

# American Profile

# They've Got Spirit!

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# American Artisan

by  
CYNTHIA  
ELYCE  
RUBIN

## Fashioning Seed into Bird Feed

From a perch in bushes surrounding her farmhouse, Ann Hoffert watches a flock of warblers as they fly across the open prairie against a clear, blue sky. "Ever since I was a child, I loved to watch the birds," says Hoffert, 58, of Carrington, N.D. (pop. 2,268).

After traveling across the country and working as a registered nurse, Hoffert returned to Carrington in 1987 with her husband, Ernie, and their four young daughters to live on the grain farm where she grew up. Wanting to spend more time with her family, she looked for a way to work from home.

Surrounded by the farm's 6,000 acres of wheat, flax, sorghum, soybeans and sunflowers, Hoffert found inspiration in the seeds that birds love. "Birds will eat a lot of things," she says. "But sunflowers, that's what they really want."

"In my mind, I pictured a sunflower with a hole cut out of it, like a wreath," Hoffert adds. "Then I saw I had everything right here to do that."

Taking seed-laden sunflower heads and decorating them with dried berries and suet, she created birdhouses with a double purpose: They could beautify the inside of a house, and then be placed outside later as a feast for the birds. "I worked at the kitchen table until early morning," she recalls. The next day eager customers snapped them up at a local craft fair.

That experience gave birth to Pipestem Creek, Hoffert's home-based business, which produces edible birdhouses and feeders, all built with sunflower heads, sunflower seeds and other natural ingredients that birds savor, as well as wreaths of grains,



Ann Hoffert makes birdhouses, feeders and wreaths from natural ingredients on her North Dakota farm.

grasses, berries and dried flowers.

Hoffert also uses an ever-changing palette of red amaranth, green flax, purple thistles, black-and-white sorghum, and multicolored Indian corn cultivated in Pipestem Creek's 16 acres of gardens and fields, or that grow wild nearby, to decorate her products.

"I love being able to take something that comes from nature and make it into something beautiful and share it with the rest of the country," Hoffert says. "And even better, have it be able to return to nature."

Pipestem Creek has two full-time and five part-time employees who work year-round planting, cultivating and harvesting. Numerous "stay-at-home" women from small towns around Carrington work a flexible schedule during peak season to construct and ship as many as 20,000 products each year.

"Ann has a wonderful talent for using North Dakota's natural resources," says Sara Otte Coleman, the state's tourism director in Bismarck.

An interest in architectural preservation motivated Hoffert to recycle abandoned buildings from around the state for use on the farm. Two former granaries serve as Pipestem Creek's drying sheds. Another

10-sided granary is the gift shop, and a fourth was renovated to provide overnight lodging for birdwatchers.

When a coalition of communities and agencies dedicated to the promotion of bird-watching formed Birding Drives Dakota in 2002, Hoffert helped develop a network of off-the-beaten-track birding trails. As current president, she works to promote the organization's Pot holes and Prairies Birding Festival, held each June. "Ann is a wonderful ambassador for North Dakota birding," says Kim Hanson, project leader of nearby Arrowwood National Wildlife Refuge Complex.

Today, in addition to the multitude of customers around the nation who have fallen in love with her all-natural products, people come from all over to tour Pipestem Creek's gardens, observe the production process and share Hoffert's artful vision.

"Using the skills and ingenuity of a true pioneer," says former North Dakota Gov. Ed Schafer from his home in Fargo, "Ann creates products of worldwide appeal that allow her to live and work in the rural area she loves." ☆

Cynthia Elyce Rubin is a writer in Orlando, Fla.

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