

Shopping here will spread a little Christmas spirit

BY DEBBIE KOONTZ

EPHRATA — Now that the Thanksgiving holiday is behind us, our thoughts, our plans, and, especially, our purses seem devoted to that favorite of all holidays—Christmas. Are you having trouble thinking of just the right gift for everyone on your shopping holiday list? Of, if the gift idea isn't the problem, is finding the money to pay for it causing quite a headache?

Then here is a place for you to shop: the Self-Help Craft Gift Shop in Ephrata. This shop is a marketing outlet for skilled craftspeople in 20 countries around the world who, because they live in poor countries or are refugees or handicapped, sell their work to the shop in order to earn a living. The program is part of the Mennonite Central Committee, a relief and service agency supported by Mennonites and Brethren in Christ.

The MCC operates the shop on a nonprofit basis and actually sells the pieces at a price which includes only the craftspeople's asking price plus shipping and overhead costs. Therefore, items of brass, wood, ceramic, jute, and many more, are offered at a low retail price.

How would you like to give a brass candle stick holder costing less than \$7 to a close friend? Wood belt buckles run at a low 70 cents. Nativity scenes handcarved from wood, run as low as \$7.95. Know anybody who collects elephant figurines? nutcrackers? macrame? dishes? towels? They have them all and they're all handmade.

As you may have guessed, this is not a small operation. In fact,

there are 42 stores like this one throughout the United States; and just as many in Canada. However, the difference is, this is where the program had its start and this is where the headquarters and central shipping point are located.

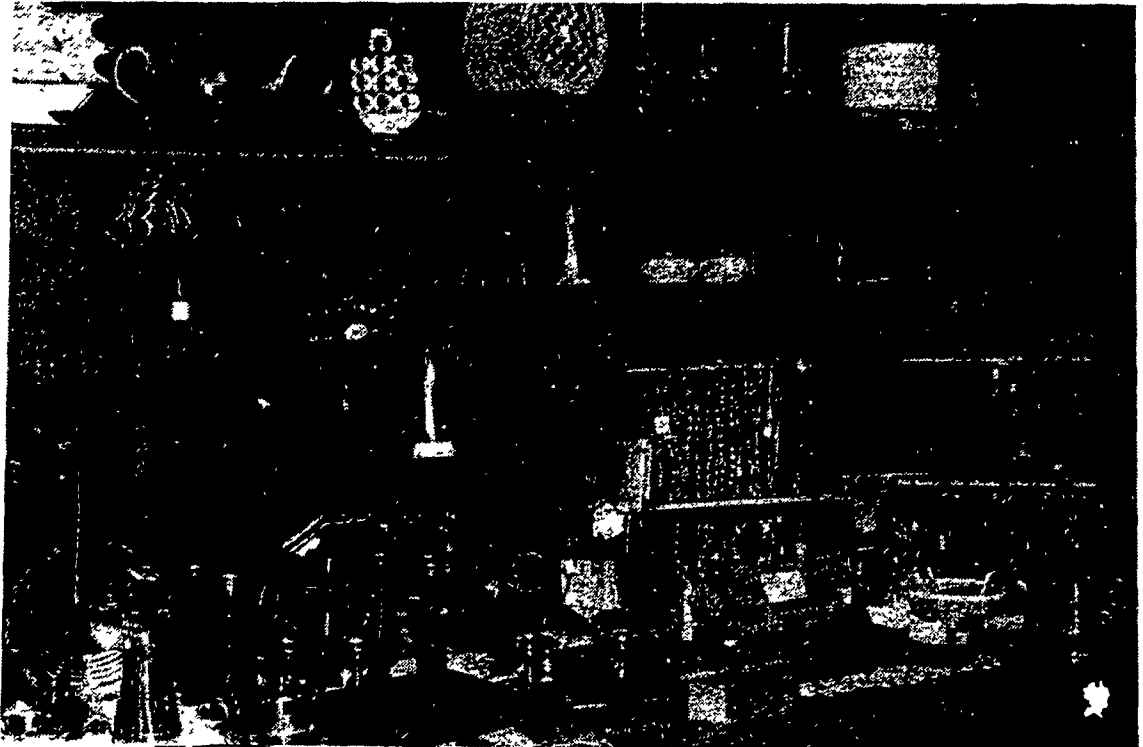
According to Paul Leatherman, director, the main goal behind the program is "a matter of providing employment for people in poorer countries." The fact that we as consumers benefit from the program, too, seems beside the point.

And it has always been this way, ever since Mrs. Byler of Ephrata first offered crafts from people in Puerto Rico in the late 1940's. These first few crafts were cross stitch tablecloths and napkins, and came to Mrs. Byler through the MCC who at the time was in Puerto Rico doing agricultural development.

Since then the program has grown to include over 20 countries. Among these are Taiwan, India, Bangladesh, and Haiti. Leatherman says he is expecting a shipment from Turkey shortly and expects Ecuador to follow soon. They also offer turquoise items from the Navajo Indians.

The business is growing about 30 percent a year through both the United States and the retail store in Ephrata. Leatherman says simply, "People recognize a bargain when they see it."

Selling is not done through the store only, however. Local groups interested in the shop set up booths at different affairs throughout the year. The Farm Women Societies operated a booth at the annual homemaker's holiday program this year and the Farm Show in January always includes a booth.



You want it? They've got it. Jewelry, Chinese and nautical figurines. The list goes on. And you're only looking at a shelf about six feet long.

Recently a display was set up in Fairfield. This three-day event profited more than \$36,000.

Of the crafts, Leatherman says, "They are all handmade. They have a very high degree of hand labor involved in each piece."

"Our intention is that the craftsman get payed an adequate wage according to their country's economy," he continued.

"If you understand the financial system, you'll know that what they make as a wage wouldn't be nearly as high as our salaries," gift shop manager Betty Rheinheimer added pointing at several hanging baskets. "You couldn't even buy the materials it would take to make a hanger with the money they get paid for it. And yet to them, it's very fair."

In fact, Leatherman admits that sometimes he has advised some craftsmen to raise their prices. His say is the final word on any item.

"Most customers come here to buy something as a gift for someone or to decorate their home, so I try to pick items with this in mind. We look at the producer. Who makes it? They must meet our criteria. Next we decide, is it done well enough that people will be willing to buy it? Will people be proud to give it as a gift? I work with the producers to make sure their quality doesn't drop."

Their biggest seller, according to Leatherman, is from India. Items made from Shesham wood, a reddish-brown wood, sell for an unbelievable low price. And to prove his point, Leatherman

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Paul Leatherman, director of the Self-Help Craft program, looks over a shipment of three new handcarved wooden pitchers. Mr. Leatherman says he tries to pick items with the buyers in mind. His main concern - will people be proud to give it as a gift?



The Self-Help Crafts Gift Shop is the place to shop for the collector in your family. Elephants, bells and decorated towels line the shelves. In addition to these items, the shop has a large selection of macrame hangers and baskets. But the best news is - you'll be pleased with the prices.



These handcrafted nativity scenes are a favorite Christmas item. The scene in the middle sells for as low as \$7.95. The one to the left goes for \$9.95. The figurines? A low \$9.95 to \$24.95.



Betty Rheinheimer, gift shop manager, places some new items on the shelf. Betty says she loves working here and little wonder why - she is surrounded everyday by beautifully handmade items from all over the world.