

# Volunteers Build Traditional Toys for Scheffel Memorial Toy Project

by Christine Caswell

It started with a small grocery store owner in 1958. Reuben J. Scheffel saw a need he wanted to meet.

"In his neighborhood, he felt that there were a number of kids who were from economically depressed families that probably wouldn't have much of a Christmas," explained Dick Bernitt, the group leader for the R.J. Scheffel Memorial Toy Project. "So on his own, he made wooden toys. He was a member of the Everett Kiwanis Club, and some of the members began to be his materi-

al gatherers. They got scrap wood and other materials for him to build his toys. Also very instrumental in his success was Jim Hough, who wrote 'The Onlooker' column [for the *Lansing State Journal*]. Jim gave him quite a bit of publicity."

Scheffel died in 1978, but his enterprise has lived on through the efforts of others.

"A group of volunteers, preceding me, at the Gier Community Center began to meet and to continue making toys in his honor," said

Bernitt, who has been a Scheffel volunteer since 1987.

The group worked at a number of locations where space and utilities were donated, but they were also regularly being asked to move when buildings were sold or put to other uses. Finally, the group decided to rent its current south Lansing site.

"We went from about a \$5,000- to \$6,000-a-year operation to about a \$20,000 operation," Bernitt noted. "That includes supplies, utilities, rent, the whole kit and caboodle."

*Dick Bernitt, the group leader for the R.J. Scheffel Memorial Toy Project, makes many types of wooden toys, including rocking horses.*



Photo by Terri Shaver



The R.J. Scheffel Memorial Toy Project is strictly a volunteer effort, so it is completely dependent on donations and community support.

"This is the only charitable organization I know of that doesn't have a single paid person," said Bernitt. "There are no wages or perks here at all."

According to Bernitt, there is a core group of about 25 volunteers, mainly retirees, who work on the project throughout the year.

"We are building the toys for agencies, and they, in turn, distribute them to [low-income] families [in the tri-county area]," he explained. "So we're not in the distribution part of it directly. In January, I invite representatives of those organizations to tell us how many of each of the toys they would like to have built."

Some of those organizations include the Salvation Army, the Lansing Police Department, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, the Mason Community Outreach Center, and Child Abuse Prevention Services. The local Kiwanis club also takes unpainted toys to children's hospitals around the state so that the kids can paint them themselves.

"This year, the number of toys requested was about 5,400 to 5,500," said Bernitt. "Last year, it was 8,400, which was by far the greatest number we'd ever built. We were working five mornings a week. Because of the reduced number this year, which is basically the same as we'd built for years before, we're able to get by on a three-day-a-week schedule. We've also picked up a considerable number of volunteers who are quite religious in showing up."

Additionally, the project gets help from local businesses and community organizations.

"We spend approximately \$5,000 to \$6,000 a year buying lumber, paint and hardware. That is about \$1 a toy, so it's expensive," said Bernitt. "But that is augmented considerably

by donated materials and donors who keep us supplied with scrap wood, which we think is great. Lumber comes from Capitol Bedding—that's the remainder of box springs—and Pageant Homes, Hazen Lumber and numerous contractors who salvage stuff for us. The organization is reasonably well known, so they know a spot where they can get rid of [the scrap wood]. You bring it to us, and we'll make a decision as to whether we can use it or not. But one of our real weaknesses in this facility is that we have very little space to store materials to use later. Sometimes we have to tell people we can't take what you're offering because we have no place to put it."

Bernitt and his crew prefer to receive BCX-quality plywood that is one-half to three-quarters of an inch thick.

"There are probably 40 different items that agencies ask us to duplicate," said Bernitt. "Some of Mr. Scheffel's toys are still being made. [We have] rocking horses, wagons,

doll beds, cradles, crocheted trucks and boats, wheelbarrows, tool boxes, jewelry boxes, ironing boards, step stools, stick horses, jewelry hangers, rocking chairs and lots of little cars.

"I think the kids are happy to get the toys," Bernitt continued. "I think the families of those children are happy they were able to get a toy for the kids. I think the agencies are happy that they participated. I think the volunteers are happy because it gives us something productive to do. But I think the happiest people of all are our spouses because we're out of the house." ■

## R.J. SCHEFFEL MEMORIAL TOY PROJECT

Dick Bernitt, Group Leader

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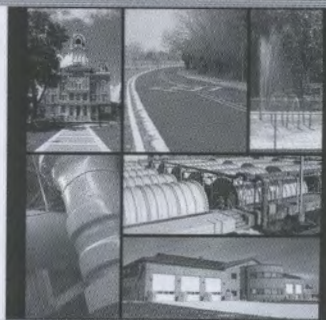
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