

Ancient legends come alive at Gnome Countryside

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KIRKWOOD — "Although I've never seen a gnome, I've had a lot of fun looking for them." These are the words of Richard Humphreys as he sits in the kitchen of his home in Kirkwood, discussing the Gnome Countryside.

Tucked deep in the countryside on a stream which feeds into the Octorara Creek, along a picturesque ravine, the Gnome Countryside is not just a place, but also a state of mind. It is, in fact, also the way Humphreys happens to make his living.

The area on Bridle Path Road where Humphreys lives with his wife, MaryLou, and their three children couldn't be better matched for the gnome fantasy which Humphreys espouses. He explains that gnomes live underground and in trees, and in this wonderful wooded place, interspersed with open areas, gnomes certainly could feel at home.

Humphreys opened Gnome Countryside five years ago, and his "business" of conducting tours of this rich outdoor arena has grown to reach 6,000 people annually, which is "as many as I can handle," he says forthrightly.

It is difficult to describe exactly what it is that Humphreys does as he invites people to walk with him through this treasure trove of outdoor experiences. He talks about the gnomes and their ways, of course, but what he really does is expose his visitors, young and old alike, to the wonderfully creative concept of enjoying the outdoors.

As a former teacher who has done some acting and enjoys storytelling, Humphreys is a natural for this role as spinner of legends about gnomes. Indeed, he relishes what he is doing so much that he says his goal is to still be walking around with visitors when he is 100.

In fact, he envisions himself with

a white beard, helping promote the fantasy. "I'll shrink a little, and the older I get the better I'll get. I'll do it as long as I'll be able to keep going."

What would make a man with a "normal" job like teaching turn to the countryside for his livelihood? Humphreys is candid. He admits that some friends and relatives thought he was crazy when he began. But he had a more serious consideration.

"A prime motivating factor is that I had been a diabetic for 25 years. Hardly anyone escapes major complications (from the disease) after that long." Humphreys was fearful of losing his sight, and he had to keep blood sugars regulated, which made it difficult to keep teaching.

"I wanted some other vocation. I knew I could do something. I had taught elementary art and directed a camp for diabetic children. I thought about a nature trail," he explains.

In his art lessons he often used elves, and understood their magical qualities. He added, "Children like the out-of-doors. It was a wonderful combination with a lot of appeal for children."

Another factor was an extended visit he and his wife, MaryLou, had had to Scandinavia and an intriguing two-week visit to a Danish pig farm over the Christmas holidays. "Those people had a sincere belief in the good luck that gnomes bring. We had kind and enjoyable thoughts of that."

That experience, coupled with the publishing of the book on gnomes by Poortvliet/Huygen, helped create the dream from which Gnome Countryside was born. Their home, deep in the woods, offered the perfect setting.

Humphreys took half a year off from teaching to test the idea, and with a few articles in the local newspapers his new career was underway. Ironically his sight has now been restored to 20/30, something he attributes to the "modern miracle of laser surgery. Ten years ago I would have been blind." He still keeps close watch on his blood sugar levels and administers insulin four times daily; but the miracle of sight is precious to him.

Of course his interest in gnomes



Richard Humphreys stands on the bridge across a small stream on his property. Underneath can be seen a troll bridge, where here he invites young people to choose which way they will cross. Humphreys urges them to follow their own choice, and not that of friends. His home can be seen in the background.

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and his information has grown as his experience expands. He has learned, for instance, that psychologists now believe that parents who leave no room for fantasy in their children's minds may cause those children to develop psychological problems.

He continues to read a lot, and for gnome enthusiasts he now publishes a quarterly newsletter.

He said he has found "an underground current of gnome fanciers."

He has acquired many carvings and pictures of gnomes over the years, some of which are used in the "gnomery" where guests are greeted upon arrival. The living areas of their home are filled with gnomes as well, many given to him by people interested in his countryside. One hand carved gnome is the "gnome ranger," who rides a great horned owl. Another prize is a "metrognome" which ticks out the time for playing music.

While the Countryside started mostly for families in the fall, the concept quickly became popular and Humphreys expanded it to begin in April. About three years ago he began offering Christmas candlelight tours, which have been very successful.

As Humphreys talks with his guests, he uses every opportunity to work in appropriate value lessons. One example is when a group of children reaches a toll bridge, found just beneath an arched bridge over the small stream. Humphreys invites them to cross the stream on either bridge, but urges them to take the way they want to take, not what their friends might choose. He then carries over this idea of choice, encouraging them to think for themselves at home, on the playground and in school.

At one point, he has visitors stop and close their eyes and listen to the sounds of the stream and forest. At another stop on the walk children are invited to climb ropes, but again, only as they feel comfortable.

His entire walk ties in with nature, at whatever season of the year it is. Each season offers special interest. Since gnomes are

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This could be a gnome house, lovingly carved from paulownia wood, and intricately designed with features which would be appealing to gnomes. This gnome appears right at home as he peers out the front of the small home.



This intricately carved wooden home could be a place for gnomes to live. In the background is the wooded area which comprises much of the visit to Gnome Countryside.



Gnomes are happy creatures, known in legends of countries throughout the world and over the centuries. This carved approximation of a gnome happily lives with the Humphreys.