

Pixie Holbrook and John Rioux



Pixie Holbrook and her husband, John Rioux, have

built and/or renovated many homes over their years together and have helped raise some nine children along the way.. Said Pixie of her husband's construction skills, "We always were saying John could make it, screw it up, fix it, and get it right faster and cheaper than you could pay for it!" The handy couple live in Conway and are awaiting completion of yet another home which, for once, they are not doing the construction on. "John is 83, I am 68," commented Pixie."We said, 'let's be grownups and stop building.' "

I visited them in their charming rental house on Shirkshire Road, just down the road from the construction site. The couple have miniaturized their out-sized building skills into the making of highly detailed dollhouse rooms (sans dolls) that they have recently consigned to the Coop. "We haven't had anything to do, our kids have homes, we started doing this," said Pixie.



How did it all start? "My father and mother refinished antiques for a living, and when he retired he started making miniatures," she explained. "I had a collection of my dad's miniatures, perfect scale. My mom learned how to rush seats and rushed the miniature seats. And many years ago after he died, I said to John 'let's try making houses for them.' We had just finished building a post and beam house. We didn't even know there was a name for this craft, which is Room Boxes."

Basically, John constructs the box, and Pixie decorates the tiny space with furniture, wallpaper, knick knacks and whatever else belongs in the setting that they are creating. Since they are world travelers, they will put a scene behind the mullions of the tiny window and build their theme around it. For instance, the "Weekend at Grandma's" room box shows a scene from Vermont's Northeast

Kingdom. Bookend room boxes currently at the Coop show the view from Beatrix Potters own cottage in the Cotswolds, a section of south central England.



The two have received several commissions for room boxes from friends and neighbors. One woman had inherited a bunch of miniature chairs and so Pixie and John decided to make a miniature Antique Store that would utilize her furniture. Another woman collected dolls from China that were Barbie sized; John fabricated a dwelling for her that was to scale, and she outfitted the house herself with furniture that fit the dolls. The regular dollhouse scale the couple use for their room boxes is 1" to 1 foot. Commercial miniature items are widely available to fit this scale; however, Pixie likes to source vintage items where possible by buying assortments of dollhouse goods on Ebay. Papers made for scrapbooking

often are also perfect for wallpaper, so she is able to shop for those at Michael's, a chain of craft



stores.

I was attracted to a table full of brightly painted rocks in their living room. Pixie said, "This has been a tough winter on lots of levels. This has been so therapeutic for me to do. I got a bundle of rocks for a dollar, then I started playing with them, and didn't want to make just one. Dot painting is based in aboriginal art." She started playing with dot painting as a way to learn how to decorate furniture for the rooms, but has continued to do it as a side line. The swirls of layered dots are carefully laid down on the rocks using nail heads to transfer paint without actually hitting the surface, just kissing the liquid from one to the other by transferring the surface tension. Pixie finds a reduction in stress if she focuses on dot painting while hearing the news.

Pixie and John were formerly based in Connecticut where John headed up an innovative "school within a school" program in a public high school in Middletown. Funding was generous in the early and mid 1970s for programs that used hands-on learning experiences to reach kids who were turned off by traditional classrooms. This approach fell out of favor later on, and John found that more and more at-risk and special education students began filling up the program instead of "students that were searching." Pixie explained that "We moved to Conway 28 years ago, eager to escape CT. Every farm was turning into clusters of cul-de-sacs, and we wanted out. Within a few weeks, Conway felt like home to both of us. The kids were entering high school and kindergarten, and we found teaching jobs just before we arrived. Couldn't be happier!"

Pixie works in special education and currently consults for the Amherst schools. Both are political activists around the MCAS and school reform; however, "It is not going our way, but it is someone

else's turn now...high stakes testing has been eliminated in all but 13 states now, but Massachusetts started it and so they are committed...."

"Perhaps I'll retire eventually!" mused Pixie. At that time she might want to become a working member at the Coop, but for now she still works in the schools part-time and does a significant amount of grandkid after school care, so it's not possible.