

Clarksville becomes winter escape to bygone era

by Terra Osterling

Hamlin has a little-known seasonal community named Clarksville. The miniature Christmas village has been on display in 86-year-old Wilberta "Willie" Clark's living room every holiday season since 1994.

Willie Clark, mother of six, grandmother of eight and great-grandmother of four, lives downstairs in the home of her son and daughter-in-law, Butch and Pat Clark. It is here that a dining room set and couch disappear under Clarksville for the season. One side of the room is the quiet countryside of Clarksville. The other side, separated by a small area for Willie's love seat and television, is the bustling downtown.

It all started with one lighthouse. Today Clarksville is 129 major buildings, plus smaller structures, vehicles, people, and wildlife.

Family and friends helped Willie to add to her collection over the years. Clarksville's many pieces were purchased at garage sales, specialty shops, online and at local retailers. Some features are hand-crafted -- Butch builds bridges and is the "water expert," creating realistic ponds and waterways using plywood, paint and clear window caulk.

A feat of imagination and resourcefulness, Clarksville is also a winter escape to a bygone era. Soft snow blankets the scene with drifts of white fluff sprinkled throughout.

There are skaters gliding, snowboarders shredding, sledgers, snow angels, a tug-of-war match and even a man snowblowing his driveway. Santa Claus can be found riding in a zeppelin, in a hot air balloon, or driving his sleigh and reindeer.

Lights, sounds and moving parts bring whimsical Clarksville to life. Christmas carols play from the revolving carousel at

the amusement park while lights twinkle around a junkyard. A light wheel mounted at the ceiling casts the Northern Lights over the diner, bakery and mansions of downtown.

Clarksville is a family affair and team effort: brothers Butch and George begin in mid-October by constructing the two expansive, sturdy wooden platforms that support the display.

George Clark and his wife, Joanne, the set-up team, then spend an estimated 24 hours over several weeks arranging the display. They set it up differently every year. Joanne works on downtown, where her favorite feature, the working drive-in movie theater, is located down the road from a replica of her employer Macy's New York flagship store.

George's specialty is the outdoorsman's corner with hunters, fishermen, a hilltop cabin and a fire tower. The last buildings were placed on Thanksgiving morning.

"Every year we say, 'No more houses,' then comes Christmas and we open presents, and she gets more houses," laughs George. "I'd have to move upstairs if I add any more," says Willie.

They do add every year, but try to search out unique features, such as this year's working windmill and a locally-known grocery store. Clarksville is a who's who of national retailers and restaurants. There is also an airport, casino, fire department and hospital.

"It's getting tougher to come up with new ones," says Joanne. The Clarks are contemplating a drag racing strip and a raised train platform.

Every shopping trip throughout the year holds potential for new finds, like a tree house, a maple sugar shack or a working rollercoaster found at a Christmas specialty store in the Thousand Islands.



Eighty-six year old **Wilberta Clark** stands next to her collection of Christmas season buildings that she has been putting together for over twenty years. She is also holding a sign, designed by her granddaughter Jennifer Clark, that describes the Christmas Village collection. Photography by David Knox.



Wilberta Clark's Christmas Village collection of buildings depict many stores decorated for the holidays from around the area. Photography by David Knox.



The Earl's Farmers Market section in Wilberta Clark's collection is named in memory of her late husband, Earl Clark. Photography by David Knox.

"Pat will come home and say, 'Close your eyes Willie,' and I'll close my eyes and the next thing I know I have a handful of little things." Dogs, bears, raccoons, fox, deer, ducks, and a bald eagle roam among the trees and ponds in the countryside of Clarksville. Vendors, shoppers and a chimney sweep are a few of the downtown population. Clarksville has everything, including a running waterfall.

Sharing Clarksville with family and friends every holiday season is the reward for the effort that the entire family puts into maintaining Willie's display, which stays up through January. The take down team -- sisters Bonnie, Trudy and Kathy, often with their grandchildren -- carefully

wraps and packs every piece into totes for off season storage.

Willie considers each part of the display to be special reminders of her large family. For example, there's the outdoorsman's area for brothers George and Todd, Joanne's Macy's, a great-granddaughter's horse farm and a Ford dealership for Butch's work in the auto industry.

The grandchildren routinely check on a corner of Clarksville not far from Earl's Farm Market, named in memory of Willie's husband.

"It's been fun to watch it grow," she says. "I've had oodles of fun with my kids. As long as they keep doing it, we'll put it up."