

Side  
*by Side*

# Tin Cookie Cutters

BY GREGORY LEFEVER

MAN HAS EATEN COOKIES IN SHAPES FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS. TODAY'S TINSMITHS KEEP THAT TRADITION ALIVE WITH DESIGNS BOTH VINTAGE AND NEW.



**D**uring Europe's Dark Ages, peasants ate cookies shaped like cows to avoid sacrificing their domestic beasts to appease pagan gods. At medieval village fairs, many an English lass devoured a gingerbread man in hopes of landing a flesh-and-blood husband. In fact, bakers for four thousand years have used their hands, knives, molds, and metal cutters to mold cookies into every shape imaginable.

In America, use of metal cookie cutters grew alongside the nation. About the time Europeans first settled in the New World they began bending and soldering tinplate into cookie cutters. By the early 1800s, tin peddlers were traveling distant roads to delight children with cutters for creating edible foxes, flowers, and fowl.

Owners treasured their early tin cookie cutters. Some Pennsylvania German families handed down collections of them, one generation to the next, for more than a hundred years. When shinier mass-produced cutters eventually prevailed in the kitchen, antique tin ones became highly collectible, some fetching thousands of dollars at auction.

A resurgence of interest in America's traditional crafts during the 1970s and '80s has produced scores of skilled tinsmiths, but most don't bother with cookie cutters because they don't consider them worth their time. Others, including those profiled here, happily create cutters in Pennsylvania German country, in the northern woods of Wisconsin, and high in the Colorado Rockies because they believe the tin cookie cutter still represents something sweet about life.

### COOKIES THROUGH TIME

A number of food writers say the cookie was invented in 7th-Century

**Traditional tinsmiths make cutters for everyday and holiday cookies, such as the baker, Christmas tree, snowman, and Moravian star shown here. The first three are the work of Betsy and Bill Cukla of Hammer Song, the star is by Karen Hurd.**

**This cutter, regarded as one of the most important Pennsylvania shapes, is referred to as "William Penn smoking the peace pipe." In some ways it is the pinnacle of the tinsmith's art with its intricate shape and several inset strips for clothing details, necessitating the many air holes. The oversized back shows how tinsmiths often pieced the cutters and used heavy perimeter soldering—here an additional backing piece was attached to support the pipe. Similar versions of this shape are often called "man smoking a pipe."**

Persia, yet there seems to be no factual basis for the claim. If you regard a cookie as a small sweet cake—thin enough to be held in the hand and easily munched—then its evolution follows two historical paths: that of bread, and that of sweeteners.

Bread is prehistoric, dating back at least 12,000 years to the Neolithic era when an anonymous Stone Age cook first heated a glop of grain-paste next to a fire and invented one of the world's most versatile foods. But leavened bread, such as might qualify as a cookie, had to wait another nine thousand years until Egyptian bakers discovered the benefits of yeast.

Ancient Indian bakers around 300 A.D. discovered how to extract and crystallize sugar cane's sweet syrup, greatly enhancing sugar's use in baking. Growing the cane and extracting its sweetness proved so arduous that the price of sugar remained exorbitant for the next five centuries.

But honey is a far older sweetener than sugar. Humans have been collecting it for at least 10,000 years, or about as long as we have been baking bread. If honey qualifies as a sweetener for the first cookies, then some sort of leavened cookie might have been common around 2500 B.C., when authors of the Biblical book of Exodus described the Promised Land as flowing with milk and honey. (Could the Promised Land, in fact, have been the original site of milk and cookies?)

Beyond that, we know cookies appeared in the 2nd-Century Greek writings of the rhetorician Aethnaeus. They are mentioned a century later among the foodstuffs of Roman



COURTESY OF MERCER MUSEUM, DOYLESTOWN, PENNSYLVANIA

legions and were baked across Europe in the 11th Century at the time of the first Crusades. Street vendors sold them in 14th-Century Paris, and recipes for them appeared in 15th-Century Renaissance cookbooks.

### COOKIES TAKE SHAPE

The provenance of the cookie cutter is equally hard to pin down, although we know cookies in recognizable shapes go back to 2000 B.C., to the wooden and ceramic baking molds used in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia.

Germanic tribes molded cookies in the shapes of animals as part of the Julfest winter festivals during the Dark Ages. Traditionally, the ceremonies involved sacrificing animals so pagan gods would bestow mild winters and early springs. Legend has it that as livestock became more valuable, people turned to baking tasty animal-shaped cookies that they then "sacrificed"—by devouring them during the festivals—while their animals remained safe in their pens.

These sacrificial cookies evolved



The bugler on horseback often is cited as one of the finest cutters in the Pennsylvania German tradition. Nearly 8 inches square, it was fashioned from 8 strips of iron soldered to a backing of the same shape with 6 large air holes. This example is a 20th-Century replica of the original, believed to have been created by noted historian and author Henry J. Kauffman of Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

known spices, among them ginger, which monks appropriated for their newly invented gingerbread's consumption at Christian festivals.

Village folk across medieval Europe enjoyed popular fairs in which gingerbread cookies were baked in symbolic shapes, such as buttons and flowers for springtime and beasts and birds for autumn. In English festivals, popular tradition called for eligible young women to devour flat, man-shaped gingerbread cookies known as “husbands” to improve their chances of marriage.

By the 17th Century, the German city of Nuremberg ranked as the gingerbread capital of the world. Skilled woodworkers carved intricate molds, while gifted artists applied colorful decorations to the famous *lebkuchen*, or flat gingerbread. The city's baking skills shone on the elaborate *hexenbaeusle*—gingerbread houses with thick snow-icing roofs and candied gables inspired by the witch's edible house in the folk tale of Hansel and Gretel.

By the end of the 1600s, three key European developments were in place that would greatly influence

into popular forms such as the white, anise-flavored *springerle*, created from molds with intricate animal, floral, and Biblical images. Monks at St. Katherine's Monastery in 14th-Century Switzerland carved what is today's oldest surviving wooden *springerle* mold.

Early bakers shaped cookie dough with their hands, cut out figures with knives, and impressed intricate images with molds for a thousand years, but they didn't have a practical metal cookie cutter until well into the 1600s. Although tin, the material most often associated with cookie cutters, had been mined since ancient times, it became a coating for steel sheets only in the 17th Century.

The production of tinplate enabled Europe's tinsmiths to create household furnishings that were lightweight, flexible, and sharp. Soon they were cutting, bending,

and soldering strips of tin into cookie cutters of various shapes. But one man in particular has come to typify the transition from molded cookies to cutout versions, and his name begins with Ginger.

#### A PINCH OF SPICE

Crusaders in the 12th Century returned to Europe from the Holy Land with stashes of previously un-



These antique cutters include Santa carrying a Christmas tree, left.



COURTESY OF OLD SALEM MUSEUMS & GARDENS, WINSTON-SALEM, NORTH CAROLINA

This array of 19th-Century cookie cutters created by the Moravians reflects a number of popular designs, including people, domestic animals, and musical instruments. The horse at the top right and the woman, bottom left, are stamped with the maker's name, "G. A. Boozer, Salem N. C."

the use of cookie cutters in America—gingerbread's popularity, the greater use of tin for household items, and the number of Europeans departing for the New World, including women carrying a few of their favorite cookie cutters.

### TIN'S HIGH POINT

When they weren't battling the elements, hostile Native Americans, or their fellow Europeans for survival, America's early colonists treated themselves to English teacakes, French pastries, Scottish shortbread, and German gingerbread. Women adjusted their European recipes to make use of native ingredients—maple syrup often served as a sweetener in the northern colonies and sorghum molasses in the southern—

and they invented new cookies with peculiar names such as "jumbles" and "plunkets" and the ubiquitous "cry baby."

By about 1800, tinware peddlers began crisscrossing the land in horse-drawn wagons, journeying from New England deep into the South and westward across the Appalachians in ever widening patterns. Cooks eager to add some family fun to the long hours spent toiling in hot kitchens popularized tin cookie cutters. Tinsmiths also favored them because the cutters spread cheer and offered a way to turn tin scraps into cash.

A traditional cookie cutter is a narrow strip of tin bent into a particular shape and soldered onto a flat tin back that often was composed of

several tin scraps soldered together. To make the cutter more usable, tinsmiths cut holes in the backs to release the suction and allow the cutter to slip free from the dough. They often soldered a strip onto the back as a handle.

The tinsmith created shapes using two basic methods. If he wanted to make a design to sell over and over, he usually cut a wooden template or jig in the desired shape then bent the tin around it with pliers or by hand. For one-of-a-kind shapes, he drew the shape on paper and bent the tin to match it. With either method, he soldered the shaped strip to the cutter's back.

Tinsmiths could also make highly intricate cutters by adding narrower strips of tin inside the cut-

ter's perimeter, just deep enough to create "imprint" marks on the cookie but not so deep as to cut through the dough. In this way they created smiling faces, clothing, feathers, and other details to be embellished with brightly colored icing.

Although popular across cultures, cookie cutters found particular favor with the Germanic immigrants known as the Pennsylvania "Dutch," whose love of holidays and festive baked goods harked back to their homeland. They produced ornate cutters capable of rendering

true culinary art. Families frequently collected them in great numbers and passed them down from generation to generation.

In his 1946 pamphlet, *Pennsylvania German Cooky Cutters and Cookies*, Earl F. Robacker wrote, "Certain patterns obviously became more popular than others, for one finds them over and over again: hens and roosters, stars, tulips, dogs, horses, sheaves of wheat, parrots, and, in particular, the flat, broad-lobed heart so characteristic of Pennsylvania German decoration.

Others, even more highly prized by collectors because of their rarity, seem to be one-of-a-kind: William Penn smoking the peace pipe, the Indian maiden with topknot and fringed buckskin skirt, the baseball player, the pair of identical twins, and the dignified, albeit attenuated figure of Uncle Sam."

### SHAPING A NEW TRADITION

In the mid-19th Century, metalworking machinery began mass-producing cookie cutters. Now-defunct companies such as Mason, Kreamer, Hillson, and Dover—which in 1869 printed the first catalog of cookie cutters—took away customers from the dwindling number of tinsmiths. By 1920 aluminum had replaced tin as the metal for huge quantities of cutters, and twenty years later plastic cookie cutters hit the market.

According to the late Phyllis Wetherill, who founded the 650-member Cookie Cutters Collectors Club in 1972 in Washington, D.C., the value of antique tin cookie cutters increased dramatically during the 1980s. The number of people collecting them increased to the point where old tin cutters became scarce, fetching higher and higher dollars at auctions. A 1989 auction in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, of the estate of the aforementioned Earl Robacker witnessed many cookie cutters going for hundreds of dollars apiece, and a very rare "runaway slave" design brought an astonishing \$7,400.

Wetherill noted that during the traditional American crafts revival in the 1970s, new tinsmiths were mainly men, but a decade later, she saw increasing numbers of women becoming skilled with tin. From that fact alone, it was predictable that traditional, handmade cookie cutters would return to American kitchens.

Women have the driving role in most of the companies we feature here. Many of their newly made cutters are replicas of historic cutters, with hundreds of designs culled from



COLLECTIONS OF THE HERITAGE CENTER OF LANCASTER COUNTY, GIFT OF HENRY J. KAUFFMAN

Collection of tin cutters from the 19th and early 20th Centuries includes typical German motifs such as tulips and birds.



**Standing about 6 inches tall, this well-worn cutter of a 19th-Century woman, made in southern Pennsylvania, has a simple outline, in contrast to similar cutters with delineated arms and feet.**

museum and private collections. Some of today's tinsmiths also make custom cutters of everything from corporate logos to high-school sports emblems. For tinsmiths who focus on cookie cutters, business can be good as they sell to bakers and collectors around the world.

### KAREN HURD

Karen Hurd became a tinsmith in the 1960s when she couldn't find a particular pair of tin sconces she wanted. But when it came to making her first piece of tinware, something else happened. "The first piece I made was a cookie cutter—two hearts on one piece of rectangular tin with a handle on the back," she recalled. "And I still have that cookie cutter some thirty-five years later. It was my first."

Hurd, who lives in the small town of Quarryville, Pennsylvania, just south of Lancaster, is one of the most traditional tinsmiths working today. She uses primarily antique tools from the early 1800s, and her pieces have a patina reminiscent of tinware two centuries old. For a single-person operation, her output is impressive.

## TELLING OLD CUTTERS FROM NEW

Tinsmiths such as Karen Hurd use antique tools and work in a style so reminiscent of 19th-Century tinsmiths that their cookie cutters are nearly identical to those made in the early 1800s. To help collectors and other cookie-cutter enthusiasts, we asked Hurd for tips on how to tell the difference.

"A big difference is the tin itself, which is actually a tin coating on a sheet of steel," she said. "The older cutters were made out of hot-dipped tin, which is heavier. It has almost a straight-line pattern running across it, because as the tin cooled on a sheet, it would sag a bit and leave lines on it. Starting in the late 1800s, tin was electroplated, which means it's very even in color and texture and the tin itself is thinner."

The old tinsmiths were economical and made every attempt to use their scraps, including soldering together small pieces to create a single-piece back, although this technique can be replicated. Also, the cutting strip often is "spot soldered" to the back of vintage cutters, whereas tinsmiths today tend to use a continuous bead of solder.

But perhaps the sure-fire way to determine age is by wear. "Old cutters sometimes have been used so much—all of the pressing down on the cutter to cut the cookie dough—that the pattern of the design almost comes through the back of the cutter," Hurd explained. "You can actually see the design when you look at the back of many old cutters."

The presence or lack of handles, however, is not a good indicator. "There's no rhyme or reason as to why they do or don't have handles on the back," she said. "Sometimes they put an extra strip down the back, sometimes not. They'll all different and—like everything else about old cookie cutters—all very individual to the tinsmith."

**The crude fish-shaped cutter lacks sharp definition of either the head, at left, or tail, and has 2 sets of nearly identical fins on the back and belly.**



**At less than 4 inches long, the mouse-shaped cutter requires a strong tail so the resulting cookie won't break. The shape was created from a single strip of iron and required only one large air hole.**



Tinsmith Karen Hurd of Quarryville, Pennsylvania, has been creating cookie cutters for nearly 40 years and still relies on antique tools from the early 1800s. A popular lecturer on cookie cutters and tinsmithing, she recently began working with the Heritage Center Museum in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to reproduce some of its early cookie cutter shapes.

“I do everything from cookie cutters to fifteen-arm chandeliers,” she said. “I do sconces and lanterns and candleholders. It’s just endless what you can do with tin.”

Her designs, which have a historical look and feel, are inspired by various sources. “They come from having admired pieces of tin in museums and in other people’s collections for all these years, and then there are all the holidays and seasons, each with symbols that are special for cookie cutters,” she said. “One of my biggest sources is my friends—oh, they come up with some great ideas.”

Currently she is working with the Heritage Center in Lancaster to reproduce a number of cookie cutters from the center’s rare Pennsylvania German collection, including designs of a mouse, a partridge with ruffled tail, a large rooster, and a man waving with his uplifted arm.

Hurd is a historian of tinsmith-

ing and frequently gives talks to groups throughout her region. She contends that cookie cutters typify the very nature of tinsmithing. “Everyone has a different technique for making cookie cutters, and they always have,” she said. “Some use just

a pair of pliers and free-form it, some have wooden molds that they can bend the tin around, and some use a combination of wooden mold and cutout shape. Everyone does it differently.”

She favors using a jig for each of



Sledder by Hammer Song.

her cookie cutters—a wooden board with a particular design drawn on it and holes drilled at key points, into which she inserts wooden dowels. She bends strips of tin around the dowel pins to achieve the cutter's shape that she solders to the tin back. "There's a variety of soldering techniques," she added, "and I use all kinds because I like all time periods of cookie cutters, from the very earliest to yesterday."

Hurd offers a catalog with two hundred tinware designs, which can be purchased directly from her shop or at various crafts shows. Her cookie cutters range from \$4 to \$50.

### HAMMER SONG

Twenty-five years ago, Hammer Song took tinware to a new level. In the heyday of the heritage crafts revival, identical-twin brothers Bill and Bob Cukla—both metalworkers skilled at making high-performance race cars and aeronautical components—ranked among the country's best-known creators of tin chandeliers, sconces, coffee pots, and almost everything else early tinsmiths produced.

Hammer Song sold tinware to Colonial Williamsburg, the Smithsonian Institute, Carnegie Mellon, the late Jacqueline Onassis, Mobil Corporation, Museum of American Folk Art, *Washington Post*, and has had items on display in the White House.

Through it all, cookie cutters remained the company's bread and butter. The Cuklas had such a reputation that some high-flying corporate CEOs paid \$1,000 apiece for special Hammer Song cookie cutters for their wives.

More recently, Hammer Song has gone through big changes. With the departure of his brother in 2006 to pursue antiques, Bill Cukla and his wife, Betsy, a botanical illustrator who has worked alongside her husband since 1985 and who handles operational aspects of the business, moved from Boonsboro, Maryland, to the north woods of Wisconsin, about seventy miles south of Lake Superior. They thought the move would give Bill time to pursue his be-



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After nearly three decades, Hammer Song remains one of America's largest purveyors of cookie cutters produced with traditional methods. Using hand tools, Bill and Betsy Cukla continue to create about 12,000 cutters a year.

loved fishing and Betsy could enjoy the natural beauty of the land.

The cookie cutters, however, have occupied most of their time. The mail-order business remains active, their cutters are being picked up by more retail cooking shops, and they still attend key crafts shows, most notably the annual October show in Waterford, Virginia.

The Cuklas now make more than 12,000 cookie cutters a year in 150 different designs. "We make them entirely by hand, using only 18th- and 19th-Century hand tools," Betsy explained. "They're highly detailed, with many having imprint lines on the interior that produce elaborate designs you can decorate or not. The design can hold its own."

Bill Cukla believes the two brothers' metalworking experience has been key to the success of Hammer Song. "We did a lot of work for the aircraft industry and gained a pretty extensive knowledge of working with metals," he said. "I mean as kids in Chicago we couldn't leave our bicycles alone. That knowledge gave us an edge over the other tinsmiths. And we have perfectionist qualities, although sometimes that's a curse."

Betsy said her hope has been to turn cookie cutters into an everyday kitchen tool, "not something you bring out at Christmastime and then put back into the drawer." For example, she designed a line of cutters in the shapes of small leaves, ideal for decorating piecrusts. "As simple as it sounds, the idea took off like no one could have imagined," she said. "We gave cookie cutters a new purpose, an extended life."

Hammer Song cutters cost \$4 to \$30. The Cuklas still do custom orders and produce a catalog of standard offerings.

#### VICTOR TRADING COMPANY

High in the Rockies in the 1890s gold-mining town of Victor, Colorado, Karen Morrison creates cookie cutters by bending strips of tin to match designs drawn on pieces of paper. "I don't use jigs or anything resembling mass production," she said. "I have a line on a piece of paper and I bend the tin by hand to match that line. It's simple, and it's the old, original way."

What's astonishing is that she has collected nearly three thousand of those individual cookie-cutter de-

signs, more than almost any other tinsmith working today. "I love the historical designs in particular," she said. "It's folk art. Some of them are really bizarre, but they're works of art and I find them all so appealing."

Her husband, Sam, had been interested in metalworking since he was a teenager, and the couple had talked about starting up a tin business in historic Victor, but the plan had not yet materialized by the mid-1990s. "We were driving through Nebraska on vacation when we saw a little town and said, 'Oh, let's go there,'" Karen recalled. "As we were leaving, we saw a building on a hill with a sign that said 'Tin Shop.' We looked in the window and it was full of old tin equipment. We just couldn't believe it. To make a long story short, we were able to buy most of the old hand tools out of that little shop."

Karen began tinkering with the tools. "I started looking at cookie-cutter designs and I figured out how to make a few little cutters, and it's just taken off from there."

Today the Victor Trading Company produces tinware, brooms, jewelry, candles, and has a letterpress print shop. Sam's brooms and Karen's cookie cutters have been publicized in national magazines.

You can see hundreds of designs on the company web site, plus the Morrisons offer a catalog. All sales are retail, with most cutters costing between \$6 and \$30, while some custom cutters can sell for \$100 or more. All have a Victor Trading Company brass tag soldered on the back, and those based on early cutters are stamped "Historic Design."

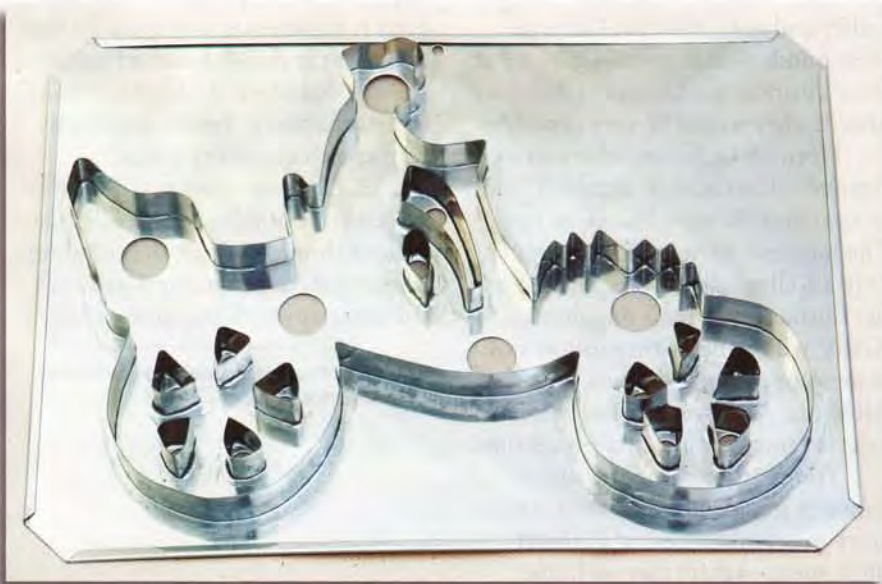
#### H. O. FOOSE TINSMITHING

Kristy Killian knows her grandfather could not have envisioned what his small cookie-cutter business in Fleetwood, Pennsylvania, is today.

"If you look at my grandfather, he went to school in a one-room schoolhouse until the eighth grade," she said. "He had a tomato-plant greenhouse and then he apprenticed as a tinsmith. That was in the 1970s, and he and my grandmother traveled



At the Victor Trading Company, Karen Morrison creates thousands of cookie cutters in the basic manner of bending tin to match the line on a pattern and then soldering the strip to a back piece. The *Belsnickel* above is a historic design, the cyclist is modern.



# Simple

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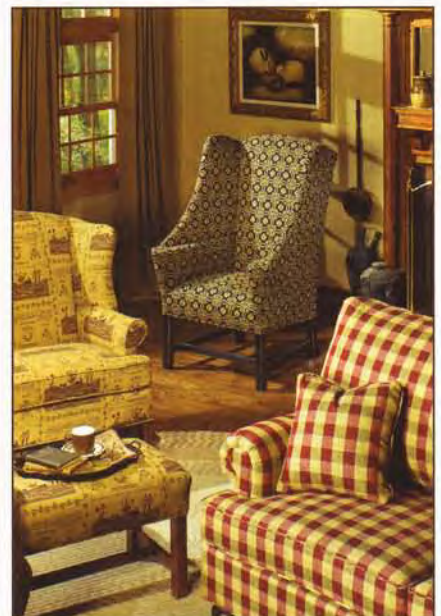
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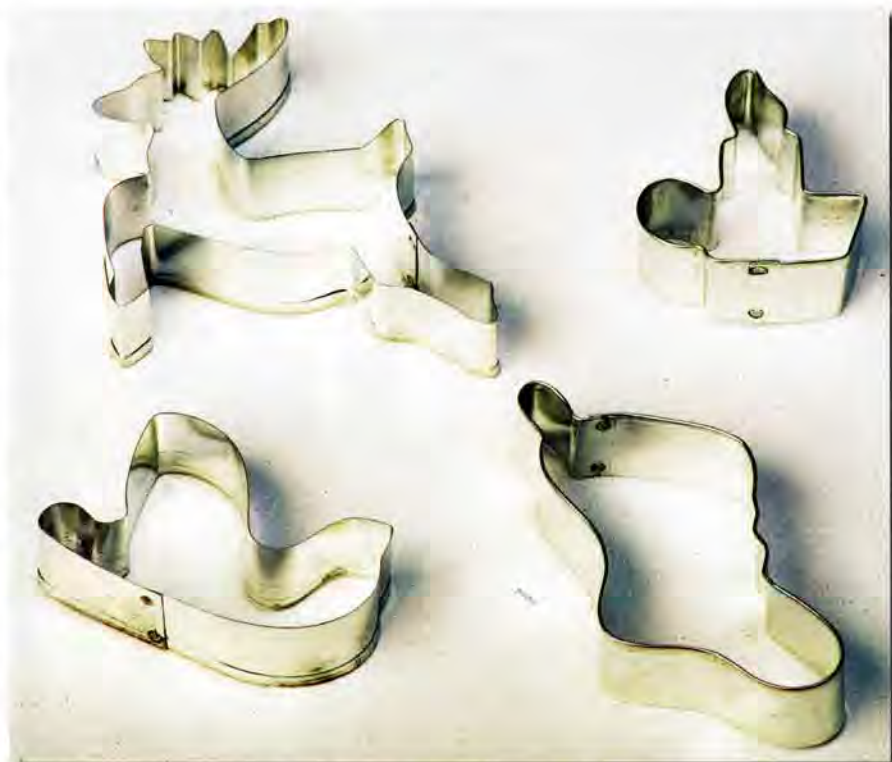
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**H. O. Foose cookie cutters are distinctive because of their lack of backs—the top edge is folded over so it is not sharp. The company sells some 700 different cutters in everyday as well as holiday shapes.**

the country doing shows and selling their cookie cutters wholesale. They never sold retail.”

Today, the company does an international wholesale business in cookie cutters, and in recent years launched a retail web site. “Selling retail online was a big step for us,” Killian said. “Today we have customers in Japan and Thailand and Singapore. Australia is just a huge customer. When I think of my grandfather and grandmother, I believe their minds would be blown by what their business has become. I think my grandfather would be very proud.”

Horman O. Foose, who was of Pennsylvania German ancestry, died in 1997 and his wife, Maria, in 2004. The business went to their daughter, Sylvia Keller, who now is assisted by her husband and their daughters, Kristy, who handles promotion and some supporting functions, and Stacy Richards, who oversees the wholesale, inventory, and order processing.

The company employs about eighteen people in Fleetwood, about sixty miles northwest of Philadelphia, most of them stay-at-home

mothers and retirees who create the cutters in their homes. “It’s nice because we’re like a big family,” Killian said, noting that several of the employees have stayed with the company more than twenty years.

The company sells 700 different shapes and sizes of cookie cutters, distinctive because they have no backs. “When we cut the tin to make the individual cutter, two things happen,” she explained. “The top edge is folded over to form a lip that protects the cook’s hand when she presses down on it. The other thing is that the name ‘Foose’ is actually imprinted onto every piece.”

H. O. Foose cutters sell for between \$1.50 and \$5. Wholesale customers should contact the company directly. Retail customers can visit the company web site or the store. ★

**Gregory LeFever is a contributing editor to Early American Life.**