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Bits And Pieces

Stave Puzzle owner Steve Richardson is a master designer of upscale and intricate jigsaws. Once you open a puzzle box, he boasts, there is no turning back.  By John Grossmann

Enticing a new customer into the delightful, deceptive world of Stave Puzzles begins with an understated, smaller than business-card-sized ad in a magazine. What follows is marketing magic. For two dollars Stave Puzzle Inc.'s owner and founder, Steve Richardson, will mail you a colorful brochure that displays on the cover a blue and green Stave puzzle box topped with the company trademark—a big-shoed, floppy-hatted clown—and the words “Once You Open This Box, There’s No Turning Back. . .”

The game has begun—and what a game it is. Stave



 The Can of Worms (\$395), labeled STEVE'S REVENGE, contains a challenging puzzle "guaranteed to make you crawl."

Photos courtesy of Stave Puzzles © 1992

Steve Richardson

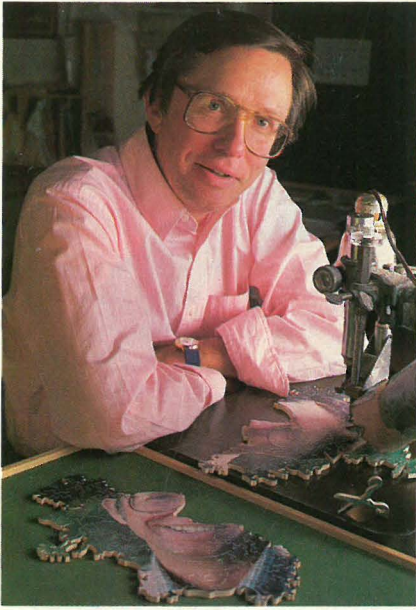


Photo by Charles A. Parker/Courtesy of Stave Puzzles © 1992

puzzles are unarguably the most beautiful, expensive, and difficult jigsaw puzzles in the world. Praising their "mind warping. . . matchless craftsmanship," Tom Peters, co-author of *In Search of Excellence* and himself a customer, named them product of the year for 1991.

Stave's limited-edition original designs are hand painted in brilliant colors atop four layers of hardwoods backed by polished, furniture-grade mahogany. True works of art, they're treasured by many buyers as family heirlooms—Queen Elizabeth has two. The least expensive puzzle, a 40-

piecer, sells for \$95. Many top \$2,000. Stave's legendary Dollhouse Village set of five interlocking puzzles stretching 8 feet long, a creation once on display at the White House and referred to in *The Guinness Book of World Records* as the world's most expensive jigsaw puzzle, currently sells for more than \$9,000.

Yet paying for a Stave puzzle is often easier than assembling it. Cleverly, rather like flinging down the gauntlet, the Stave brochure prominently displays a glass of water and two aspirin. Take this to heart. Among the easier tricks employed by Stave's eight scroll saws are drop out spaces,

"People know when they buy a third- or fourth-generation puzzle from us it's loaded with Steve's dirty tricks." —Steve Richardson




unfillable holes in the puzzle design; phony corners, fake corner pieces that actually fit within the puzzle; and whammy edges, which, when elevated to triple-whammy status, link two non-interlocking false corners with a third ersatz corner piece.

Imagine puzzles with pieces that fit in more than one place and bedevil the puzzler into interlocks that must later be undone. "It's all part of the game," says Richardson, a 52-year-old former computer-systems designer.

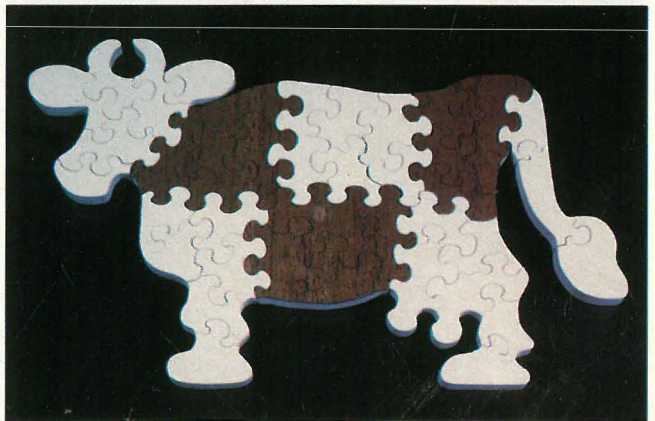
"There are people who love it, who can't wait to see where I've put the booby traps and see if they can work around them. There's a whole set of crazies—crazies within the shop and crazies out there. You've got this little dance that goes on."

Over the years the dance has spun ever wilder as

 Pennant Race (\$1,295), a three-dimensional puzzle, is so intricate you can almost hear the cheering crowd.




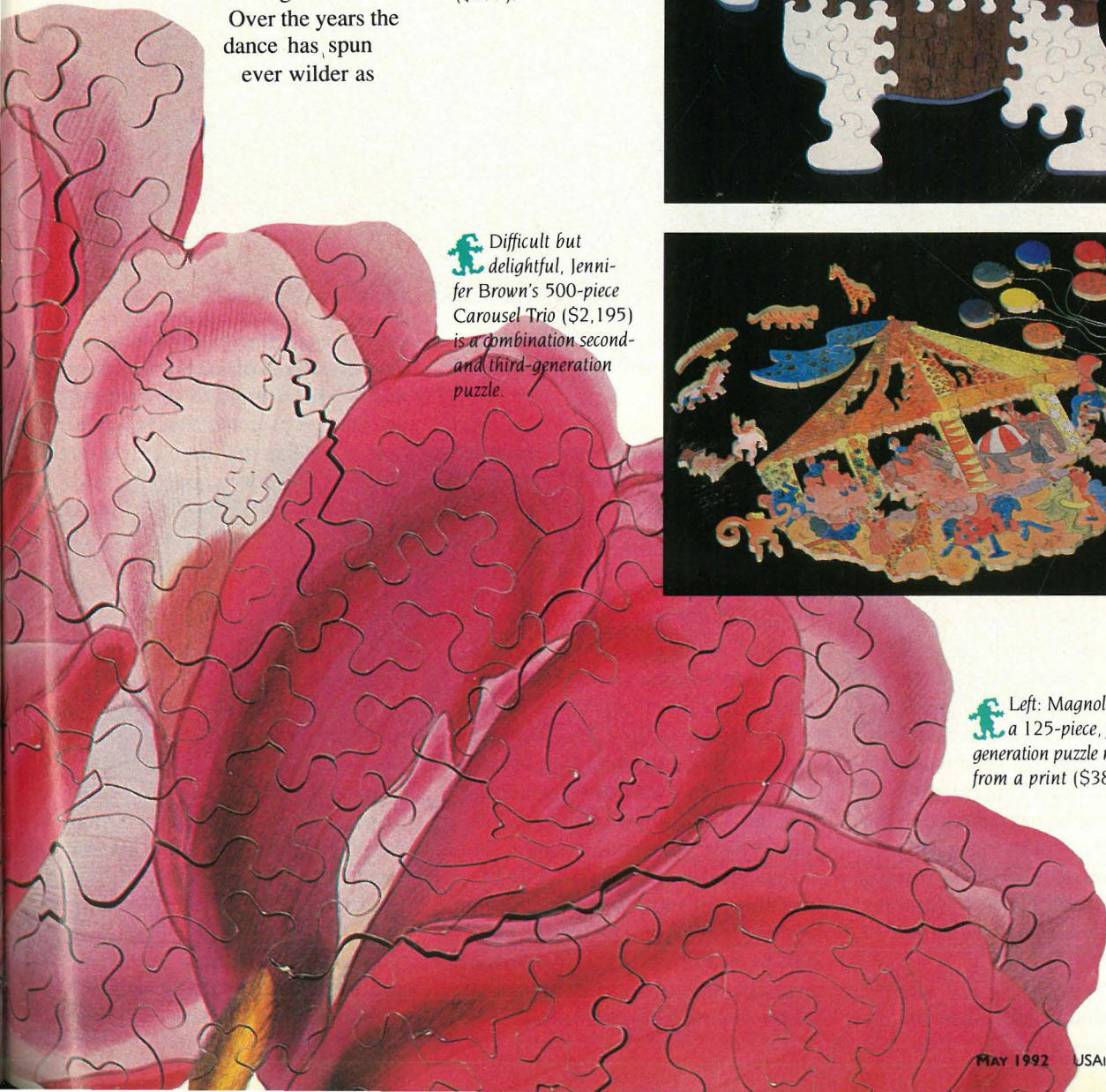
 Richardson and many Steve customers have been stumped by Carlye Klein's 40-piece, reversible Carlye's Cow (\$195).



 Difficult but delightful, Jennifer Brown's 500-piece Carousel Trio (\$2,195) is a combination second- and third-generation puzzle.



 Left: Magnolias is a 125-piece, first-generation puzzle made from a print (\$380).






Steve's most dedicated puzzle solvers divine his latest challenges and hungrily ask for more, thereby ratcheting the shop's creativity up another notch or two. Four years ago, when *The New York Times Magazine* previewed Steve's Carousel Trio puzzle on its back page "Works in Progress" column, the trickery rose to what Richardson calls a third-generation challenge.

A first-generation puzzle, he explains, involves finding an existing print, gluing it down, cutting it up, and doing lots of interesting things in the cutting process. A second-generation puzzle is designed and hand painted by an artist, thus evoking certain themes that can be incorporated in the cutting process—for instance, silhouette ghosts that act out the story in the Dollhouse Village, and such features as irregular borders that add to the difficulty.

In third-generation puzzles, also necessarily hand painted, there are no

 The animals march on two by two as you assemble the tricky, third-generation Noah's Ark puzzle (\$1,795).

holds barred. Thanks to what Richardson calls "magic cuts," specially made Steve puzzles can fit together in more than one way. "This is where they are led to slaughter," says Richardson, his voice edged with obvious delight. "People know when they buy a third- or fourth-generation puzzle from us it's loaded with Steve's dirty tricks."

Fourth generation? These, Richardson explains, introduce the added twist of having to flip some pieces mahogany side up. A Christmas offering called Take a Bow is a classic example. The puzzle comes together as a colorful wreath, complete with red bow at the bottom, but, far less obviously, can also be assembled to form a Christmas tree. The bow, it turns out, splits in half to become two cardinals—

ornaments on the tree. But the *coup de grâce* is a small clump of pieces that doesn't seem to fit anywhere—until turned over and attached at the base of the tree to form a brown trunk.

Richardson once received a telegram from a baffled customer that began and ended with a single word: "ARRRRRRRRRRGH!"

His is the rare company where frustrated customers are good for business. Frustrated they are guaranteed to be, for recent doodling in his design notebook and experimentation in the wood shop have made even these tricks seem tame.

Not till Richardson opens his mouth does he look the part of his wooden stand-in—the Steve clown. His grin is large and would look terrific in grease-paint. His brown hair overruns the tops of his ears. He wears large-framed glasses; favors shirts in plaids or stripes with button-down collars, and

Steve Richardson

chino pants; and for as many months of the years as is possible in Norwich, Vermont, tucks his feet sockless into sandals.

It's easy to picture Richardson studying for his B.A. in mathematics at Colby College and his M.B.A. in computer science at the University of Michigan. It's not so easy to imagine him in his 30s, living in northern New Jersey, fighting the traffic and the pressures of designing computer systems for *Fortune* 500 companies. "One day," he recalls, "I simply burned out on the Garden State parkway."

Richardson opted for a change of venue; he moved his family to Vermont, took a job with a computer company, and started a small business—then called Strategy House Inc.—in an old brick schoolhouse in the heart of Norwich. His specialty was custom-designed games and cardboard puzzles. A ring of the telephone, however, redirected the business into wood and changed his life forever.

Richardson had placed an ad in the Boston Yellow Pages, and an insurance executive called to ask if Richardson could make a wooden puzzle for his wife's birthday. The man and his wife had been loyal customers of the venerable but then-failing Par Company Ltd. Par had been hand cutting high-quality wooden puzzles since the Depression and shipping them to puzzle fanciers like Bing Crosby, Gary Cooper, Marilyn Monroe, the Duke of Windsor, and people named Vanderbilt, Du Pont, Astor, and Ford, who were paying up to \$2,000 per puzzle and trying to assemble them in "Par time," a challenge specified on the side of each pictureless black box. Imagine hundreds, maybe thousands, of well-heeled Par addicts mournfully drumming empty tabletops. Steve Richardson did.

He spent the summer of '74 eating sawdust in his garage while he taught himself the basics of puzzle cutting. After numerous false starts he learned which blade to snap into his scroll saw, which glue best held down a print, which wood cut cleanest, which fin-

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ishes to apply. At first, Richardson admits, he merely aped many of Par's flourishes: no picture on the box top; cute little silhouette figures cut through-out the puzzle; a Stave clown instead of the Par sea horse; maddening irregular borders; and nasty tricks, such as false corners. As Par had cultivated special requests, typically puzzles made from enlargements of family photos, so did Stave. Richardson even cribbed his prices from Par.

But all that is ancient history. For as soon as Richardson drifted into hand-painted designs and started concocting his second- and third-generation puzzles, it was as if a gust of wind suddenly filled his creative sails. He found himself racing from a well-tacked bay into the open seas.

Until four years ago Richardson and his wife, Martha, who serves as controller for the company, operated the business from cramped quarters in a barn adjacent to their frame house on Main Street in Norwich. The town fathers, however, took exception to a commercial enterprise, no matter how internationally celebrated, in a residential neighborhood. Richardson moaned and moved a few miles out of town into a new, much larger building.

The town, it turned out, did him a big favor, for in tripling his square footage to 3,000 feet, Richardson acquired the ability to grow his business.

Counting Richardson and his wife, Stave now employs 16 people, all of whom are required to cut puzzles. The more elaborate designs can take as long as a week to make. "When people buy our puzzles, it's like a mini-vacation to them," says Richardson.

Stave sells about 1,000 puzzles a year—a disproportionate amount during the four-month Christmas rush and about half in the key \$95 to \$195 range, entry level for many customers Richardson then creatively lassos into the Stave family. One technique involves including puzzles within puzzles—for instance, rebuses in the silhouette shapes—and awarding prize points worth upward of 10

percent of the puzzle's price that can be redeemed toward future purchases. But the biggest puzzle Richardson has faced, easily the equivalent of his own offerings, is how to make and sell quality wooden puzzles at less than knee-buckling prices.

Three years ago, financially strained by his new building, Richardson desperately needed a creative breakthrough. "I had to drive down the price and increase the difficulty. . . . A 40-piece puzzle without any tricky or deceptive elements—you could do it in 15 minutes," he says, acknowledging that few customers would consider their \$195 well spent.

Until then most of his most devious designs had "acreage problems." They required a considerable number of pieces, and that forced up prices. Nor was his third-generation concept flawless. Usually his configuration left him with a handful of strays he then had to incorporate somehow back into the design. Then there were his customers—some wily enough to circumvent his deceptions by solving the puzzles wrong side up by the patterns in the woodgrain.

"The customers are very bright. You show them one trick; they don't want to see it again. They want to see new twists and turns," says Richardson, explaining that he sought a technique that would involve fewer pieces and that he could somehow disguise and use again and again.

Richardson designs new puzzles in hard-bound, grid-paper notebooks, and designs best sometime after day five of a vacation. In fall 1989, while in the Florida Keys with his wife and two sons, he pulled out his notebook and commenced drawing and cutting paper mock-ups.

"I was working with a kind of free-form loop," Richardson recalls. "I've learned I've got to create the geometry first, then superimpose the theme on top of it. I ran into the same problem—all these stray pieces—but then it was as if my subconscious took over." Rearranging the paper pieces without any real sense of what he was

(Continued on page 110)

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Steve Richardson

(Continued from page 71)

doing, he found that the strays magically blended into another spot on the loop. Richardson looked twice to see if this had really happened, then yelled to his wife and children.

"It was a quantum leap, and it opened up all kinds of possibilities," he says. Within hours he unleashed a 44-piece, jagged-edged sea monster, later named Champ and priced at \$195. The catalogue reads, "There are two different solutions and hundreds of contortions to this monster of the deep. Can you make Champ bite his tail? These 44 perplexing pieces will have you breathing fire."

The day after his big breakthrough, Richardson came up with Can of Worms, which added yet another twist of Stave's puzzling thumbscrews. The object of this small but vexing puzzle is to assemble some colorful worms and a can labeled STEVE'S REVENGE—and then fit the worms into the open-lidded can. "Guaranteed to make you crawl," predicts the Stave brochure. Little wonder—each worm, confesses Richardson, is a miniature Champ. Judging from the picture, there appear to be two worms too many.

"Same to you, fella!" wrote one mock-angry customer on the side of a tin can sent to Richardson. Inside, he found an assortment of colorful gummy worms. One couple's assessment of a recent Stave delivery came written in code and signed "Cryptically Yours." "Here I am settled in on one of the islands sending out an SOS," wrote one longtime customer from Hawaii, enclosing snapshots of her progress with a puzzle called Treasure Island.

With Stave providing the spark, the play arcs back and forth, sometimes with Stave in the role of co-conspirator. In cahoots with a first-time customer from New Jersey, Richardson and Carol Scott, his vice president of marketing, jiggled the words "Will You Marry Me?" into a marriage scene. Withholding the penultimate word, the man worked the puzzle with his girlfriend until one space remained. He then handed her the missing piece. She said yes.

Richardson clearly loves to imagine himself in people's homes, picturing them in the glow of firelight perhaps, his latest creation jumbled before them—his pieces against their peace of mind. Conversely, his customers can't help but see, and often curse, his grinning face, which they know from catalogue photographs, as they struggle with his latest unkind cuts.

In the last few years, under Richardson's tutelage and nurtured by the playful spirit at Stave, others have also chipped in with some highly creative designs. Carlye Klein, who signed on 11 years ago during the Christmas rush to do giftwrapping, stumped first Richardson and then plenty of Stave customers with her 35-piece cow puzzle—all white and absolutely unsolvable till you divine the secret.

Stave's latest rising-star designer is 37-year-old Andrea Farnham, who joined Stave three years ago after raising her three children. Before that she had worked as a lab technician. She hated it. At Stave she has blossomed. Take a Bow, the wreath-to-Christmas tree puzzle, was her design, as was a cute but deceptive jack-o'-lantern puzzle called Trick or Treat?

"When I conceive of a breakthrough, I can't wait to get in here and get my hands on some wood and try it out," Farnham says. Her masterpiece to date is Treasure Island, which currently sells for \$2,695. It has quickly become a Stave classic, a puzzle that goes on and on and on like a fun-house mirror.

The 600-piece Treasure Island puzzle rises to three layers—counting upright palm trees—and involves third-generation deception in both the bottom water layer and the scattering of islands that must be assembled just so atop the water. An octopus in the water layer reaches an arm up out of the briny deep toward a three-dimensional raft complete with a shipwrecked family. Of course, X marks the spot, but finding this X is a puzzle in itself—and the X does not locate the treasure, but rather the correct one of eight key-shaped pieces cut in the water

layer. When you send a photograph to Stave proving that you've gotten the puzzle together properly and found the right key, they will send you the treasure chest.

"This was the final excitement in the puzzle; this blew me away," says Christopher Hill, a 43-year-old obstetric anesthesiologist in Southern California, who admits to buying a Stave puzzle nearly every month. In fact, he's so convinced that Richardson's puzzles, especially the limited-edition designs, will soon be regarded as valuable collector's items, that he's stopped ordering personalized cuts—such as his initials—which might later detract from their value.

The treasure chest arrived as a Lincoln Log-like assemblage of puzzle pieces, tightly locked until opened with the correct key-shaped puzzle piece. Hill, with his 10-year-old son Brennan at his side, eagerly lifted the lid. "I couldn't believe it," he says. "Inside there was just a bunch of confetti."

He dumped out the confetti and his spirits sank. He'd been had by Stave before, but this seemed unfair. Then his son picked up the treasure chest and gave it a shake. "Dad, there's something in there." Of course! The treasure chest had a false bottom. Hill studied the chest. To slide out the false bottom, he ascertained, he had to take the treasure chest apart. The game was still on.

Beneath the false bottom Hill discovered tiny plastic pearls and a bunch of shiny, foreign coins. He beamed and realized two things. He wasn't done yet; he now had to put these pieces back together. He realized, too, that the real treasure chest was a blue and green box with a clown on top. □

John Grossmann is a free-lance writer based in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. He has written for Audubon, The New York Times, Smithsonian Magazine, and USA Today.



To receive the Stave Puzzles brochure, send \$2 to Stave Puzzles Inc., Box 329, Norwich, Vermont 05055.