

Nativity Scene at Christmas by Candlelight is a **LABOR OF LOVE**

by Michael Arnum, *Director of Marketing & Public Relations*

From the tender age of 15, Tom Casey Hopkins began a fascination with nativity scenes – the popular miniature depictions of the birth of Jesus. In 1968, when Tom’s family made regular trips to Old Sturbridge Village, there was a private home about a half-mile from the entrance to the Village where a kind gentleman had converted his basement into an elaborate display of small plastic figurines depicting Bethlehem at the time of Jesus’ birth. Though inspired by the landscape of Tuscany, each vignette interpreted different parts of the Biblical narrative – the annunciation, the greeting of Mary and Elizabeth, the shepherds tending their flocks, with an Italianate flair. As Tom remembers, “this guy was meticulous, dressing the human figures in real cloth, and arranging the buildings with special lighting and landscaping.” The owner did not have set hours or charge a fee to enter. He simply answered the door when people rang the bell and happily introduced guests to his enchanted nativity display. It was an annual Christmas pilgrimage for the Casey family that Tom remembers vividly.

When this long-time neighbor of the Village moved away, his display went with him. While Tom was disappointed, he knew that it would be up to him to carry on the tradition of portraying the nativity story in miniature. Tom began collecting Fontanini pieces, saving his allowance for investing in new pieces. However, when it came to displaying this scene at Old Sturbridge Village, which began about 13 years ago, Tom soon realized that the ceramic miniature buildings were too heavy and too delicate to move around so frequently.

Having worked at Old Sturbridge Village for a time, Tom got to know another employee who taught him how to carve Styrofoam, which was done at the time for modeling Santa’s Workshop. This gave him the idea of recreating the nativity scene in Styrofoam – a much lighter, portable material that he could now fashion with his own imagination.

While inspired by the Fontanini buildings, Tom soon came up with his own ideas for recreating a 19th-century nativity scene set in New England with



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portrayals of the daily life of the residents and their world, with the story of Jesus' birth set among them. He created a shoemaker's shop, a blacksmith, a glass blower and more, as he tried to imagine how 19th-century Americans might have thought about Bethlehem and its environs. Though the pieces still have an Italianate motif, with tile-like roofs and stucco on half-timbered buildings, they are a hybrid with pre-industrial 19th-century New England themes. Tom spent 30 hours a week for a period of six months to design, carve and paint the miniature buildings and accessories, which include exotic animals and 20 breeds of dogs. Today, there are more than 500 individual pieces in the display.

"The nativity is geared for children, and they really get a kick out of it," Tom says, "though adults too are moved by it, some even to the point of tearing up with joy." One of those adults is Old Sturbridge Village's Board President, Richard "Dick" Schulze, who takes great pride in leading guests, with a flashlight, through a tour of the elaborate scene each night.

While Tom handled the artistic and creative direction, it is thanks to Tom's husband Darrel, who had a 24-year career in the US Army as an Electronic Warfare Intercept Equipment Repair Technician, that many of the

pieces in the miniature village are animated. A grist mill spins its wheel, a cat chases a mouse around a circle and of course the pieces are carefully illuminated.

Now residents of Westminister, Mass., Tom and Darrel faithfully bring the nativity scene to life each year, transporting the pieces from storage in their home and setting them up at Old Sturbridge Village over two days.

Both Tom and Darrel serve as volunteers at the Village, lending their voices to the Village Singers and demonstrating folk dances with the Village Dancers.

For the first time this year, the Village will display the nativity scene in the Friends Meeting House, giving the display greater prominence. 🦋

