

Inside Hallmark Cards: Joyful, artistic job atmosphere

BY SHEILA GARRETT
Special to the Record-Eagle

"Merry Chr-" read the front of the ugly-looking hand-made card that came in the mail. I opened it and read inside, "I didn't care enough to send the very best!"

That was one friend's reaction to my new job at Hallmark Cards of Kansas City years ago. Other friends wrote apologetic notes if they sent me a card by a competitor.

My job title was children's editor. A college friend working at Hallmark had alerted me to the possibility.

Applicants were required to take an I.Q. and a creativity test, which included an audition of sorts. So I wrote a little birthday verse that went:

*Darlene, the dolly, was up with the dawn,
Ran out of the house to the street,
Passed all her friends with a wave of her hand
As though she had wings on her feet.
She ran past the school and the church and the*

*store,
And straight round the corner she flew.
And here she is now, she just couldn't be late
To say "Happy Birthday" to you.*

My friend looked it over and said that a verse of eight lines was too long for a simple birthday card, but that I, as an applicant, could not be expected to know that. She suggested I go ahead and submit it, which I did. A few weeks later, I began work at "the plant," a humdrum name for an amazing place.

There was a certain party atmosphere that prevailed and management encouraged this. There was a daily newsletter, decorated with a bunny in a herald's costume, blowing a trumpet. With all the artists in the building, newsletters and signs invariably looked good. Choirs and other music groups were welcome to visit the plant and entertain, especially during the holidays.

When the real Christmas rolled around, though, we were working on the "little holidays" — Halloween and

Thanksgiving. In the editorial department, pumpkins and pilgrims were everywhere.

My friend and I merrily flew back to Michigan, carrying shopping bags of presents from Halls, Jones and The Plaza — Kansas City's glamorous shopping district. We happily met our families and headed home for a few fun-packed days.

Then, when we were all worn out from celebrating, we returned to a dark and depressing post-holiday January in Kansas City, to start work immediately on Christmas cards two years into the future.

My job didn't involve writing verse as much as planning a line of cards, such as the Christmas line for children. Other editors dealt with the general, humorous and religious lines, and the elegant Crown Line that included famous art reproductions.

A line would consist of a given number of spots, each to be filled by a card at a given price. Most spots were filled by proven material,

solid sellers from past years. We sent designs to the art department to be updated, giving the cards a fresh look.

The company encouraged new ideas and many were provided by the writers. This fortunate group was allowed to go Christmas shopping on company time. They could watch television and read magazines. This was all considered research.

Accountability involved having a certain number of acceptances — work approved for future use.

Since editors gave the presentations, we tried to put our best spin on the writer's new material. The humor editor was a great standup comic. When it was my turn, I tried to use my best story-lady voice.

I remember once reading these lines at the end of a card that featured a story about a magic lamp:

*"But what if you don't have a lamp? That's all right
For Christmas Eve is a magic night..."*

All the executives around me seemed to have turned into 6-year-olds waiting in

suit. All of his entourage followed two steps behind him. I almost expected to see two dancing mice bringing up the rear.

The poet Ogden Nash came in once, alone. He was much more casually dressed, in a tweed jacket and smoking a pipe. Smoking was strictly regulated according to time and place in the plant. However, nobody said anything to the author of "Custard the Dragon" that, I proudly noted, was in my line.

Eventually, I left the company for the simple reason that I missed Michigan. I was about to be married and we had decided to live in my home state.

This time of year, I always remember my coworkers at the plant. They brought a lot of happiness to many people, especially during the holidays, and I'm proud to have been associated with them.

Howard and his group, however, could assemble them in seconds and were quite happy to be timed. Our employer, J. C. Hall, was one of the original Hall brothers who founded the postcard company that became Hallmark Cards. He personally approved every scrap of work that left the plant; including cards, gift wrap, party favors, coffee table books — everything. There were also many interesting visitors to the plant. One afternoon, Walt Disney walked past my desk. He was deeply tanned and wore an elegant dark blue

freelance writer.

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Spruce up holiday decor with the latest in ornamentation

BY MARTA HEPLER DRAHOS
Record-Eagle staff writer

It used to be that decorating for the holidays meant stringing colored lights around the big spruce in the front yard and spraying the windows with artificial "frost."

But thanks to technology, holiday decor in the 21st century has taken on an entirely different look — from animated light sculptures and holographic greetings to gel-look sculptures crafted from PVC material.

Among the newest decorations at Meijer in Traverse City are battery-powered light sets for use on door wreaths, said store director John Spaulding. But blow-up yard ornaments and lighted deer sculptures with heads that move are the best sellers for the third year in a row.

"I think the reason the inflatables are so popular is they aren't a lot of money and they're still huge," Spaulding said. "When you can put a 15-foot snowman in your yard for about \$20, it's pretty impressive."

Inflatable yard ornaments are also popular at Ace

Hardware on Front Street, where they went on sale the day after Thanksgiving. But more and more people are discovering the convenience of lights by the foot, said store manager Jason Gothard.

"The advantage of having those is you can make a string 150 feet long out of one cord instead of connecting three strings," Gothard said. "One guy did his whole fence with it, so he didn't have to connect strings together, he just ran one enormous line out."

Ice lights have been redesigned for the holidays. Besides classic, clear white, they come in multi-color, "windowcicle" and snowflake varieties. Even regular lights have undergone a facelift, with faceted bulbs — shaped like pine cones, blossoms and teardrops — to add texture. "That's kind of for someone who wants something a little different, a little trendy," Gothard said.

At Garden Goods in Traverse City, the hottest trend in outdoor decorating is using fresh greens to extend the life of planters like pots, window boxes and

urns. "In essence, instead of doing an evergreen tree like a dwarf evergreen or spiral topiary, you use fresh greens," said co-owner Julie Sovereign. "It's less expensive, and whenever we put a tree or shrub in a pot over the winter we run the risk of losing it."

The greens come in bundles selected for their color, texture and aroma, and include berried hollies, incense cedars, eucalyptus leaves, boxwood, blueberry juniper and curly willow.

"It is absolutely the look that you see in catalogues," Sovereign said. "It's very Smith and Hawken, Williams-Sonoma."

New at gift stores this year are window stickers made of soft, crystal-clear gel. The brightly colored "Gel-Gems" come in shapes like snowmen, penguins, holly and snowflakes, and do double-duty on refrigerators and mirrors.

"I know girls who are buying them for their lockers, and we just had a woman who put them on her shower," said Nancy Peacock, assistant manager at Tiny Treasures in Glen Arbor.



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