

Blair Farm Woman Operates Party Room

LINDA WILLIAMS

Bedford Co. Correspondent
ROARING SPRING (Blair Co.)— Shirley Kensinger can't remember a time when she didn't want to have her party room. "Shirley's Something Special," located on the picturesque Kensinger farm is her dream come true.

"It's just a dream I've always had," she smiles. "But, while I was raising my three children and we were farming full time, I considered that my job. My party room was a dream and I didn't know if it would ever be a reality."

Thirty years ago as a busy, young mother who helped her husband on their 265-acre farm, Shirley began baking wedding cakes. "It was something that just grew," she remembers. "Before long I was baking birthday cakes or cakes for any special occasion."

Then, the children grew up and, when Shirley wasn't needed at home quite as much, she accepted a job as dining room manager of a local restaurant.

"I loved it," she remembers. "I liked the challenge and I learned a lot about managing a restaurant. It brought back my old dream of owning a party room."

Shirley continued to bake their special-occasin cakes and when Wilton cake pans offered a special school in Chicago where she could learn how to make crystalized flowers from icing, Shirley signed up for the course.

"When I came home, I knew it was time to give up my job and go into the cake business full time," she says.

Persuading her husband to build her a kitchen was no easy job. "He grumbled a lot and was sure I wouldn't make it, but he built the kitchen anyway," she laughs.

The cakes were such a success that Shirley soon had to hire some part-time help to keep up with the demand. "I'm the only one in the area who seems to know how to make these icing flowers," she admits. "I've had orders from as far away as Philadelphia."

With the children grown, Fred cut back on farming and began raising feeder calves. He is also a farm auctioneer. He had more time for chores which had been put off when work pressures were greater.

Mother Nature took its toll on the big farm house where the Kensinger family had lived for nearly three decades, and the side porch became very much in need of repair.

"It was either tear it down or add a room," Shirley told her husband. "I told him that, at long last, here was the perfect opportunity for my party room."

"Fred laughed and told me I was getting too old to take on a challenge that big. But, I persisted and finally won him over."

The Kensingers did most of the work on the new addition themselves. While the building was in progress, Shirley began her party room idea in the dining room of the big farm house. She could serve parties of up to 12 and, it was an immediate success.

When the new room was completed, she had room for 45. "I did all of my own decorating," she says modestly. "I even papered the walls myself."

Shirley chose the colors carefully blending the patterns and designs of everything from the drapes and wall decorations to the pattern of the china and the napkin rings. Predominant colors are shades of pink accented with contrasting black.

The carpet was laid one day and "Shirley's Something Special" opened the next. "That was December 18, 1989, and we've been busy over since," Shirley remembers.

She serves card clubs, rehearsal dinners, club meetings, baby showers, wedding showers, or family reunions.

"In this area, country home cooking is still the big thing," Shirley says. "I would like to serve some gourmet-type items, but the home cooking is what most people seem to want."

She does add one special dish to each event. "Something they didn't ask for, but are willing to try. It's always a hit."

Shirley now has five regular part-time workers. During the busy summer season she hires an additional five. Her married daughter is one of her best helpers, as is her husband, Fred.

"It isn't all fun and games," Shirley is quick to admit. "It's hard work and long hours. I'm always meeting a deadline. When I was cooking for my family, I could put them off for a half-hour. You don't do that with the public. In the summer she often works until 1 or 2 in the morning and is back up at 6 a.m. One weekend last summer, she baked wedding cakes for 1,700 people."

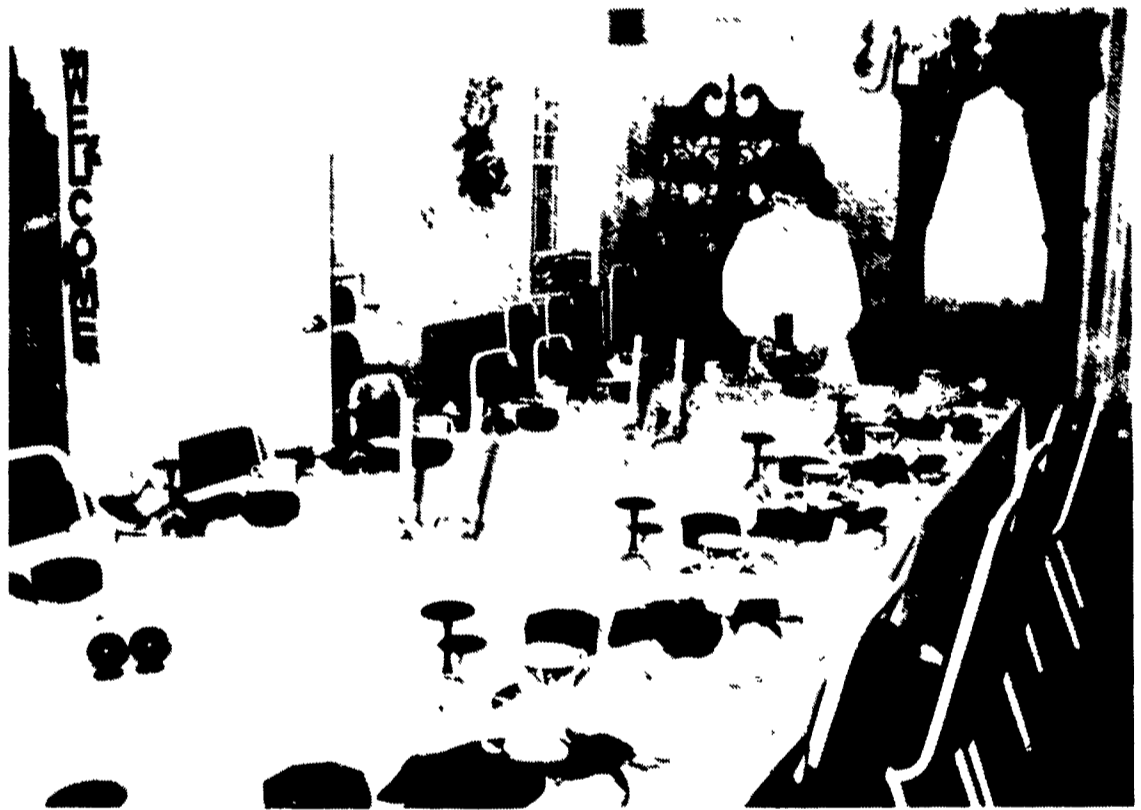
Shirley also does some catering and has carry-out specialty foods. "I think I'm going to have to give up my Christmas cookies," she admits.

"I used to make 1,200 dozen and then hold an open house. They would all be bought in one day. But, I just can't do everything. Something has to go."

She says she is always amazed at the number of people she talks with who are bored. "I couldn't be bored if I live to be 100," she smiles. "I figure we only get one crack at life and, I'm going to live it to the fullest. And, I'm extremely lucky, I've seen my dream come true. I might be working hard, but, I'm doing something I love."



A three-room building behind the farm house is the location of Shirley's kitchen. A lot of the cooking for "Shirley's Something Special" is done here.



Shirley Kensinger in the party room of Shirley's Something Special. She did all of the wallpapering and decorating herself.



Appetizers are served in the dining room. Here, the table is decorated for Easter.

Until about 1916, all the sour cream used in the United States was homemade. The advent of the cream separator in the late 1800s led to the manufacture of sour cream in dairy plants.

Some stories suggest that, during biblical times, people in the Middle East discovered yogurt when they left milk in a warm place.

Butter is one of the oldest known dairy products, having been discovered about 4,000 years ago. It was accidentally churned in an animal-skin pouch, slung on the back of a horse or camel. The pouch bounced as the animal moved, churning the cream or milk into the substance known as butter.