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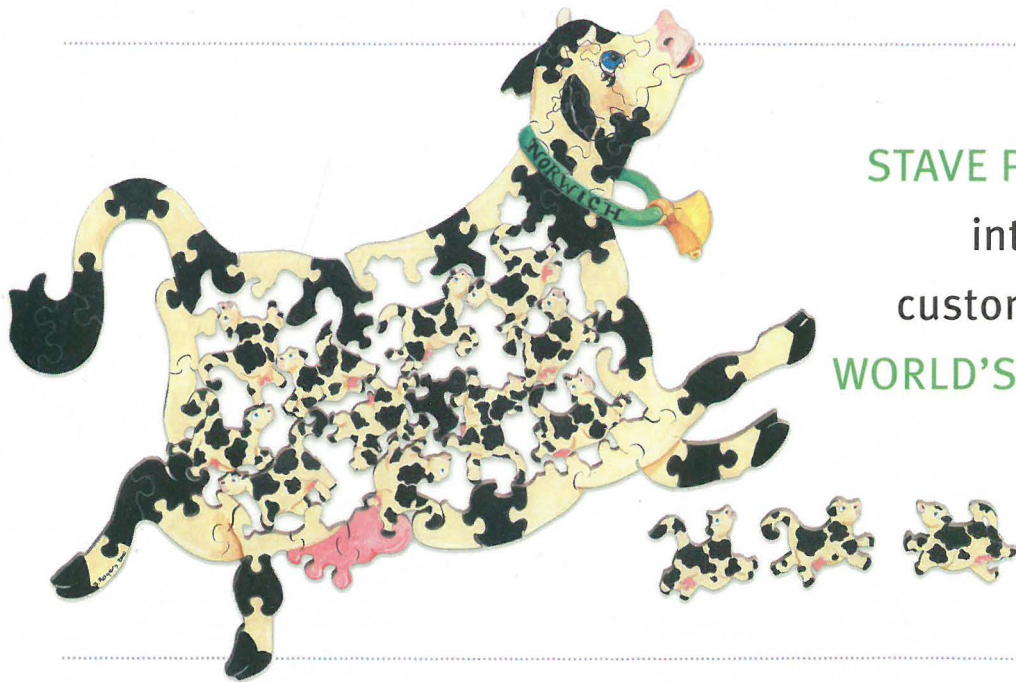
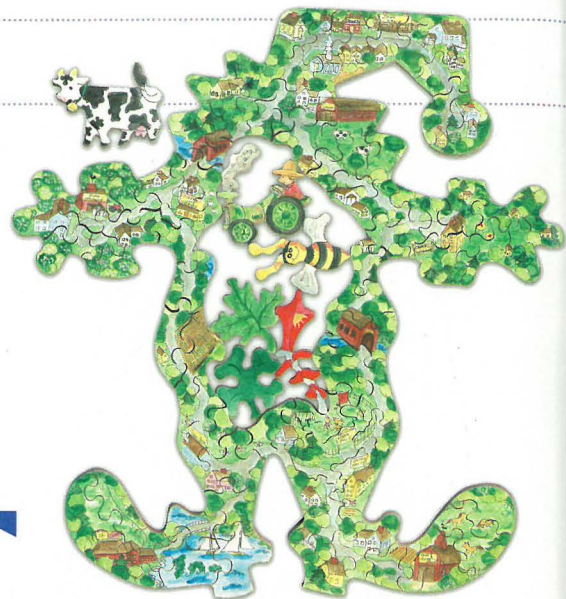
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UNIQUE
GIFT IDEAS



BY JOYCE MARCEL

THE WORLD'S MOST DIFFICULT PUZZLES



STAVE PUZZLES of Norwich is
intent on **BEGUILING** its
customers with some of the
WORLD'S MOST-CHALLENGING
JIGSAW PUZZLES.

The jigsaw puzzle was called "Clown Town" and came in a snazzy blue cube with a big-footed gold clown stamped on top. Inside, 70 colorful wooden puzzle pieces were wrapped in fine green tissue paper. Since it was from Stave Puzzles, which makes the most difficult jigsaw puzzles in the world, I knew there would be no picture to guide me along. But I was armed with a catalog picture, a magnifying lens, a lot of time, and all the good will in the world.

Yet, in under two hours, I was ready to take a splitting maul to the puzzle—the 70 colorful pieces, the board, the cube, the tissue paper, and all. Little did I know that my exasperation was exactly the right reaction.

Instead, I wondered why anyone would pay good money (and in 1993, Stave Puzzles of Norwich made the Guinness Book of World Records for producing the most expensive wooden jigsaw puzzle in the world at \$15,000) or spend good time trying to fit together tiny pieces of polished wood. So I visited Steve Richardson, the Steve of Stave, to find out.

Richardson, 63, is a gregarious man with the long, tapered fingers of a pianist. He calls himself the Chief Tormentor and he is enormously proud of the lovingly sado-masochistic relationships he has developed with customers around the world.

Stave's customers are a Who's Who of the intelligent, the rich, the creative, and the powerful. Queen Elizabeth owns Stave's \$3,500 "Midsummer's Night Dream." Barbara Bush is a fan ("You have given us such great pleasure") and so is her son, the president ("You are a master craftsman...we really enjoyed the chance to appreciate your work."). Bill and Melinda Gates take Stave puzzles along on vacations ("They're entertaining and stimulating"). Business guru Tom Peters chose Stave Puzzles as 1991's "Product of the Year" ("matchless craftsmanship...mind-warping").

These colorful and tricky puzzles are designed by artists and cut by hand by skilled Vermont craftspeople. Puzzles can be made out of almost any picture. In the past, Broadway shows have turned their posters into puzzles and given them as opening-night gifts. Corporations can use their logos. Families design personalized puzzles for reunions and celebrations. One man had Stave design a puzzle for his girlfriend; when she put it together, it said, "Will you marry me." She didn't commission an answering puzzle—she just said yes.

What makes Stave puzzles so difficult? For one thing, when doing a jigsaw, most people look first for the straight edges and try to create a border. Forget it with a Stave: the edges are curved. To make matters worse, the puzzles feature false corner pieces, and pieces that look like they should lock together but actually don't—they need a third piece to do the job.

Some puzzles have open spaces in the middle, where nothing fits. The deceit has become so complete that many puzzles have multiple solutions. Take "Champ," the Lake Champlain dragon. There are 32 different ways to put Champ's 44 pieces together, but he will only bite his own tail in one of them.



Steve and Martha Richardson of Stave Puzzles are better known to their customers as Mr. and Mrs. Chief Tormentor.

For the pleasure of matching wits with Richardson, you can expect to pay anywhere from \$95 to \$4,000 and up. And if you don't enjoy the experience, he will send your money back along with a bottle of aspirin. That's exactly the in-your-face attitude that Richardson's customers love.

"I'm always up for a challenge, and the more difficult it is, the more stimulating it is for me," said art dealer Riccardo Stoeckicht of Wilmington, Delaware. "It might be considered a little sadistic or masochistic, someone who's looking to relax and yet is sparring his mind against the creator of the trick puzzle. Steve's objective is to sucker as many people as possible into buying these expensive puzzles and not be able to solve them. He wants people to suffer."

Sometimes Richardson's cockiness backfires. In 1989, for example, he created an April Fools' puzzle with absolutely no solution. His customers were furious and he had to refund a lot of money.

Though Stave was born in 1974, its story begins in 1969, when Richardson left a computer-consulting job in New Jersey and the family moved to Norwich in Vermont's Connecticut River Valley. "My father-in-law was a professor of engineering at Dartmouth," Richardson said. "We would come up here to visit and think this was the most beautiful place in the world. Then we'd go back to New Jersey and say, 'This sucks.'"

At a new job with a computer company in Hanover, N.H., Richardson met Dave Tibbetts. (Steve plus Dave equals Stave.) The two soon lost their jobs and decided to start a business of their own. Because they both liked games, and Richardson had recently figured out how to turn a crossword into a game for two, they decided to try their hand at puzzles.

They marched into the offices of *The New York Times* and convinced the paper to give them exclusive rights to use its crossword puzzles in games, jigsaw puzzles, and calendars. Then they expanded their product line by adding jigsaw puzzles with Vermont-style images—fall foliage, maple recipes, a mountain—for gift shops.

"So here we were making stamped-out, cardboard jigsaw puzzles," Richardson said. "We advertised in the Boston and New York yellow pages that we were custom designers of games and puzzles. In 1974, this guy, desperate for a wooden puzzle, sees that we are custom designers. He calls up and tells us that Par Puzzles—the leading maker of custom wooden jigsaw puzzles since the 1930s—has gone out of business. He offers us three-hundred dollars to make a five-hundred-piece wooden puzzle."

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Stave's monthly mortgage at the time was \$247. So Richardson visited the man to see what a \$300 puzzle looked like.

"I gasped when I saw it," Richardson said. "The pieces had shapes. There was a dancer, a policeman doing a jig, a skater. It was very complicated. It was what our print puzzles look like today."

Richardson took the puzzle back to Norwich, where his father-in-law, impressed, contributed a 1930s Delta scroll saw to the new undertaking. It was a chancy business in more ways than one. Richardson spent the summer of 1974 figuring out how to cut wood into intricate jigsaw puzzles. He still cuts his puzzles on his father-in-law's old saw.

Tibbetts created a brochure and an ad, the men combined their names to form Stave (which also means "break into pieces"), and they invested in six weeks of *New Yorker* ads to see how many other jigsaw-starved Par customers were out there. When the orders started rolling in, Stave was in business.

"The very first person who called became our best customer ever," Richardson said. "He averaged fifty thousand dollars in sales a year with us for twenty years. That comes out to a million dollars. We just happened to come along at the right time. The stars aligned."

Over the next few years, Richardson perfected his designs, found the perfect hair-thin saw blades, developed a skill for cutting silhouettes, found the right woods—Stave puzzle pieces are made of polished, mahogany-backed, five-ply, quarter-inch wood—and started crafting high-quality, extremely tricky wooden jigsaw puzzles.

In 1976, Richardson bought out Tibbetts for \$1 and a jigsaw, hired his first employee, and built a small workshop behind his garage. Tibbetts went on to become a well-respected children's puzzle designer, and Stave went on to build a little factory on Route 5 in Norwich with 25 employees—all of them women, except for Richardson, who says they make him feel like "one of the girls"—and has become a \$2 million business. Richardson's wife, Martha (Mrs. Chief Tormentor), is the company's CFO.

Although Stave's Web site is now offering electronic puzzles (try your hand at www.stave.com), the company goal of challenging customers will never change. For Richardson, losing his job in 1974 was the luckiest thing that ever happened to him. "We're like the court jesters in people's lives, Richardson said. "We bring joy and humor and distraction. I find it very fulfilling." ●

Isis Takes Flight

Isis, a Vermont apparel company, tailors to women who value function and performance in their choice of outdoor clothing.

PHOTO: IAN MACKENZIE



Story by Peggy Shinn

During Easter weekend in 1998, Poppy Gall and Carolyn Cooke were at Stowe to ski, to enjoy the last snow of the winter, to soak in the warmth of a sunny spring day—and to forget their career woes. A sales-and-marketing maven, Cooke had just spent two years trying to launch a Swiss women's outdoor clothing line called Wild Roses in the U.S. The group went bankrupt, and by Easter, the Colchester resident was looking for work. Gall had also experienced many sides of the outdoor industry. In 1980, she founded Mountain Ladies & Ewe, a knitwear company based in her hometown of Manchester, Vermont. A decade later, she sold it to Turtle Fur, the fleece-wear manufacturer in Morrisville. Gall then moved to Stowe and became a freelance designer in the outdoor industry. She also ran women's Nordic ski clinics.

That beautiful spring day, the two found themselves talking about everything—their hopes, dreams, regrets, even how their clothes fit. "We were lamenting that there just weren't any good outdoor products for women," remembers Gall. "Women aren't unisex. We were just ragging on the whole thing."