

Krista Farris Feature Writing Portfolio W09

Plasticville: A miniature village with a big spirit

By Krista Farris
The Winchester Star

Brian Daly's Plasticville village is not that different from typical miniature displays and train sets holiday celebrators put up each year to celebrate the season. It has buildings, roads and a locomotive encircling the town. The village was founded decades ago as a Christmas tradition by Daly's parents when the Frederick County resident was a boy in Newark, New Jersey.

What sets Daly's collection apart from others is that the story behind it gives meaning to the expression "it takes a village to raise a child." Daly's Plasticville is significant not because the plastic parts have held up over time, but because of the hands that have touched it and the vision of those who put it together. The village has been a part of his life in one way or another as he grew from son to father to grandfather.

Plasticville toy buildings, figurines and infrastructure were originally made by a company called Bachmann Industries in the mid-1940s, according to the Plasticville webpage tandem-associates.com. Manufacturing shifted to China in the 1980s, but the 1950s architectural building style has remained the same.

Daly and his three siblings were introduced to Plasticville one holiday season around 1950 when his father, Joseph, brought home a simple farmhouse. The basic tan house with a red roof, red shutters, red door and red window frames didn't immediately impress Brian. But his parents knew they would be adding one building to the collection each year to build out the village — a church, gas station, fire station, airport and more.

Brian's mother Josephine meticulously customized some pieces with paint, carefully adding colored costumes to the figurines or accenting a building with a splash of personality.

As Brian grew, so did the collection.

He started to relish the spectacle and experience. His father would put up the base structure. Then his mother would place the buildings. "It's something me and my mom did together. Out of me and my siblings, I was the right age for it. She would arrange things and rearrange things. She'd place the little people about and find a spot for the dog," Daly says.

Soon, the town "spread to an 8 foot by 8 foot square that we built over the living room furniture of our five-room walk up apartment in Newark," Daly says. He explains that the village base was relatively tall because it had to fit over the couch. When family and neighbors visited during the

holidays, they knew fancy footwork may be necessary to get around the giant obstacle that left scant places to walk — let alone to sit — in the living room. Daly fondly remembers that revelers would always go admire the festive village and then congregate in the kitchen.

When Daly was in 8th grade, his father died of a heart attack. He and his mother displayed the village after his father died, but he says it wasn't the same.

Plasticville was boxed up.

Daly got married. He and his wife Rachel had two children. Daly's mother died soon after.

The little village with the big spirit sat idle in Daly's basement for 35 years. He referred to the village every so often, always meaning to show his daughters, but he never got down there to open the boxes. One year when they were in high school, he pulled out a few of the buildings. But it wasn't enough to conjure the village's spirit.

When Daly's first grandbaby was on the way, he decided it was time. Time to rebuild the town. Time to showcase the future-oriented thinking his parents put into the collection. His daughters never knew their grandfather and their grandmother died when they were young. It was time for them to get to know his parents a little better. He wanted to give them a glimpse into their grandparents' personalities and feel the love and excitement he did as a boy.

“For me, it's personal history,” Daly says. “I thought I was bringing it out for my grandchildren. But, really, I wanted my daughters to see it even though they were in their 30s at the time.”

He secretly put it together in his basement in 2012. Following in his mother's footsteps, he customized a few village landmarks to welcome those who joined his family over the years. The runways at Daly's Plasticville airport are numbered with the addresses Daly lived in with his siblings. He created a billboard for Pumpkinville, a place in Northern Virginia where his daughters liked to go in the fall when they were growing up.

All told, there are 42 buildings in Plasticville. There is a farmer's market, greenhouse, toll booth, fancy homes and humble abodes. The cathedral has a bell so bright that it shines like it did fresh out of the box. A country church and diners surround the first bare-bones farmhouse Daly's father brought home to that Newark apartment.

There are also 53 hand-painted, unique Plasticville residents milling about town. To Daly, the people are very important and integral to the warmth of his Plasticville experience.

When he revealed the village to family, friends and neighbors 10 years ago, it was well received. A neighbor brought him a new piece, while another started a village of their own. His brother, daughters and wife also appreciated it. With those interactions came newfound friendships and

connections. The village drew in and continues to bring people together in the way Daly remembered from his childhood. That pleases him.

While Daly cannot predict the future of his village, this much he knows: “Traditions change as each family member is added.” He seems OK with that. Instead of putting up the display once a year as a Christmas tradition, he decided to keep it up year-round for his grandchildren to explore.

In Daly’s Plasticville, it is the village — the family, the friends and all the individual stories and kindnesses that are shared — which give meaning to life. Sometimes memories are boxed up like forgotten holiday decorations. But Daly knows he is lucky to have had the time, space and the inspiration to be connected with others that enabled him to open the stored boxes, put the pieces together and share.

“The trains were secondary. It was the town that mattered,” says Daly.

'It is a spectacular view': Ginkgo grove's foliage nearing peak color at state arboretum

By Krista Farris

The Winchester Star

BOYCE — Whether it’s letting your peepers feast on a dramatic eye-popping sea of golden leaves or honoring an urge to submerge your senses in what a prehistoric landscape might have looked and smelled like, it’s time to get over to the Virginia State Arboretum at Blandy Experimental Farm off of U.S. 50 in Clarke County. The height of ginkgo viewing in the Northern Shenandoah Valley is soon to be upon us. Whether you go it alone or revel with a group at Ginkgo Fest on Oct. 29, the sizeable Ginkgo Grove at Blandy beckons you to take in its 3.3 acres of golden splendor.

“There are two things that are really spectacular about the ginkgo grove,” according to T’ai Rolston, the state arboretum's curator. “All the trees come into peak at the same time. I think the image of the golden canopy at peak foliage is the most iconic image of the state arboretum. It is a spectacular view. The other thing that makes the grove spectacular is that the trees all drop their leaves at the same time to create a golden carpet.”

The staff at Blandy starts fielding calls about when peak foliage will occur at the start of each fall. Rolston says with a wry smile that he and others at the arboretum don’t like to “go out on a limb when it comes to predictions,” but this year’s peak time to experience the golden canopy at Ginkgo Grove will likely be the third or fourth week in October.

While the visage of the trees at peak foliage is described as spectacular, the history of the tree is impressive. Ginkgoes are living fossils. The tree type has been around for 270 million years,

according to Rolston. He says they were part of the fossil record in what is now Asia, Europe and North America before living ginkgo trees were found in China in the 1800s. There were many types of ginkgoes that were fossilized. However, the remaining live species is *Ginkgo biloba*. In the right conditions, a specimen can live to be 3,000 years old, according to The Arbor Day Foundation Ginkgo Tree Guide at arborday.org.

Once living specimens were discovered, people were eager to propagate trees across the globe. One big selling point is that ginkgo trees grow in a variety of planting zones and thrive in both rural and urban landscapes. “It’s a very reliable tree in urban areas for giving out oxygen and helping to manage storm water,” Rolston explains. In addition, they don’t need a ton of root space and cope well with pollution. “There are very few things that feed on ginkgoes,” Rolston says. “Insects tend to leave them alone and I don’t know of any animals that seek them out.”

Ginkgo biloba are conical trees with fan shaped leaves. The show the species puts on each fall — changing from a deep green to a uniformly deep gold — make them popular. “They are very ornamental and have been intentionally planted by people since being rediscovered,” Rolston says.

While ginkgo trees are favored by some folks, the smell of the fruit produced by female trees sometimes repels would-be tree planters. Rolston describes the odor as “stinky — like some form of semi-rancid vomit.” Because of that unique feature, male trees are often selected for planting. In fact, the quest to understand sex differentiation in ginkgoes by Blandy’s first director, Dr. Orland W. White, was the impetus for the planting the grove.

“Orland White had students bring seeds from the UVA campus in Charlottesville in the 1930s and 40s. They planted about 600 trees. It takes 20 years for a ginkgo to reach maturity, so White never saw the result of the experiment. But the grove turned out to be about 50-50 female-male. And there are a few trees that express as both male and female,” Rolston says.

When the grove was planted, it was thought to be the biggest in the world, according to Rolston. Now, with 334 trees standing, it is believed to be the largest grove on public land in the nation. That fun fact is what led the Foundation of the State Arboretum (FOSA) to launch Ginkgo Fest in 2021.

“Last year was the first year,” says FOSA Director Robin Couch Cardillo. “We were thrilled so many people chose to come and walk through the grove. We had so many great responses. People liked doing something that is a little different.” Ginkgo Fest raised about \$10,000 for the arboretum last year. Cardillo says funds raised by the event will go towards FOSA’s mission of supporting environmental education, research and public outreach.

At Ginkgo Fest 2022, ginkgo groupies are invited to don festive gold outfits to match the trees and enjoy a warm meal with other revelers. They can wander the grove while sipping a beverage

and listening to live Celtic music by Matthew O'Donnell, also known as The Blue Ridge Bard. O'Donnell is known for interactive performances that include crowd pleasing sea shanties, according to Blandy Public Relations and Marketing Coordinator Stephanie Swaim.

Members of the Blandy sketch club will be making plein air art amid the tree trunks. The event will run from 5-7 p.m. Swaim says the sunset will occur at around 6:15 p.m. that night, which will provide a golden photo opportunity in the grove. Tickets can be purchased for \$60 through blandy.virginia.edu until sold out.

However, the nature experts at Blandy understand that many tree gazers want to experience the phenomenon in a more solitary fashion. To enjoy the grove more privately Cardillo notes, the arboretum is open 365 days a year from dawn to dusk. During ginkgo-viewing season, Blandy provides regular updates on the trees beginning in October and will have "ginkgo guides" on-site during weekends to answer questions and post educational signage.

Directional signs will be posted from the main parking lot and overflow lot during the next few weeks prompting visitors to follow a fairly flat gravel road about a half-mile to the grove. Visitors can also drive to the grove, but parking is very limited. A shuttle will be provided from the main parking lot to the grove during Ginkgo Fest.

Since the female-male tree ratio is still 50-50, Rolston says visitors should bring plastic bags to put over their shoes if they want to venture deep into the grove unless they want the stink to follow them home. "No one thinks about it until they are in the grove getting the fruit on their shoes," Rolston says with a smile.

Putting plastic bags over one's shoes is a small consolation to pay for the privilege of spending time in the grove, as evidenced by the fact that the Ginkgo Grove at Blandy provides a real destination for many people near and far. Rolston says it is "by far, the biggest annual draw." Whether you want to stand back to admire the big picture, sit among the trees and paint or cover your tootsies in plastic wrap and venture deep into the grove, there is a way for all to take in the fall magic.

From curtsies to corgis: Remembering Queen Elizabeth II from Winchester, Va., to Winchester, England

**By Krista Farris
The Winchester Star**

WINCHESTER — The 70-year reign of the United Kingdom's Queen Elizabeth II ended last week when she passed away at the age of 96. For most residents of the UK, she was the only queen they had known. It's likewise for many former Brits who now live in the United States. During those seven decades, she touched many lives.

Area resident Sally Anderson spent her formative years in England, and her youth was peppered by encounters with the royal family. She said she wept and was surprised by her emotions upon learning of the queen's death.

As a teenager Anderson was part of the last group of young ladies to be “presented” to the queen in 1958. It was the last year the queen had such a ceremony. Being “presented” to the queen was similar to being a debutante. Anderson stressed her family was firmly in the middle class with a long history of military service. Her mother just happened to know someone who was able to get her in.

“I got my white dress and went twice to Buckingham Palace to learn to curtsy,” she said. “We also had tea time. It was all part of the etiquette.”

Anderson stood to demonstrate. “Knee behind knee,” she said with a slightly nervous giggle. “It’s very easy to wobble. And you drop straight down to curtsy.”

The day of the presentation, Anderson said each young woman wore gloves and held flowers. She waited for her sponsor to announce her name. She then approached the front and stood in front of the queen who sat in a very formal chair. Anderson curtsied, then rejoined the group of young women. Following the ceremony, they had tea. Otherwise, Anderson doesn’t remember anything astounding about the occasion.

“It seems like it lasted all of five minutes!” Anderson said with a laugh. “Oh! There were no stairs, thank God!”

“You know, it’s funny. Knowing my mother, I’m surprised she pushed it,” Anderson reflected. “We were middle class.” But, the royal family was not “hoity-toity,” according to Anderson. “They go into the military. They hunt. And they like dogs.”

Anderson looked down at her own dog, a corgi named Macduff that was sitting at her feet. The pooch is named after Lord Macduff, a character in Shakespeare’s “Macbeth.” The queen was known for loving her pack of corgis.

As a young adult at Cambridge University during the mid 1960s, Anderson met the queen's son, Charles, now King Charles III. She said he was initially shy, but they made friends soon after arriving at the school. She joined him as his sidekick in the school’s Cambridge Footlight Revue, a stage group that did various comedic skits.

The two did a bit together in which Charles played an inept magician who was insistent on cutting his assistant, played by Anderson, in half. The skit ended with him “actually” cutting her in half while fake blood squirted everywhere.

Anderson's love of theater continued. She is currently directing "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime" at Winchester Little Theatre.

Her handful of encounters with the royal family, especially that particular fake blood squirting skit, are unique. However, most people who are struck by the queen's death never had any face-to-face encounters. Yet, they mourn.

In Winchester, England — sister city to Winchester, Virginia — people are paying their respects to the queen. The flag at Guildhall, a historic municipal building that hosts community gatherings, is being flown at half-mast. Councillor Derek Green, who is the 823rd mayor there, opened the Book of Condolences at Guildhall, according to the British city's website.

He also laid a wreath at Abbey House. Abbey House sits on land that was gifted to Queen Mary Tudor in the 16th century and now serves as the mayor's official residence. Residents in Winchester, England, are laying flowers and notes outside of Abbey House, in addition to lighting candles and creating memorials at various other public sites.

In Winchester, Virginia, City Council on Tuesday approved a "Resolution of Sorrow" to send to Green.

Some memorials to the queen are small, quiet affairs, especially here in the United States. At the Tea Cart on Main Street in Berryville, a table is reserved for the queen, with a place setting adorned with a single red rose, a candle and a tea cup turned down, said Allison Ritter, who owns the tea house.

"Next week, we will plan to add an additional meal selection called 'Her Majesty,' which will include some of her favorites like orange marmalade, smoked salmon and cream cheese, and, of course, something chocolate," Ritter said.

In Middletown, the Union Jack will fly on Main Street until the queen's funeral on Monday, said Mayor Charles Harbaugh IV.

Whether it's by partaking in her favorite foods, lighting a candle, placing a bouquet, turning a tea cup upside down or retelling the story of the day you curtsied without wobbling in front of Queen Elizabeth II, people near and far are marking the end of an era.

"I wept a bit. I think one loves the pomp. I don't know, with her passing, I think the monarchy is probably going to fade," Anderson said.

Time will tell. But, for now, the ceremonies and the recollections continue.