

ORGANIC LIVING

By

Robert Rodale

THE MYSTIQUE OF MAKING THINGS BY HAND

Bill Muller almost chokes when he says the word "plastic" because he works in wooden toys.

"Plastic toys don't last; wooden toys do," he says. "The wooden toys that I make last. The parents are willing to spend extra money for them knowing that they will last and are worth it."

Muller's shop in Bucks County, Pa., has a special play area where new toys are put down on the floor for use by children brought in by their parents who want to buy. He watches their reactions to a toy and how they play with it to learn just how it will be accepted. If it is good, he makes more of them for sale. If it is poor, he shelves the idea.

"My aim is to create something -- to build something that can be appreciated by young and old alike," Muller says. "When I see children playing with my toys, it brings me a great deal of pleasure."

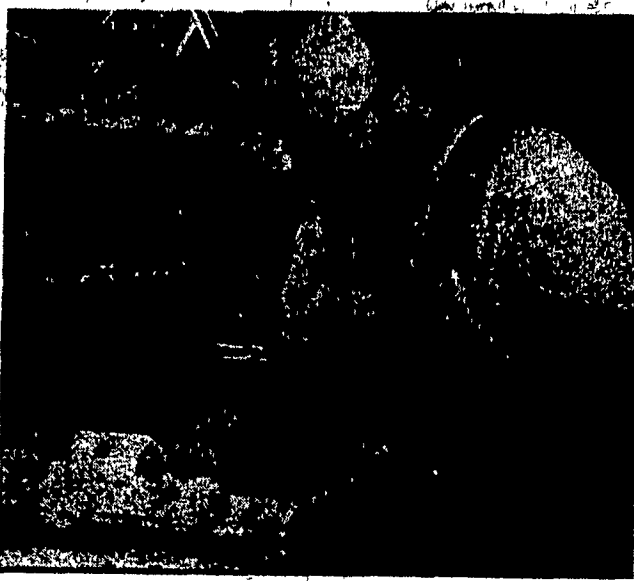
Muller is a former trucking executive from Baltimore who was burned out in 1968. But he says he'd "never go back to that rat race again. I like what I'm doing because I know what I'm doing is good, both for me, my family and children."

Thousands of other Americans are also discovering the joys of making or owning handmade articles. They are turning back to the old-fashioned "country crafts" for the following reasons:

QUALITY. Handmade things, whether they be toys or tools, are built to last. True craftsmen aren't interested in the kind of technological shortcuts and skimping on materials that plague the reliability of many manufactured goods.

UNIQUENESS. No two handmade items are exactly alike. They aren't stamped out by the thousands on an assembly line.

PERSONAL. To the extent that the hand crafter enjoys and cares about what he is making, he imparts a little of his own personality into the article. Items like quilts, wall hangings, stained glass, etc., really give



A wooden toy automobile takes shape in the Bucks County, Pa., workshop of Bill Muller. In an age of mass-produced plastic playthings, the former trucking executive has found new satisfaction building handmade, quality toys for delighted customers.

the maker an opportunity for artistic expression.

NATURAL MATERIALS. Because most crafts have strong roots in the past, they are likely to utilize more natural materials. Wood is used instead of plastic, natural wool instead of synthetic fabrics, etc.

For the person serious about working with his or her hands, there are almost as many handicrafts as there are personality types. Candlemaking, woodworking, pottery, macrame, home tanning and leather making are just a few possibilities.

Spinning and dyeing woolen yarn have become exceptionally popular. Many enthusiasts even go a step further and naturally dye all their wool. They scour nearby woods and fields for seasonal coloring agents like mustard flowers and marigolds (yellow), onion skins (orange) and indigo (blue).

Weaving is another of yesterday's arts that is suddenly quite popular. Looms are selling briskly, and novices are flocking to introductory weaving classes at community centers and colleges.

People who take up basketmaking are finding eager customers. "I have never seen a basket I did not long for," says environmental writer Ruth Adams, an avid basket collector. "I cannot pass a roadside stand where as few as five baskets are for sale without stopping. I buy little and big baskets, practical and frivolous ones. I think they are all beautiful, practical, useful, meaningful and ecologically sound."

For those with the ambition and skill, even building their own home is not too great a challenge. "Eight years ago, working on weekends only, I started to build myself a home," writes Art Boericke in his book "Handmade Houses" (Scrimshaw Press) "... a home that was suited to the way I actually lived ... a solid little shed that had some of the spirit and the personality of the builder busting through." Many others are doing the same, for as Boericke says, such a place "could very well be duplicated by almost any greenhorn or apprentice who showed any aptitude at all."

Handcrafts on a smaller scale are helping obese

people overcome their eating problems. Mosaics, macrame, woodworking, metalworking and other purposeful activities are assigned to some patients to keep them too busy to snack between meals. This blocks the "hoof and mouth" reflex, says Dr. L. Melvin Elting, a Teaneck, N.J. specialist who has successfully treated many obese patients.

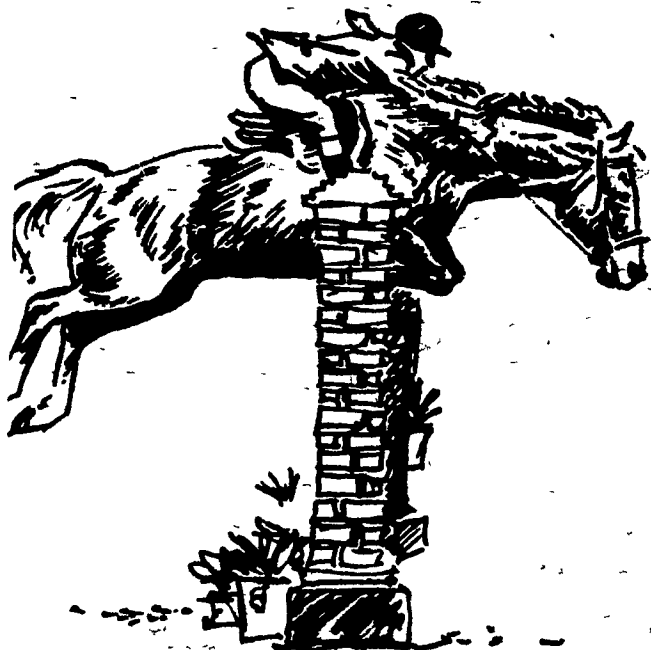
The best part of many handicrafts, according to Dr. Elting, is the "grime time" when patients get their hands dirty. "Few individuals, no matter how unbounded their appetites, will care to handle food with grimy hands," he says. Dr. Elting should know that he's talking about. He solved his own overweight problem by taking up metalworking.

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It's not too early to start thinking about making your own hand-fashioned gifts for the holiday season. "Have a Natural Christmas" is an illustrated 42-page booklet that shows you how to create herbal sachets, potpourris, dried flower arrangements, greeting cards and other personalized gifts and decorations. It's available for 50 cents from Robert Rodale, Organic Living, in care of this newspaper. Ask for the booklet by name, and please allow four weeks for delivery.

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