

A Lifetime of Tradition

BY GREGORY LEFEVER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY WINFIELD ROSS

RANDEE AND JOHN MALMBERG'S PRIZED COLLECTION OF CHRISTMAS ORNAMENTS AND THEIR HOME'S RARE FURNISHINGS ARE ROOTED IN RANDEE'S YOUTH.



Walking through the home of Randee and John Malmberg during the Christmas season, it helps to know two things about Randee's youth to better appreciate the resplendent holiday decorations and fine antiques displayed throughout their Rockford, Illinois, saltbox.

One is that while Randee was growing up in the 1950s, Christmas meant celebrations filled with joyful memories. "I'm from a large family—six kids—from a small town

in Illinois," she said. "And, for me, Christmas is all about tradition." That accounts for the abundance of Christmas decorations gracing nearly every room.

The second thing is that as early as age sixteen, Randee was drawn to antiques. "Instead of buying 45-rpm records, I was buying antiques and putting them away in the basement for my later life," she recalled. That accounts for why nearly every room displays 17th- and early-18th-Century American chairs, tables, cupboards, and other rare pieces.

Both aspects of Randee's past—her love of the holiday season and antiques—come together in the Malmbergs' extraordinary collection of Christmas decorations. Scores of rare cotton-batting ornaments and wax angels hang from trees and beams. Quaint tiny villages—some in wood, others in tin—adorn shelves and mantels. A number of traditional feather trees display ornamental themes, and 18th-Century-style swaths of cloved fruit, pinecones, and evergreens embellish mantels, doorways, and windows.

It doesn't take much prodding for Randee to reminisce about the magical Christmases of her childhood. Her father erected the tree—"not without a lot of struggling to get it straight"—and the children decorated it.

"It would have everything from special handmade ornaments to hand-strung popcorn and cranberries—even my brother grabbed a needle and thread to help us five girls string them—and of course the tinsel sometimes ended up in clumps instead of strands," she said. "I was the designated baker in the family

from age ten or eleven and made all of the Christmas cookies, dozens and dozens of them in traditional shapes that, of course, were all decorated.

"I think I carried all of this into my adulthood and have found great enjoyment making our house look like Christmas every year," she added.

Of that, there can be no doubt.

TREASURES IN COTTON

The Malmbergs' Christmas decorations clearly reflect two genres. One is vintage items—many of German origin—from the 1870s to about 1920, including many of the ornaments, Santas, and feather trees. The other is from the era of the couple's childhood Christmases during the 1940s and '50s—collections of brush trees, holly boxes, bubble-lights, and several village scenes.

Most distinctive, however, is their assortment of rare cotton-batting ornaments, built up over the course of more than twenty years.

Cotton-batting ornaments—made from sheets of puffy white cotton wrapped tightly around a wire frame—date from the late 1800s through about 1920. The most prized of these ornaments came from the town of Lauscha, nestled in Germany's Thuringian mountains, where local artisans created the figures by hand in their homes.

Popular shapes included people and animals as well as fruits, vegetables, and icicles. Facial features often were hand-painted directly onto the cotton, although some ornaments have painted composition or printed-paper faces. Many wear crepe-paper clothing and carry tiny accessories such as umbrellas or musical instruments of Dresden paper or tin.

The couple's lavish living room features a carved mahogany mantel and surrounding mahogany wall paneling, contrasting tastefully with the wide-plank pine floors found throughout the home. The Malmbergs purchased the 18th-Century New England Chippendale table with two-board top, breadboard ends, and original dry red surface in New Hampshire. The mustard-colored bowl sitting on the table is c. 1850 and features beehive turnings. Also on the table are several wedding-band hog-scraper candlesticks and a 19th-Century red candle box with sponge decoration. To the right of the fireplace is a large, 1840s two-drawer blanket chest in original red paint. Early paintings above the mantel are a c. 1830 portrait of a young man with ministry collar, an 1820 painting of a U. S. ship of the line they found in New Hampshire, and a c. 1800 woman's portrait. Eighteenth-century-style cloved-fruit and evergreens adorn the mantel and doorway, while the room's two trees include the tall, decorated feather tree and a 1940s bubble-light tree reminiscent of the Malmbergs' childhoods.





"We began collecting them many, many years ago because they don't break, and we have cats," Randee explained. "Traditionally, cotton ornaments were put on the bottom of the trees because they were considered a lesser ornament. Children could play with them and couldn't break them, unlike the fancier glass ones. We're also drawn to the cotton ones because they're simple and whimsical."

While they may have been nearly indestructible at the turn of the century, most cotton-batting ornaments have suffered the ravages of age. Surviving ornaments have increased in value so that most now are in the hands of private collectors. "Early on, the prices weren't so high," Randee said. "But now the rarer the ornament is, the more you have to spend."

But with the insight of experienced antiques dealers, the Malmbergs know the investment value of these rare little treasures. "In the long run, the ones you spend the most money on are the ones that'll become the most valuable," John added. "They'll appreciate the most,

Many examples from Randee's extensive collection of holly boxes are displayed in the early New England cupboard in the keeping room. Holly boxes were popular in the 1940s as gift boxes for items from chocolates to perfumes and have become highly collectible in recent years. Randee began collecting them in remembrance of John's mother, who often gave Randee holly from her trees for seasonal decorating. The green sleigh being pulled by the candy-container reindeer is a c. 1900 German decoration.

John likes tin trains, and this c. 1860 model with its several cars is especially rare because of its embossed tin. He purchased it in New Hampshire and it now is on display at the base of the large German feather tree in the keeping room.



so we figure that if an ornament is rare and in good shape, we'll buy it."

Their large collection includes cotton-batting people, pigs, cats, lizards, frogs, monkeys, donkeys, reindeer, tigers, a polar bear, a lion, and a snail, to name a few.

Proof of the Malmbergs' skilled eye in acquiring the ornaments was evident last year when the regional chapter of The Golden Glow of Christmas Past—an international club of collectors of antique Christmas items—met in Rockford and visited the couple's home afterward for refreshments. "Randee had about eighty of those ornaments on the six-foot German feather tree in our keeping room," John said. "There were a lot of people here and many of them just sat and stared at that tree for an hour and a half because many of the cotton ornaments are so rare and unusual."

A PERFECT HOUSE

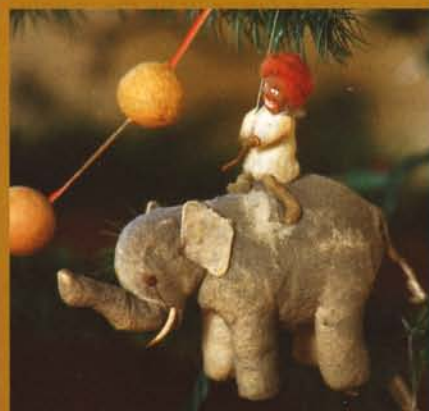
Speaking of unusual, the rarity of their saltbox house drew the couple to it nearly six years ago. As evident in their furnishings, Randee and John share a deep fondness for New England's 18th- and early-19th-Century furnishings. She is a former banker and he a thirty-year veteran of the business insurance and benefits industry, and for several years they had been settled comfortably in a brick ranch-style home with interior colonial touches to highlight their growing cache of early furnishings.

Eighteenth-century houses are not to be found in Rockford, Illinois. Located in the north-central part of the state, about an hour west of Chicago, Rockford was founded on the banks of the Rock River in the 1830s as people migrated west from New England and New York State. It grew rapidly, was chartered as a city in 1852, and soon became the region's manufacturing center

The six-foot German feather tree in the keeping room is decorated with more than 80 cotton-batting ornaments, many of them rare. Redware, game boards, and tiny buildings atop the wainscoting are examples of the Malmbergs' many collections.



The most well-known and collectible cotton-batting ornaments are German, made from the late 1800s to the 1920s. The Malmbergs have amassed a notable collection of them over the past twenty years, including several that are considered exceedingly rare.



OPPOSITE TOP FROM LEFT

A rabbit with his carrot is rare.

This fox is a hunter, holding a pheasant.

One of Randee's favorite ornaments is this rare maid elephant, with her crepe-paper apron and cap and tiny earrings at the tips of her ears. She carries a feather duster. "For all of that to survive in such good condition just amazes me," Randee said.

OPPOSITE CENTER FROM LEFT

Spotted dog and a bird on a nest. The garland is spun cotton.

In 20 years of collecting, Randee has seen only 2 camel-and-rider figures. The rider sports a turban, while the camel has a burlap side bag.

The little turbaned rider on his elephant is equally rare—Randee has seen only 3 examples.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM FROM LEFT

A dancing bear with a stick is one of the couple's rarer ornaments.

This unusual butterfly has a wingspan of nearly 4 inches and is decorated with Dresden stars.

This tiny cotton sailor boy wears crepe-paper clothing and a paper hat and carries a paper sword, all in remarkably good condition.

TOP FROM LEFT

Cotton-batting dove with paper wings and a paper tail.

Few cotton-batting giraffes have survived during the past century.

CENTER FROM LEFT

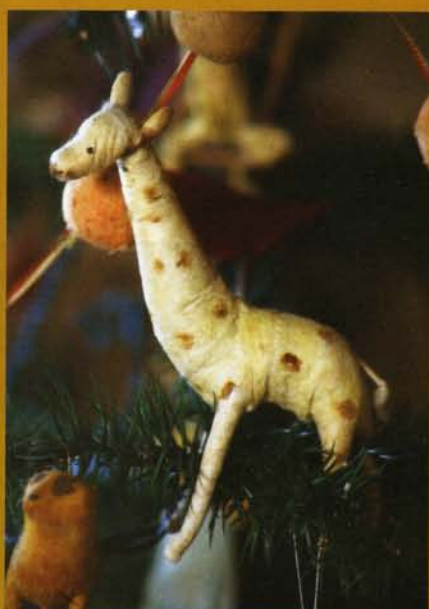
This rare yet well-preserved cotton ram is easily recognizable because of his curved horns.

The fine condition of the cowboy, including the lasso he holds, and his horse makes this a prized example.

BOTTOM FROM LEFT

Cotton-batting girl holds a paper bowl filled with birdseed, which attracts these cotton birds.

This chubby little ornament is a delivery pig, complete with his paper hat and pouch.



This rare wax-over-composition angel has a glittery netted skirt and spun-glass wings. Her soft lead trumpet is in unusually good condition considering the German ornament is at least 100 years old. At 6 inches tall, this angel is harder to find than smaller versions.



The Malmbergs purchased the 19th-Century mustard-painted dry sink in Illinois, but it likely is an original Pennsylvania piece. It provides a base for two late-1800s Santa candy containers from Germany and, in the red coat, a German clockwork nodding Santa. Also in the dining room is the couple's rare, late-1700s red corner cupboard from Massachusetts. In the foreground is an early candle stand with a keepsake collection of cardboard village houses and cast-iron figures that once belonged to Randee's mother, who had a young Randee put them on display every Christmas season.



for agricultural equipment. Today it has a metropolitan population of 340,000 and is the state's third-largest city.

"My son wanted to buy a house and I looked at the house ads in the paper each Sunday, then one week there was this house," Randee recalled. "I said to John, 'Did you know there's a saltbox in Rockford?' As far as we know, it's the only one in Rockford."

Curious, they decided to investigate. "We drove to the address and we came around the corner but couldn't see the house because it sits back among the trees," she said. "Then, all of a sudden, we both saw it and John hadn't even stopped before I was out of the car."

John knew he was in trouble. "I said, 'Oh, my God' because I could see right then what was coming." Although their ranch-style home was paid off and ideal for retirement, he saw a change in residence looming. "But it was perfect for us," he admitted. "I'd always said I'd like to have a saltbox house, but I didn't want one unless it was mechanically new—wiring, plumbing, and the rest—and that's exactly what we found with this house."

Built in 1979, the house has traditional saltbox lines and unpainted cedar siding weathered to a pleasing gray. It features wide-plank pine flooring throughout and mahogany paneling in the living room. Its

Some of Randee's most prized ornaments are displayed above the keeping room fireplace. Her collection of brush trees from the 1940s is distinctive because she limits it to trees at least 14 inches tall. They share the mantel with a collection of tiny wooden Pennsylvania German putz houses. Wax-over-composition angels, produced in Germany from about 1880 to the early 20th Century, hang above the trees. Each is at least 6 inches tall. The antique ladder-back chair and candle stand are from New England.





As if plucked from colonial New England, the Malmbergs' saltbox-style home, built in 1979, sits amid several acres of woodland populated with wildlife. The pastoral setting belies the fact that the home is located just a couple of miles from the heart of Rockford, Illinois' third-largest city.

floor plan has a living room, dining room, kitchen, and keeping room on the first floor and four bedrooms on the upper floor.

Despite its location just two miles from the heart of Rockford, the house is secluded by woodland. "Behind us are five acres of woods that'll never be developed," Randee said. "At any time, even though we're sitting right in the middle of the city, we can see deer, turkeys, raccoons, coyotes, hawks, owls, foxes, and other wildlife. It's like we're not even in the city."

LIVING WITH ANTIQUES

The Malmbergs' extensive collection of early furnishings also has roots in Randee's youth, beginning when she was sixteen. "My parents were like other parents—they wanted to decorate their home with what they could afford and what would look good," Randee said. "Back then, antiques were less expensive than buying new, and I got my love of them from my mother."

John was more cautious. "I liked early American furniture, but that was about the extent of it," he said, admitting he at first was skeptical of Randee's choice of furnishings but under her tutelage learned

the value of her pieces. He brought his business acumen to bear and the couple launched an antiques business in 1988 that remained active for fifteen years. They sold mainly at major antiques and collectibles shows in the Midwest, including Heart of Country and similar shows in Chicago and Ohio.

"The first time we traveled to New England, we became aware of early painted furniture and accessories," Randee recalled. "We decided that was what we wanted and we never looked back. We wanted to bring this furniture back to Illinois, both to live with it and to sell it. You can't find that kind of thing in Rockford, so it gave us an excuse to make several trips out east."

The Malmbergs replenished their inventory with twice-yearly trips to New England—primarily New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Maine—developing close personal ties with several of the leading dealers there.

They pay homage to these fellow dealers by naming some of their pieces, such as a primitive portrait named "Platt" in honor of well-known dealer and friend Sharon Platt of Portsmouth, New Hampshire. The Malmbergs call another painting

"Lucinda" for Pittsford, Vermont, dealer Lucinda Seward, and a well-loved stuffed bear is "Ethan" after the son of dealer Mary Elliot of Pepperell, Massachusetts.

"We get just as excited going back to New England today as we did several years ago when we first went," Randee said. "As far as the history interest goes, we don't just like to decorate with early antiques—we want to know how old a piece is and what it was used for. We've always said we would love to know where all of this has been, and how many lives it has gone through, and how many more it still will go through."

"Everything we have is American, except some of the holiday decorations, which are German," John said.

In addition to the impressive selection of early chairs, tables, and cupboards, both Randee and John are avid collectors of early redware, stoneware, cutlery boxes, game boards, baskets, toys, and weathervanes, to name just a few of their finds.

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This 27-inch, late-1800s German Santa candy container is dressed in brown mohair. He holds a German papier-mâché and composition Santa lantern of the same vintage.

Seasonal visitors to the Malmberg home enjoy the array of vintage red textiles Randee incorporates into her decorating, such as this display in the upstairs hallway.

A LIFETIME CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12

"We had a rule in our business for a long time that we wouldn't buy an antique to sell unless it could pass a test," John explained. "The test was, it had to be good enough to be in our house—because if we didn't sell it, we had to live with it. And that's what happened. Most of the things you see here we bought at one time or another to sell, and we just, over the years, kept them and kept them and kept them."

The Malmbergs wound down their antiques business and got off the show circuit about six years ago, today selling a few pieces from their home to some of their customers of long standing.

Although they've cut back on their sales efforts, Randee still goes all out when it comes to Christmas. "I know that as some people get older, they don't have the inclination to keep doing all the Christmas decorating and the traditional things that go along with it," she said. "But I hope I don't lose this aspect. We enjoy it, our adult children enjoy it, as do our friends when we entertain. In fact, our antiques friends always visit to see what 'new' antique ornament we've added or what we've done differently.

"This year is special," she said. "We have our first grandchild and I can't wait to share our traditions with her." *

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The Malmbergs found this early-1800s, blue step-back cupboard in Maine. One of the first painted pieces they purchased during their many years of collecting, it now enhances the couple's living room. The horse is part of their extensive weathervane collection, and they have named the little, well-loved stuffed bear "Ethan" after the son of one of their dealer acquaintances, Mary Elliot of Pepperell, Massachusetts.

