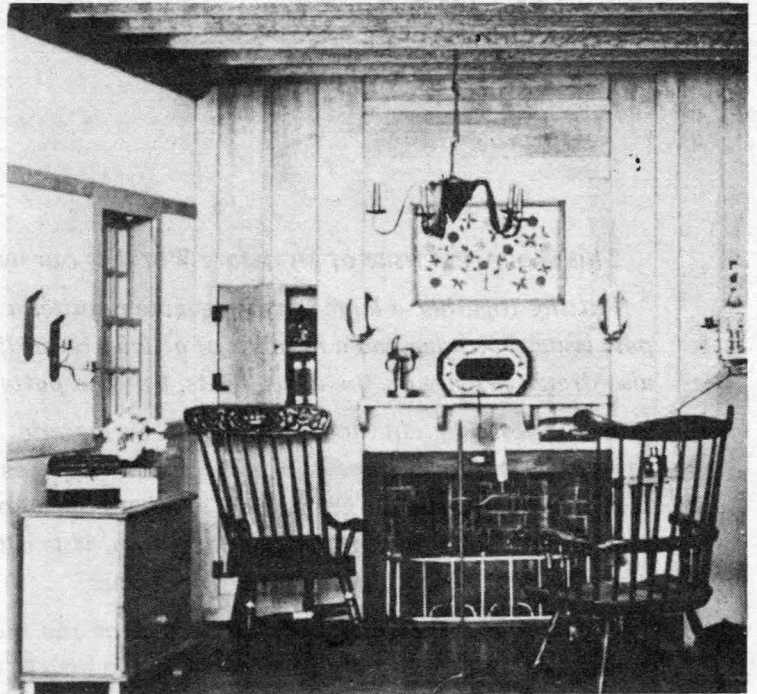


To the right is a completely furnished miniature sitting room. On the left a miniature tinsmith's shop.



# Studio B

by Nessa Mines



This family of miniaturists manages to work independently and cooperatively even across state lines.

"I had a difficult time convincing my wife Peggy that I wasn't crazy when I suggested we go into the business of making miniature tinware, but now she's even more enthusiastic than I am."

Thus explains William Birkemeier of the splendid working relationship he and his wife have in their part-time business.

Peggy is a complete convert

now, however, and she is probably the harder worker of the two.

"I came from a big, close family," she says with enthusiasm. "And this miniature business has brought Bill and I so close to each other and to his family that it has been marvelous. It has been such an area of personal growth and good relationships that I think we've all benefited from it."

This young couple are an excellent example of the quality craftspeople who are devoted to making fine miniatures for adult collec-

tors. Whether their business is full-time or part-time, it is an essential part of their lives and they are committed to only the best.

As William Birkemeier emphasizes, "The core of good craftspeople is small compared to the commercial area of the vast miniature hobby. We all get to know each other fairly well. Fine craftsmanship encourages more fine craftsmanship. Even people from clear across the country get to know one another's work.

"Besides," Bill goes on, "the

adult collectors give the craftsman such a favorable response to quality work. Whenever the work piles up and I begin to feel it's all too much — that's what keeps me going. It's the tremendous response from customers who recognize fine work. They are so enthusiastic and yet patient in waiting for their orders. It gives strength to our aims."

You could not find a more dedicated couple nor better craftsmen.

Bill Birkemeier is an ocean engineer by profession. He and Peggy reside in Springfield, Virginia, where Bill is employed by the Federal Government.

However, it wasn't at all surprising for Birkemeier to get into the business of crafting miniatures, because his parents were already in it!

Studio B, as their business is called, was founded by Robert and Florence Birkemeier of Manlius, New York, about four years ago. They make superb Early American furniture. Their work was so good that all they did was go to one show and Studio B was in orders up to their ears.

"We're about two years behind in filling orders," admits the senior Birkemeier.

"But you would be amazed at how patient our customers are with us. They aren't always calling or writing, because they know good work takes time."

"Of course, we don't take any deposit of money in advance," emphasizes Mr. Birkemeier. "Whenever a piece is complete I let the customer know and if he wants it he sends the money at that time. After such a long wait, I figure a person has a right to change his mind."

Needless to say, someone who has seen the Birkemeiers' work rarely does change his mind.

Because his work takes him out of town a great deal, Robert admits his wife now does far more in the business than he.

"Florence does all the book-keeping besides doing all the beautiful finishes on our pieces," praises Mr. Birkemeier. "She can even steam the chair rails for shaping.

"You might say I'm just the lathe man. I just sit at the lathe and do the proper turnings."



A pie safe created by the talented members of Studio B.

Of course, Mr. B. is being over-modest. He is quite a craftsman.

Robert Birkemeier had made miniature furniture for his daughters for many years.

"Every year I made at least one new thing for their doll house for Christmas," he reminisces. "I don't think there was any item of furniture I didn't eventually make."

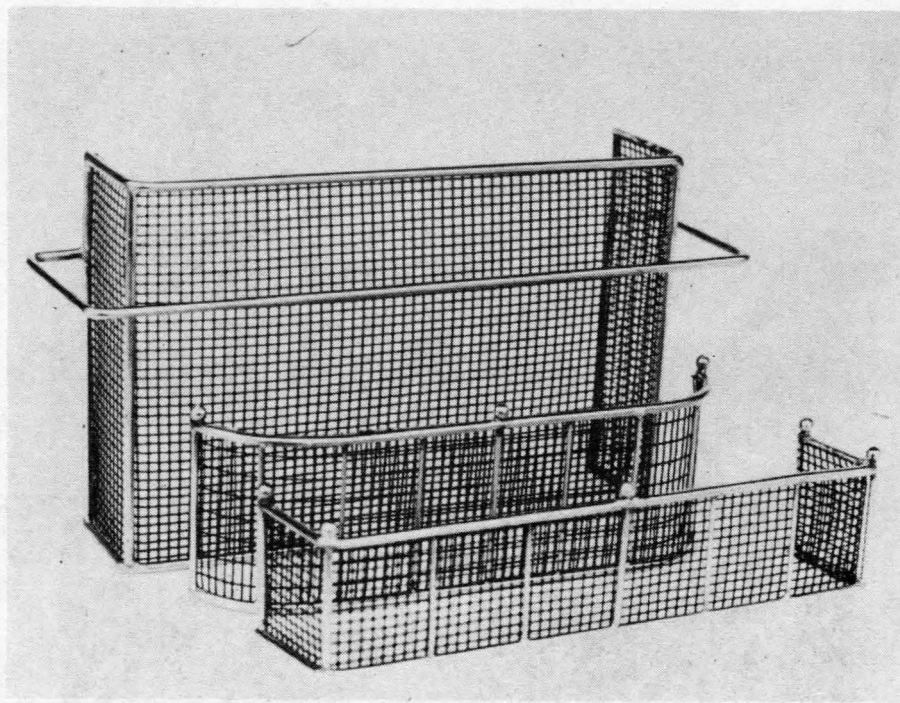
Now Robert and Florence Birkemeier specialize in various Windsor chairs, gate-leg tables, blanket chests and — one of their most popular items — a spinning wheel

with moving parts. The latter costs \$100.00 and is just about their most expensive miniature. It has thirty-seven lathe-turned pieces. One of their least expensive pieces of furniture is a pine table which costs a modest \$10.00.

Their most popular item, however, was the Boston rocker with stenciling.

"In fact," laughs Florence, "it was so popular we had to discontinue it. The amount of work that went into that tiny piece was more work than it was worth. You

Continued on next page



Fireplace screens by William and Peggy Birkemeier. Notice the drying bar.

can charge only so much for a rocker and we like to be fair."

But Studio "B", as we said, includes son, William Birkemeier, and his wife, Peggy. As a boy, Bill did a great deal of miniaturizing by making new things for the Christmas train village and by building all kinds of scale models.

"You might say I just grew up with it," says Bill.

William and Peggy make perfect

scale reproductions of all kinds of chandeliers, coffeepots, and dozens of other tin items. Peggy even hand dips tiny bayberry candles for certain chandeliers and candlesticks.

Fortunately, Bill and Peggy are not as far behind in their orders as their parents. Here, too, Bill gives his wife full credit.

"Peggy not only paints the beautiful designs on all our tin-

ware, but she also cuts all the tin parts, helps me assemble many pieces, and does all the bookkeeping."

The painting that Peggy does is not the elaborate "Tole" style, but is the earlier country style seen in Pennsylvania, Connecticut, or New York.

How did they decide on making tinware rather than furniture as the senior Birkemeiers do?

Peggy explained, "We lived in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, for a time and had a chance to observe the tinsmiths working. It was so interesting to us and they were helpful."

"One tinsmith even showed us how to roll the edges to give strength to the chandelier arms. And a tinsmith at Old Sturbridge showed us how to curve the spout of a coffeepot," explains Bill.

"That's my favorite, I think," adds Peggy enthusiastically.

"When we first started," continues William, "we just did a tremendous amount of research at libraries and museums."

Obviously, the Birkemeiers were just plain willing to put in the necessary study and research time. The tools they use are jewelers' tools and various items that model railroad builders use. They are not afraid of study and hard work.

"We've learned from our parents not to take too many orders, however," emphasizes Bill.

"Once you get too far behind, the work gets frustrating. All you can think about is catching up. Then you are afraid to take time out for recreation."

Peggy adds, "We do stock about sixty items and that's plenty. We don't want our business to get too big."

The least expensive item Bill and Peggy make is their \$1.25 cookie cutter. One of their more expensive and most popular is the electrified chandelier model that costs \$40.00. Right now they're adding an unusual item to their product list. It's called a "Pie Safe" and is copied from the Amish cupboard used to lock up hot pies as they cooled. It will cost about \$60.00.

Last year Studio B's complete reproduction of a tinsmith's shop won best of show award at a prestigious Boston Miniature Show.



A cherry gate-leg table by Robert and Florence Birkemeier.

That's the kind of work one learns to expect from this talented family of craftsmen.

But Studio B has yet another important working member — Wendy Birkemeier.

Wendy is a librarian in New Jersey, but has also been an artist most of her life.

Her contribution to Studio B is miniature primitive paintings.

"I copy existing primitives from the best collections," Wendy explains.

"Most are portraits because landscapes really aren't very popular. Actually, the children's portraits are my biggest sellers."

Though most people think of the primitive portraits as dark and staid in appearance, Wendy Birkemeier's miniatures prove otherwise. Her most popular reproduction is titled "Mary Jane Smith" and is copied from a painting in The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Collection at Williamsburg, Virginia.

Wendy describes it.

"It is a very young girl in a pink dress. There's a white cat on the floor and her sewing basket nearby. There's also a Windsor chair in the painting and it's all against a soft green background."

Doesn't painting all these items in miniature get tedious?

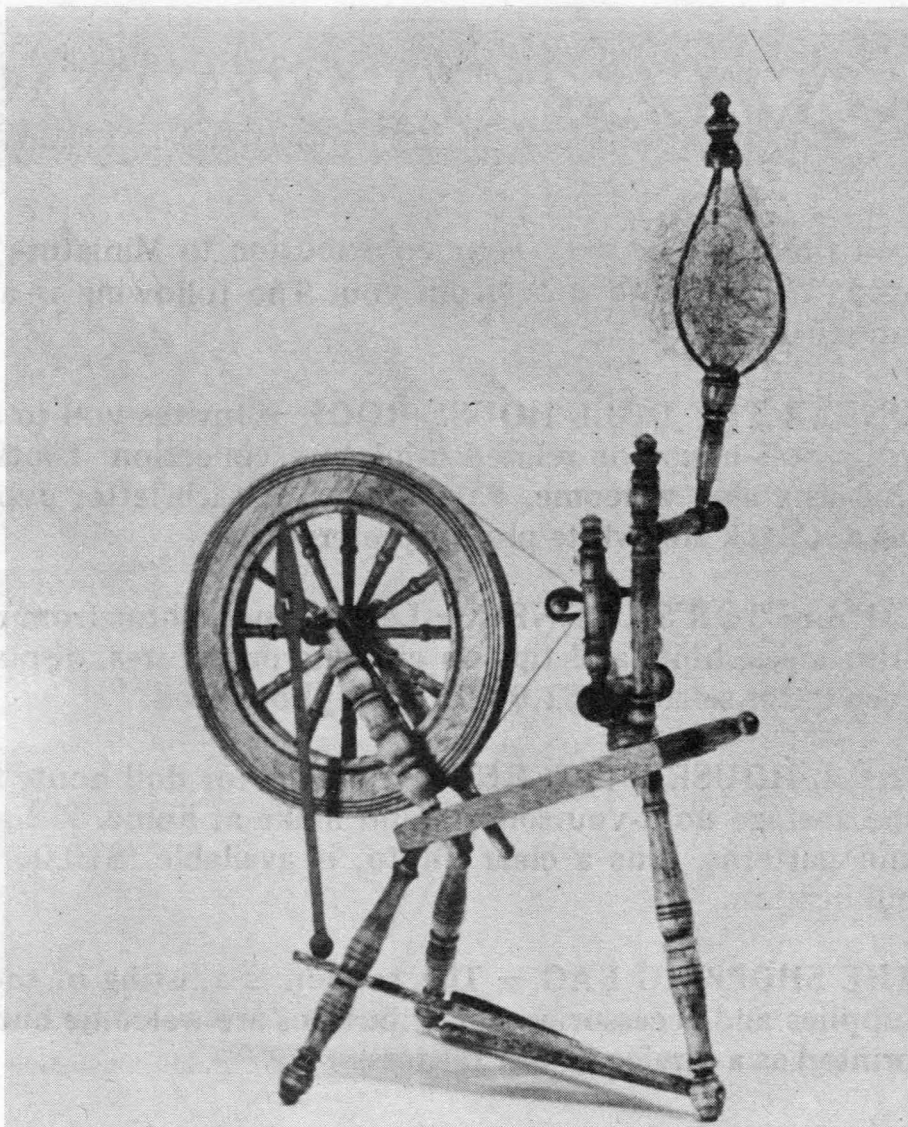
"Well, yes and no," laughed Wendy. "Sometimes the thought of doing one more tiny hand or one more pair of tiny animal features is too much. But usually I just think of the picture as a whole and then the enjoyment comes back."

Miss Birkemeier already had brought her husband Tom Degutis into the business before they were married last year. He did all the work of mounting her miniature paintings.

He uses molding from a firm selling doll house construction parts. His fingers must be nimble, too, because he beautifully frames these paintings that are — at largest — only three and one-fourth inches high!

"The molding we use most," explains Wendy, "is a simple black with a tiny gold lip. People didn't frame primitives elaborately."

Considering the work Wendy puts into her pieces, they are quite reasonably priced. Fees run from \$15.00 for just a head to about



A flax wheel by Robert and Florence.

\$40.00 on a full-length figure miniature. And most primitives had extra items in the picture which Wendy faithfully copies.

One often requested was at the Whitney Museum Folk Art Collection.

Wendy describes it.

"It is a very young girl in a vivid

red dress with four strands of red beads around her neck. She's sitting on a tasseled hassock with a kitten in her arms and a dog at her feet."

All that detail in just a few inches!

It takes Wendy about five to  
**Continued on page 56**



A creamer, curved spout coffeepot, sugar bowl and tray.



A Windsor bench by Robert and Florence Birkemeier. This bench is 2½" high and sells for \$35.00.

Studio B continued from page 7

seven hours of painting to complete one of her acrylic miniatures. Unlike most portrait artists, she puts the facial features in first.

"I like to get them right before going on," she explains.

Though a few paintings are done in exact one-inch to one-foot scale, this isn't always possible in Wendy's paintings.

"Some of those portraits were five feet high," Wendy points out. "And a five-inch painting would just be too large in most doll houses. So I can't say I stick to scale, although if a customer orders it — I will."

Obviously, in spite of the var-

ious members of the Birkemeier family living in different states, they manage to function cooperatively and supportively as well as independently for their Studio B. Their prices are amazingly reasonable for such quality craftsmanship.

"I guess it's because we don't expect to support ourselves from this," explains the Birkemeiers.

Perhaps that is why they are so happy in their work.

At any rate, the spirit and talent of this cooperative family are as large as their clientele. Their enthusiasm indicates their devotion to their crafts and makes it a pleasure not only to buy from them but just to talk with them.

Octagonal Doll House continued from page 29

cupola, and then glue the whole roof section to the house. Cut a toothpick in half. Glue a wooden bead to the top of it, pushing it down as far as it can go, for a roof spire. Punch a hole in the center of the cupola roof for the spire and poke it down into the roof. Glue the spire to the roof.

Using the photographs as a guide, draw the architectural details on the outside of the house before painting. Note that the front door has side lights and that there are stringcourses painted above the basement windows and below the cupola windows. I painted my house terra-cotta red (for bricks) with black roof, green door and white trim.

The front stairs are 2 strips of wood 1/8" and 1/16" thick, and as long as the width of the front door. The 1/16" thick strip is 1/8" wide; the 1/8" strip is 1/4" wide. They are glued together and painted, then glued in front of the door. The rest of the base is painted green for grass. The first floor inside is painted white. The second floor is papered with tiny "wood flooring" wallpaper, but could also be painted.

Interior walls: cut a strip of tiny print doll house paper the height of the inside wall and 5½" wide. Glue inside. Trim excess at end. Allow to dry. You could paint inside walls instead.

Second floor: glue two thin strips of 1/8" wide, 1/16" thick balsa wood, approximately 7/8" long each, to opposite sides of the inside of the doll house, at second floor level. Check with outside stringcourse line for placement. Allow to dry. Insert second floor. The easiest way to do this is at an angle, slightly buckling the floor until it's past the floor supports, and then smoothing it out flat afterwards.

The basic house can be made in an afternoon and then left to dry thoroughly. The painting actually takes longer than the house construction, and should be done very carefully. Now, all you need is some microscopic furniture and a tiny family to make your house complete.

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