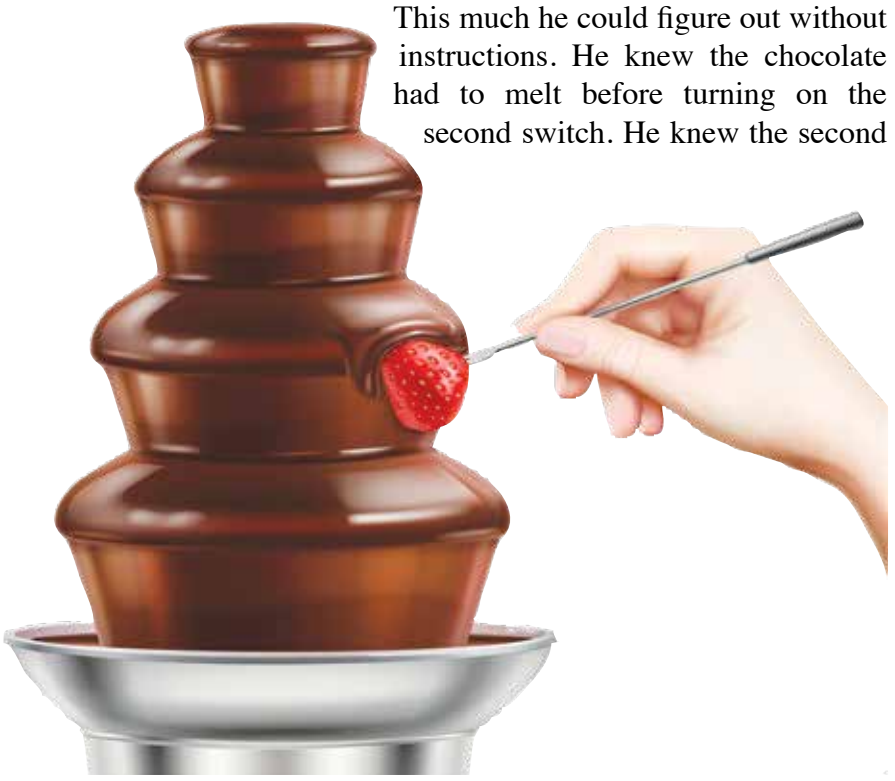
Carl decided to make Christmas Eve special that year by having a fountain of his own. He thought he had better keep this idea from Mary because she didn't share his enthusiasm for such things, and he also knew she would try to talk him out of it. Carl had his friend Ron pick up the fountain from the rental shop in the City. He had ordered a whole box of good dark chocolate from a Calgary chocolatier, and a whole case of plastic cocktail forks. He'd just added the pretzels to his normal wholesale order, and the fruit he would get ready on the morning of the 24th.

Carl's Christmas Eve would have gone smoothly if one of two things had happened. Suppose Carl had called ahead to book the fountain at the rental shop. If Carl had called, the nice lady Ron talked to when picking up the fountain would have asked whether he needed a premixed bag or two of chocolate fondue. "Most people normally rent the fountain and buy the chocolate at the same time," she told Ron. Carl had said nothing to Ron about picking up anything other than the fountain, so he did, and thus, no fondue.

The rental store was familiar with male clients like Carl. They had seen their fair share of them refuse to buy an expensive bag of chocolate fondue when they could easily, and much more cheaply, make their own. By "their own," of course, they meant getting their wives to make it.

The second thing that would have helped that day was if Carl could have read the metal plate attached to the back of the fountain. Carl, who never has his reading glasses at the store, couldn't read the instructions or the recipe printed on the metal plate.

Carl woke up early on the 24th and arrived at the store an hour before opening. He plugged in the fountain and turned on the warming plate. This much he could figure out without instructions. He knew the chocolate had to melt before turning on the second switch. He knew the second



switch ran the auger that would lift the chocolate to the hole in the top of the fountain, letting it flow down the sides.

Carl unwrapped 4 large dark chocolate baking bars and placed them on the warming plate. He then went about picking fruit out of the cooler and cutting it into cubes, stabbing a little plastic fork into each one before arranging them on a platter. He then got a bag of large pretzel sticks and stacked them up on a separate plate. The pretzels looked like logs stacked at a lumber mill and Carl could hardly wait to pick up the first "log" and dip it into his fountain.

When he checked on his chocolate, it had barely started to melt, and the store opened in 20 minutes. Fifteen minutes later, when Mary came through the back door carrying a platter of Christmas cookies, she found Carl holding a bowl he had obviously made out of tin foil on top of the toaster they used at the sandwich counter. He pressed the bread plunger down every time it popped up, and inside the tinfoil bowl were about 4 cups of almost-melted chocolate.

As I said before, if Carl had been able to read the recipe, he would have known that dark baker's chocolate wasn't recommended for the fountain, and that to help bars of chocolate (when not using the fondue packets) melt and flow smoothly, it is best to add either butter or cooking oil when melting. Carl, of course, didn't know this, so after fully melting the chocolate over the toaster, he carefully poured it back onto the fountain's warming plate. He then placed the tiered cone over the auger and flipped on the second switch. It took only about 10 seconds for the smooth, rich, dark-brown melted chocolate to bubble out of the small hole at the top of the fountain and flow down in a very satisfying, soothing way. The flowing chocolate looked nothing like it had at their niece's wedding reception that summer, neither in colour nor in how smoothly the lighter-coloured chocolate flowed down the fountain, but that was to be expected, since Carl was using the "Good Stuff," he told himself. But Carl understood: now that the chocolate had melted, it would flow back into the warming tray, warm up, and make its ascent up the fountain auger once more. Repeating its journey again and again until the chocolate was mostly eaten up.

The fountain and the quality of the chocolate overjoyed the first few customers of the day. Everything was flowing smoothly. That was until the cold winter air outside and the old store's lack of insulation proved too much for the low-voltage warming plate to handle. Carl, who had gotten too busy to keep an eye on the fountain, thought the two Bodie boys, in town with their parents from their Ranch just to the north, were enjoying the fountain so much they couldn't control their laughter. The boys were really laughing at the flatulent sound the fountain made periodically as the auger tried to pump both half-melted chocolate and air out of the top of the fountain.

Carl had gotten so caught up with the many folks stopping into the store to make last-minute purchases and wish them good tidings that he completely forgot about the fountain.

Just before noon, Mrs. Betteridge, the head of the local Ladies Auxiliary, along with her 3 grandkids stopped by the store to greet Carl and Mary. Mary had never really gotten along with Mrs. Betteridge, who thought she was always right and knew better than anyone how to do things. Over the years, the two had served on quite a few community groups together and butted heads over more than one fundraising idea. Mary was sure the only reason Mrs. Betteridge had stopped in was to show off that she had grandchildren, and Mary, as yet, did not. After a brief cordial chat, the youngest of the children ran over and grabbed Mrs. Betteridge by the coat sleeve and started to pull her towards the fountain, all the while squealing, "Come see Gran!!! Come see!!!" Mrs. Betteridge was dressed in her Sunday finest for that evening's Christmas Eve mass and wasn't impressed by the child tugging on her best coat.

Carl wasn't sure what he heard most clearly, the popping sound from the once-remembered fountain, or the complete silence that followed as the three young children stood with jaws dropped and eyes wide open, staring at their grandmother. Mrs. Betteridge had gobs of half-melted chocolate dripping from her pillbox hat onto her shoulders. A streak of chocolate ran across the front of her blouse and up onto her face. Mrs. Betteridge, not smiling, noticed the slightly upturned corners of her grandchildren's mouths and was sure she'd caught Carl in a slight grin.

Once many, and by many, I mean many, apologies were uttered and Mrs. Betteridge and her grandchildren had left the store, all was quiet except for the faint sound of Christmas carols playing on the radio at the back of the store. Mary quietly cleaned the chocolate out of the fountain, and Carl cleaned up the chocolate from the shelving displays and floor. Carl noticed that his platter of fruit and the pretzels had hardly been touched. The truth hit him like a stone. Everyone who had come into the store that morning was so busy watching the poor fountain try to pump the half-melted chocolate that most of them never even noticed the platter. Carl was so busy that morning that he didn't even get a chance to play his pretzel game, which he had been looking forward to so much.

As Carl and Mary put on their coats for the short walk home to greet the kids arriving for Christmas any time now, Carl noticed a sly smile on Mary's face. Years later, Mary would admit the fountain was one of her all-time favourite Christmas gifts. Carl knew that little smirk because he had seen it many times before. He also knew Mary well enough to know that after today he had better be on his best behaviour over the holidays. Carl took one last look around the store, smiled to himself, then shut off the lights and closed the door.

The last thing Carl thought right before locking the door and walking Mary home wasn't about the day he'd had, nor was it about Mrs. Betteridge. No, the last thing that went through his mind was whether he needed a ladder after the holidays, or if a chair would be tall enough to clean the chocolate off the ceiling.

Borderline Good is a series of original works of fiction by Kirby Gust, first published in The Country Register. The stories are set in a fictional town along the Saskatchewan–Manitoba border. All characters are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Cream of Mushroom Soup

This is a rich, flavourful soup made with butter sautéed mushrooms and onions, herbs, and a creamy broth. My husband came home, tasted it while it was warming up on the stove, and said, "I think I'll just have soup for supper."

- 6 Tbsps. butter, divided
- 2 lbs. mushrooms, sliced
- Salt & pepper
- 2 ½ cups chopped yellow onions
- 1 ½ Tbsp. garlic, minced
- ⅓ cup flour
- ⅔ cup dry white wine or additional chicken broth
- 3 (14.5 oz) cans low-sodium chicken broth or equivalent stock powder
- 1 parmesan rind (about 3 to 4 inches long)
- 2 tsp fresh thyme leaves
- 1 ½ Tbsp. cornstarch well blended with 2 Tbsp water (optional, for more thickening)

¾ cup heavy cream

2 tsp fresh lemon juice

Melt 4 Tbsp. butter in a heavy pot over medium heat.

Add mushrooms and two pinches of salt and toss. Let cook, tossing occasionally, until liquids have evaporated and mushrooms have browned, about 25 to 30 minutes (toss more frequently near the end of cooking to prevent burning).

Add onions and sauté 3 minutes longer, tossing occasionally. Then add garlic and cook 2 minutes longer, tossing frequently.

Melt the remaining 2 Tbsp butter, then add the flour and cook 1 to 2 minutes while scraping the bottom of the pot and tossing constantly.

Pour in white wine or broth, scrape up browned bits from the bottom of the pot and stir mixture.

While stirring, slowly pour in chicken broth. Add parmesan rind and thyme. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

Reduce heat to low and let gently simmer for 20 to 30 minutes, covered. Stir occasionally.

Stir in cream, and lemon juice. Remove from heat.

If you'd like to thicken soup more, add cornstarch water mixture during the last 1 minute of cooking.

Entwistle, AB



Introducing Maisy's Quilts – Where Tradition Meets a New Beginning

We are excited to introduce Maisy's Quilts, a modern online quilt fabric and supply store located just 10 minutes south of Entwistle, Alberta, right off Highway 22.

Maisy's Quilts offers convenient local pickup, along with delivery to Tomahawk and Drayton Valley. And while we're starting our journey online, we're already looking forward to opening our physical storefront in the summer of 2027!

Our Story:

My love for quilting started when I was just a little girl, learning from my Grambear. I made my very first placemat in Grade 5 at one of the Easyford Hall Quilt Retreats, never imagining that something I loved doing as a child would one day become a business of my own.

After taking a break from quilting during university, I found my way back to it in 2014, living across the driveway from my grandparents. I still remember sitting at their kitchen table one day, drinking instant coffee, eating a cookie, and showing her and Gramps what I had been working on that morning. That's when she said something that would stick with me for years: "One day, you should open a quilt fabric store."

I laughed and brushed it off at the time. I was busy developing my Métis beading and moccasin-making skills, which Grambear had also taught me. Those skills eventually grew into my first online business, Denim and Sage. What started as a creative passion turned into something much bigger than I ever expected. In my busiest year, I handmade 581 pairs of earrings, 3 pairs of moccasins, and 6 custom quilts, shipping my work to customers in 15 different countries. But Grambear's suggestion never really left me.

When our family moved to our new property a year ago, everything started to fall into place. We finally had the location, the space, and the opportunity to build something that I had been dreaming about for so long. And just like that, the idea planted at Grambear's kitchen table more than a decade ago was finally becoming a reality.

Maisy's Quilts is more than just a fabric store to me. It's a way to carry forward the skills, creativity, and traditions that were passed down to me, while creating a place where others can discover their own love for quilting. What started with my Grambear teaching me to quilt has grown into something I can now share with my own daughters, Mable-Ann and Maisy-Jo.

We're excited to start this journey, serve our local quilting community, and grow into a storefront where quilters of all experience levels can find inspiration, quality supplies, and a friendly face.

Thank you for supporting our small business and helping make this dream a reality. We can't wait to see what the next chapter brings!

Maisy's Quilts – Located south of Entwistle, Alberta. Shop online, arrange local pickup, or take advantage of delivery to Tomahawk and Drayton Valley. Storefront opening summer 2027!

The Tale of Butter: A Rich and Creamy History

By Colleen Gust

Butter. Few foods churn up as much adoration—or cholesterol—as this velvety staple. From ancient times to your toast, butter's story is a spread worth savouring.

Once Upon a Churn: Butter's tale begins thousands of years ago, maybe as far back as 2000 BCE. Legend (and a dollop of creative speculation) says nomads discovered butter while transporting milk in animal skins. After a long, bumpy ride, the milk separated: voilà—butter by accident! An "udderly" unexpected discovery.

In ancient times, butter was more than a culinary delight. In India, ghee (clarified butter) played a sacred role in rituals. Greeks and Romans used butter for skincare and medicine, leaving the eating to the truly bold. (Romans thought eating butter was a "spread" too far.)

Butter rose to fame in medieval Europe—especially in cooler climates where olive oil was scarce. It became a staple for peasants and kings alike, even used as rent or a valuable gift. By the Renaissance, French cooks wouldn't dare cook without it. The French still butter us up with croissants and creamy sauces. Scandinavians carved festive butter sculptures, and Ireland's "bog butter" (butter buried in peat bogs for centuries) is a true "time capsule" of flavor and history!

Today, butter is big business and making it is both art and science. Modern butter starts with fresh cream, pasteurized and churned to separate butterfat from buttermilk. Churning—by hand or machine—gives us that golden block. Salt or cultures may be added. The result? Butter in all its forms: salted, unsalted, whipped, cultured, even plant-based (for those who want to have their butter and "eat it, too").

Let's "spread" a word about premium butters. These luxurious butters—think French and Irish brands—come from top-quality cream, often cultured and churned longer for extra richness. Premium butters have more butterfat (sometimes 82% or more). The result? Creamier texture, bolder flavour, and a golden hue that could make the sun jealous. Bakers "butter" believe: premium butter can elevate pastries, sauces, and even toast to new heights.

Butter is now a culinary status symbol. Chefs prize artisanal butters for their terroir—the unique taste from local pastures and cows' diets. Butter tasting flights are a thing at high-end restaurants, and farmers' markets feature small-batch, hand-churned varieties. When it comes to butter, there's always room to "spread" the luxury!

What does butter do in cooking? It's the secret behind flaky pie crusts, golden cookies, and rich sauces. Butter adds moisture, flavour, and melt-in-your-mouth texture. It's why your toast is worth getting up for and your popcorn is "reel" delicious.

Of course, not all butter moments are smooth. Anyone who's tried to spread cold butter on toast knows the struggle: the bread shreds, the butter won't budge, and you wonder if you're buttering toast or carving a sculpture. It's a true test of strength and patience—no wonder they call it a "spread"!

Without butter, hollandaise is just eggs and croissants would be, well, sad. Butter is the "glue-cream" holding together countless recipes.

From ancient churns to modern factories, butter is a testament to the magic of simple ingredients and a little patience (okay, sometimes a lot of cows). Whether slathered on bread or whipped into a cake, butter has earned its place in the culinary hall of fame. Next time you enjoy a buttery treat, remember: you're tasting history. And if you're feeling bold, spread a little butter knowledge at your next dinner party. It'll be the toast of the table!

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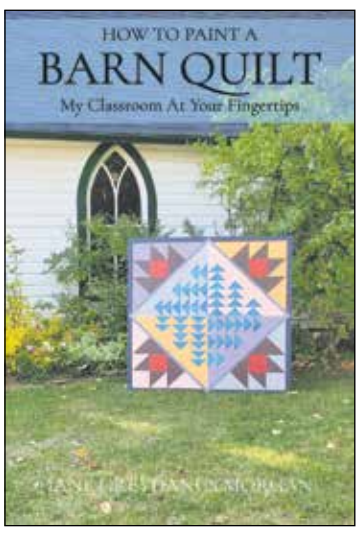
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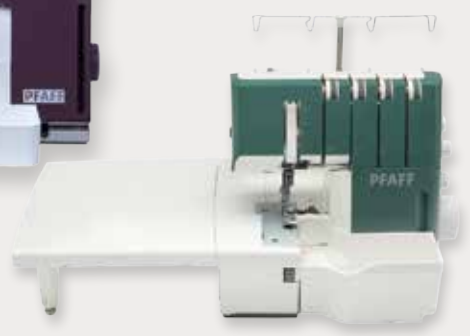
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