

# Lancaster Farming *Antiques Center*

## Decorating With Antique Ornaments Makes Christmas Special

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REEDSVILLE (Mifflin Co.) —

Dottie and Joe Gearhart's eight-foot Christmas tree stands in a place of honor in their home — squarely in the center of their living room floor, visible from all sides. That's how important Christmas and their antique Christmas ornaments and decorations are to the Gearharts.

"We pack 100 ornaments in each computer paper box, and we have seven or eight boxes. There are about 700 ornaments on this tree," said Dottie. Few of the ornaments date later than 1910.

"We started collecting 50 years ago. I used to buy 'the pile' at auctions, the items thrown together that wouldn't sell. When I started collecting ornaments and decorations, no one wanted them," Dottie says.

The Gearhart ornament and decoration collection encompasses glass, paper, and wax angels, churches and houses, bells, animals, musical instruments, pipes, Christmas trees, pine cones, chalk-faced Santas, colorful Kugels, feather trees, candy containers, Dresden ornaments, German stars, "putz" or the things under the tree such as animals and the nativity, and much, much more.

"The flying wax angels are a whole other story. They're fragile and they melt. They're from the

1890 Victorian era and were made over a period of about 20 years. Collectible to me is before World War II. I try to collect ornaments and decorations from countries in Central Europe such as Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Austria. Not Japan. The quality's not there," Dottie explains. "These ornaments are so hard to buy now because they're so expensive."

### Folklore, Legends, And Facts

Legend claims that a home in Germany in 1640 housed the first decorated tree. "The German and Protestant churches — not the Puritans — accepted Christmas trees. The trees were decorated with fruits, grains, and nuts to celebrate the harvest, as a hymn to Jesus. Santa Claus is pure myth, but not the Christmas tree."

Lights first adorned a tree in 1700. The first cottage industry of glass ornament making developed in Germany in 1840. The men would blow the ornaments; the women would decorate; the children would sell them in the villages. Paper, tinsel, and cellophane were used before glass.

The large German Kugel balls became popular from 1840 to 1860. In the late 1800s, factories in New Jersey and New York began producing Kugel balls, and it became difficult if not impossible to tell the difference. Very few were made after 1880.



Dottie Gearhart proudly holds the double-bulbed Kugel ornament her husband, Joe, gave her. These beautiful bulbs have embossed brass ends and were painted in the inside.

"About that time, Woolworth went to Germany and brought Kugels back in bulk," Dottie explains. "There are two types — glass ones blown into molds and figures, such as grapes, pears, and eggs, and the free-blown ones. They're balls or a twisted shape. Of course, there have been reproductions made of all of these. You can tell the difference by the paint, weight, and brass

ornaments. Also, the spear on top of an original is very small."

Dottie's bowl of colorful Kugel balls contains a huge cobalt-colored one as well as many of other colors and one shaped like a bunch of grapes.

Folklore has it that Hessian soldiers introduced Christmas trees to America during the Revolutionary War. Supposedly, Washington attacked while the British and Hessians soldiers



Dottie realizes that some people might call a "scrap" tree ugly, but the trim on these Victorian-era ornaments is made from pure silver. Putting flags on a Christmas tree was common practice in Europe and in America during the Revolutionary War.

were celebrating Christmas.

Whether fact, fiction, or folklore, the Gearharts thoroughly enjoy collecting the ornaments that have adorned so many homes during Christmas for so many generations.

Dottie also keeps a booth of antiques for sale at the Dairyland Antique complex. She teaches how to make German stars, many of which are seen throughout the Gearhart home and at the Dairyland Antique complex.

"To me, decorating for Christmas is my Christmas," Dottie said.



An angel with a spun-glass halo tops this Christmas tree.



Joe and Dottie Gearhart decorate their tree with rare glass beads and tubes strung onto wires that were made in Czechoslovakia.