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A Special Supplement to
The Clinton Herald
October 31, 2008



Hometown Kitchen & Bath at the Fireplace Shop, Etc. offers many products to improve the home

By Susan Jessen
Herald Staff Writer

CLINTON — Hometown Kitchen & Bath at the Fireplace Shop, Etc. — that's a mouthful for a store name.

Ironically, it doesn't even begin to describe the home improvement products and services offered in this modest-looking store, located on Main Avenue in Lyons for the past 22 years.

Owner Chuck Bilek, along with Roberta Immel, offer expertise on everything from fireplaces to custom cabinetry. Bilek is a Minnesotan transplant, and a former designer for Knapp cabinetry, with years of experience in actual cabinet building and installation. Immel, who joined the business in its infancy, handles the stove and fireplace end of the business, and can rattle off technical specs on the various models like an incendiary engineer.

"Something most people don't realize," advised Immel, who goes by the nickname Bert, "is that chimneys have to be the appropriate size and material for the appliance they're installing," as she proceeds to point out a few examples scattered throughout their showroom.

Both Immel and Bilek are well-versed in the plethora of fireplace lines they offer — 12, in total — from Mendota to Lennox to Hearthstone. And Immel explains that, for the record, all the fire-burners, be they natural gas, electric, wood or corn-burning, are referred to as stoves. It's when a unit is installed and surrounded with a mantel that it is then called a fireplace.

A perusal of the showroom reveals both the freestanding



stoves as well as those installed in mantels — mantels of wood, stone, even glass tiles. Immel reports many of the stoves they sell are retrofits, in that a homeowner, faced with restoring their home's original deteriorating energy-inefficient fireplace, chooses instead to install a new energy-efficient stove within a new surround of their own design, something both Immel and Bilek are adept at.

"Today's woodburning stoves have to meet EPA standards for efficiency and emissions," said Immel. "In fact, studies now show a tree decomposing in the woods puts out more emissions than one of today's efficient woodburning stoves."

The Rowden family has employed both the cabinetry and fireplace expertise of Bilek and Immel. Kris, his wife, Holly, and their two children recently worked with Bilek on designing new kitchen cabinetry and countertops; the couple also had a new fireplace, complete with glass tiles, installed in their family room.

"Chuck helped with the walls, the countertops, he worked well with our contractor. They offered great service, and we decided to purchase the 'big ticket' items here — we've always tried to patronize local businesses," explained Kris Rowden.

"Their prices were competitive for higher quality craftsmanship."

"I always shop the competition," said Bilek. "I price the competitors' products, and have been finding that our prices are generally lower than those of other retailers, including the 'big-box' stores like Home Depot."

Bilek added his store guarantees completion of each project, something not every outlet does. The store uses long-standing contractors, several of whom are previous employees, to complete the installations of fireplaces, cabinetry, flooring, and the like.

Hometown Kitchen & Bath at the Fireplace Shop, Etc. owner Chuck Bilek (left) and Roberta "Bert" Immel, in front of one of Bilek's original cabinet designs. SUSAN JESSEN/CLINTON HERALD



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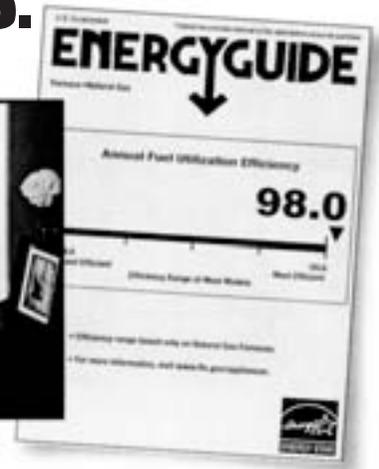
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ETC., continued on 3

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Story continued from 2

One of Bilek and Immel's trusted service people is Jim Lyon. A Clinton native, Lyon is currently the automotive instructor at Clinton High, and sidelines at the Fireplace Shop handling service calls on the gas appliances. Lyon echoes the store's commitment to service. "They provide warranty service on their products — their personal service is what sets them apart from their competitors," said Lyon.

"We'll work until a problem is not a problem," emphasized Bilek. "I want our customers to be satisfied, and to contact us as soon as they are having an issue."

A majority of the store's business comes from homeowners. But some local developers and contractors see the benefits of dealing with the local retailer as well. "They're helping me stay within budget," said local developer Will Nelson. Nelson had happened into the store earlier this year, to get pricing on fireplaces he planned for his residential development across the river.



He was so impressed with Immel's and Bilek's expertise, product lines and pricing, he decided on the spot to use them for his cabinetry needs as well.

Bilek won the 1995 top award for his cabinet designs for Knapp Woodworking, and he continues coming up with innovative designs for his clients. He pointed

to a particular cabinet display that features a microwave installed in an under-the-counter cabinet configuration. "A woman had a disabled family member who needed lower access to cooking, so I designed this configuration for her," said Bilek, adding, "it became so popular, the company now offers it as part of their

design options."

Perhaps the only drawback to the Fireplace Shop, Etc., is the store's square footage — it's impossible for Bilek, his wife Starla (who handles the accounting end of the business) and Roberta to display even a tenth of the product lines they offer. Not only are kitchen and bath cabinetry and fireplaces and stoves offered — the store carries tile, marble, solid-surface countertops, an array of hard-surface flooring and — to top things off — handmade copper weathervanes.

From setters to saws to swine, the variety of vanes seems endless.

And a fun complement to a store chock-full of home improvement ideas.



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Fulton business helps consumers with their requests for green products

By **Samantha Pidde**
Herald Staff Writer

FULTON, Ill. — Brinkman Building Center, 915 Second St., Fulton, has been family operated for more than 60 years.

During that time, home improvement materials have changed. Bill Brinkman said the most recent change is the increase in sales of “green products.”

“I just think the products have changed drastically in the past 20 years,” said Brinkman. Brinkman Building Center sells several “green” products that Brinkman said are quite popular.

Brinkman said green items also



LEFT: The Weather Blanket Insulation offered by Brinkman Building Center increases energy efficiency.

SAMANTHA PIDDE/CLINTON HERALD



Brinkman Building Center, 915 Second St., Fulton, Ill., offers a variety of energy-efficient exterior doors. SAMANTHA PIDDE/CLINTON HERALD

BRINKMAN, continued on 5

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