



TOPPING HER CHRISTMASTREE with a bear from her collection, Jan Hackney (above) said she has more than 350 bears and also has several other hobbies. She and her husband Lyle live in Bassettville Township southwest of Oberlin. — Photo by Lyle Hackney

Bear collection grows to 350 in one year

By MARYLOU OLSON

The gift of a nativity scene made up of small bears that a rural Oberlin woman received from her son and family turned out to be the beginning of a hobby that brought her a collection of more than 350 bears.

Mrs. Hackney said when she went to Alaska last year for the first time in 25 years to spend Christmas with her family, they gave her a bear nativity scene, complete with a miniature bear family, Wise Men and animals.

This year, when she and her husband Lyle decided the bears needed a shelter, they went to the "Rock House," a widely known stone structure southwest of their place, which is owned by his mother, Betty Hackney Grout, and picked up limestone rocks left over from restoring the old two-story home. Mr. Hackney said that the house was built in 1885 and several years ago was completely restored by his mother and her family after their husband and father, Kermit Hackney, died.

When the project was done, Mr. Hackney said, there were lots of original rocks in the yard, so they chose a large one and carved the center out with a chisel and hammer, making a space 11 inches wide, 5.5 inches high and 5 inches deep. A piece in front for the Wise Men is 13 inches by 8 inches was made by gluing together pieces of flat rock.

"By time the star, which measures 3 by 5 inches, was completed and the light and wiring installed, we figured the project took between 40 and 50 hours," Mrs. Hackney said.

She said that her bear collection really began when she purchased

two large white bears at a garage sale after she got the nativity set. In the year since, she said she had gotten all but 20 or so at thrift stores.

"I bring them home and wash them and, if they survive, I repair them, including the mechanical parts," she said. "Sometimes, I use two or more to make one complete bear."

"I found one named Bingo which is over 25 years old and still works fine and says over 30 different words. My favorite is a cowboy bear that sings 'Never-Ending Song of Love,' which was given to me by my husband."

Mrs. Hackney, a retired registered nurse, was born in Atwood, then grew up in Imperial, Neb., with her grandparents. She said her brother, Tom Heinz, and his wife decided to spend a year Alaska in the 1960s and have been there ever since. Later her own son and his wife, Carl and Jody Stevenson, and their family moved to Alaska. She also has a daughter, Janeize Stevenson, who works at the prison in Norton.

She said she never got to finish high school, but later decided to get her General Equivalency Degree, then enrolled in nurse's training in North Platte, Neb. She received her degree when she was 45, then worked mostly in Nebraska and Wyoming before her retirement. She has two grandchildren and two great-grandchildren as well as twin great-grandchildren "on the way." Her husband has two sons, Coley of Hemdon and Tyler of Denver.

She said she met Lyle when she was working in McCook after he returned from Vietnam in the 1960s, but they went their separate

ways. Since their marriage on July 3, 2004, they have lived on a farm in Bassettville Township, near the Rawlins County line.

Besides bears, Mrs. Hackney has many other interests. She said she loves to quilt, raise chickens and hunt and fish. The Hackneys have been training three wild mustangs, which they got from Elm Creek, Neb. The horses were captured in Nevada, she said; one is a mare with a colt.

"The mare is so tame," she said, "that if I happen to fall, she will come up to me and stand perfectly still so I can get up. Lots of children have enjoyed riding the colt."

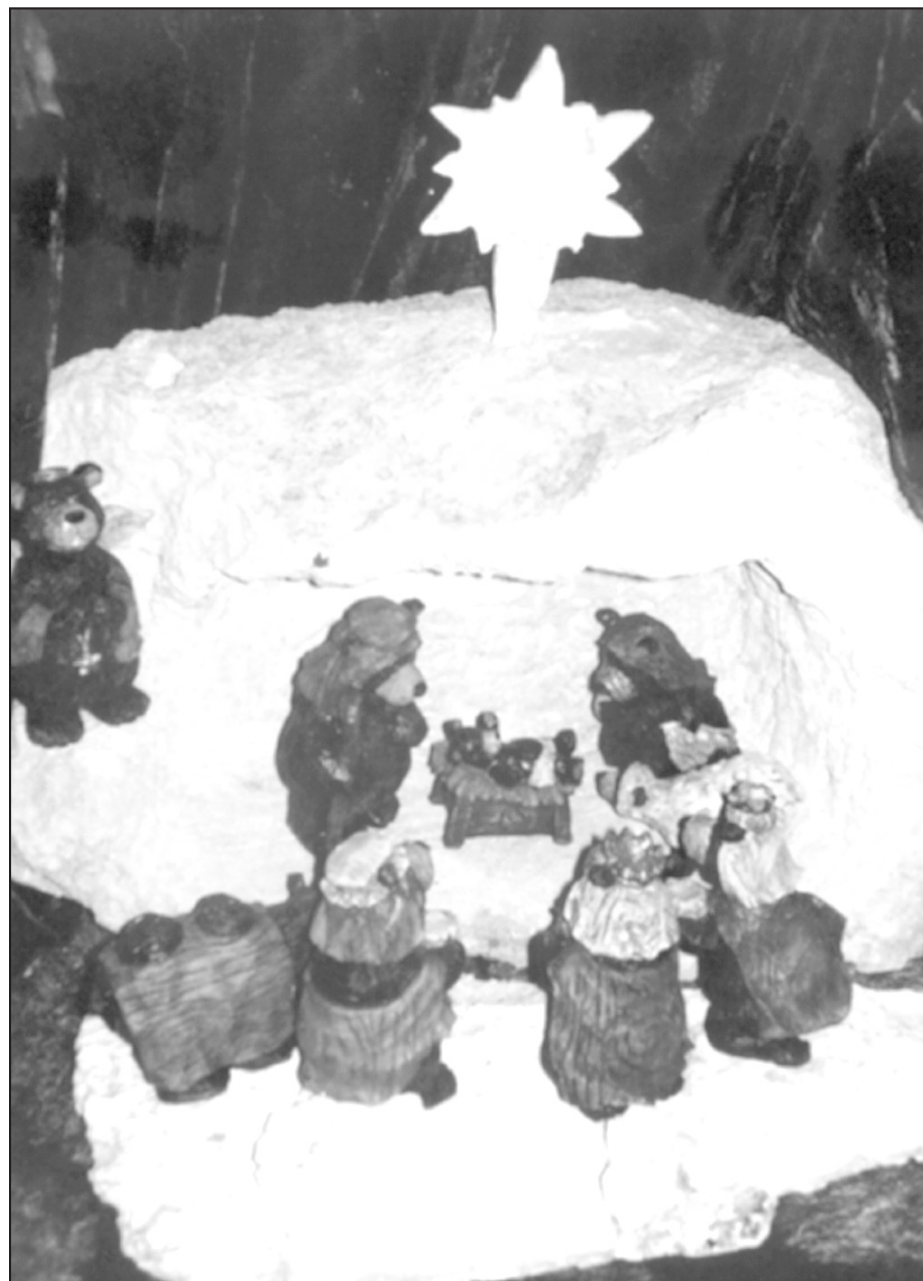
This fall, she said, she shot a deer and she and her husband did the butchering. She said she likes to can some of the meat, like farm wives used to can beef.

"My neighbor, Donna Kelley, told me that she never did care for deer meat, but after taking one look at the smile on my face, she said, 'I'll bet I've eaten it.'"

And, of course, Mrs. Hackney said, "she had."

The former nurse said she is thankful for each day, since eight years ago, she was hospitalized for back and vertebrae surgery five times in Kearney, Neb.

"The doctors gave me a 5 percent chance for recovery," she said, "and a 50-to-60 percent chance of being paralyzed for the rest of my life if I lived. But because of the prayers of my friends and relatives, I made it and am now completely mobile and able to enjoy our family and all of my hobbies."



ANATIVITYSCENE (above) features bears given to Mrs. Hackney by her son and his family in Alaska. She and her husband, Lyle recently completed the background shelter and star, using limestone rock from a house built in 1885 southwest of Oberlin. Now owned by his mother, Betty Hackney Grout, it has been completely restored. — Photo by Jan Hackney