

# The Beacon Journal

## **Tradition turns cutters into icons - Family quest sparked by love for cookie molds**

Mary Bety Breckenridge

My family's Christmas wouldn't be the same without Aunt Chick. She's not really a relative, and in fact no one in my family has ever met her. Until just last week, I didn't even know she was a real person. But Aunt Chick, aka Nettie McBirney, did something in 1948 that has had a lasting effect on our Christmas celebration. She started selling cookie cutters.

McBirney was a cooking columnist who wrote under the name Aunt Chick for the Tulsa World in Oklahoma. She developed a number of culinary products but was best known for the cookie cutters, which the family company, the Four McB's, continued to make for a number of years after her retirement in the early 1950s. McBirney died in 1982 at age 96.

In my family, Aunt Chick's red plastic cutters have been turning out sour-cream cookies shaped like smiling Santas, chubby snowmen and gift-laden stockings since before I was born. The cookie cutters are more like molds, really, and they're the basis for artistic renderings done in the mixed media of powdered-sugar icing, cinnamon candies and silver dragees.

The cookie cutters are such family icons that my sister has made it a personal crusade to track down replacements, just in case. So she was excited recently to discover Gramma's Cutters, a company that has taken up McBirney's work.

It seems the company's owner, Carrie Greno, considers Aunt Chick an unofficial part of her family, too. Greno's aunts and uncles started reproducing Aunt Chick's most famous cookie cutter, the plump-cheeked Jolly Santa, after buying the rights in 1993. Greno took over the business last year, used her computer-graphics background to launch a Web site (<http://www.grammascutters.com/>) and has been working on expanding the inventory, including tracking down hundreds of unused sets in a Tulsa warehouse.

The family members hadn't been looking to go into business, Greno said. They'd just grown up making cookies with the cutters, and they wanted to carry on the tradition. Greno's grandmother, the late Bunny Pittenger of Canandaigua, N.Y., bought her cookie cutters in 1949 and made them a treasured part of her family's Christmas celebration. Pittenger put her eight children to work decorating cookies when they were still in high chairs, and she even let the kids take bites out of the cookies as they hung on the tree.

Greno remembers Pittenger's cookie-making frenzies as "just a huge to-do every year." She was too young to help the Christmas her grandmother made more than 12,000 to sell at a local dairy bar, but it's the stuff of family legend. "She just recruited everybody and anybody," Greno said with a laugh. Pittenger's children all had their own sets of Aunt Chick's cookie cutters, but over the years the brittle plastic started to crack. When they discovered the cutters were no longer being made, they tried making their own with dental impression material, Greno said.

Finally one of the siblings found the cutters for sale and tracked down the person who was making them at the time, only to discover that the woman was about to retire. The only way to keep the cutters available, they figured, was to buy the copyright. At first her aunts and uncles practically gave away the cutters, because they were just so happy to share them, Greno said. Indeed, she finds the response from customers the most heartwarming part of the business. "It just means so much to so many people," she said.

Greno recalled one woman who said her children had lost her cookie cutters in the snow about 15 years earlier. When she found the Gramma's Cutters Web site, she cried. I can imagine how she felt. These aren't ordinary cookie cutters. They make you smile just to look at them. To me, they're the embodiment of holiday joy. Plus they make really big cookies. Yum.