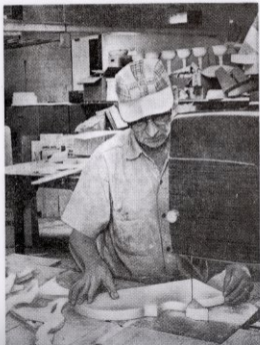


Sculptor of the **UNUSUAL**



when Lorenzo and his sons, Rudi and Freddy, worked out a life preserver, many of which were sold, and tried their hands at other commercial products.

But when Rudi returned from the Korean War and re-entered the floral business, the experiments took a new turn.

"Instead of simply using the foam to hold up flowers and greens," Rudi explains, "we began to wonder why it couldn't be used as a material in itself."

The opportunity to find out came via a request from another member of the DiGregorio family — Fileno— president of United Lens Co., also in Southbridge.

For years, the flower shop had created seasonal decorations for Fileno and other businesses and industries in the area. That year, 1959, however, Fileno wanted a Christmas display totally different from anything that had been seen in town before — and Rudi and Lorenzo produced it.

At least, Rudi designed it, and sold the idea. Then he and his father

wondered how they were going to make it.

Methods of cutting and working the plastic had to be improved. Adhesives for bonding the material had to be developed. Fillers and paints had to be found. And they were.

"You can give the bulk of the credit to Dad," Rudi says. All I did was dream up the idea; it was his mechanical know-how that made a lot of the productions possible."

THE RESULT was an animated, brightly colored display of Santa's dwarfs carrying the results of their work from the shop to a rocket. It created traffic jams on Worcester Street. New elements have been added to it each year since; next year, however, there will be an entirely new display.

"Don't ask me what it will be," Rudi said. "I'll have to wait for an idea."

The United Lens display broke the ice. Others followed. And last year, one of the nation's leading restaurant chains — Howard Johnson's — commissioned Rudi and Lorenzo to

decorate and create special displays for 15 of its outlets. That's how the clam digger, the steer head and other custom-built pieces came into the picture, including six massive Santa Clauses for the roofs of some of the restaurants.

"It's getting to be a little like the tail wagging the dog," Rudi says. "Flowers were, and are, our bread-and-butter business, but more and more people are coming to us for display work. They know that what they get will never be duplicated for anyone else. To me the work is less of a job than it is an outlet for my interest in art." Rudi, who had long planned to go to art school, soon changed his direction as the family business grew.

It is significant to note, however, that efficient operation is not forgotten in the interests of art."

WASTE PLASTIC, for example. All the bits and pieces are ground into chips on a special machine developed by Lorenzo. Every so often — at least once a week — a truckload of small vases is packed

with the chips and taken out to restaurants to hold individual table flower displays. Other bits are used for small designs; still more find their way into Rudi's own floral arrangements.

What about that tremendous Santa Claus head?

"That's classified information. For us, Christmas begins in the summertime, but it would be unfair for us to let people know who's ordering what and why."

What about the future?

Rudi smiles at this, and shrugs eloquently.

"Who knows? I suppose we could buy presses, molds and all kinds of production machinery and stamp out stock items the way so many houses are doing, but to Dad and to me this would cancel out the real fun of what we're doing.

"We like the adventure of it. We like giving people displays that won't be duplicated. We like the challenge of the material itself; it's like no other.

"And I guess that's the way things will continue."



By Edward E. Knowlton

BY HIS OWN definition, South-bridge florist Rudi — Rudolph A. — DeGregorio is a "frustrated artist."

But go with him from his florist shop to a neighboring building. You should be so frustrated!

The building is a wonderland — packed with designs brought into sparkling three-dimensional reality in a material old-time sculptors and painters never heard about. It's the home of a commercial display business that's rapidly moving into the big time.

You see, for example, a Santa Claus head of massive proportions intended to top a figure 18 feet tall, yet light enough to be easily carried by two people. You see the body of the same Santa in rough form, looking for all the world like a snow-fort built of blocks of glistening white material.

A family of dwarfs in full regalia and color is gathered in another corner.



LIGHT CHRISTMAS. Featherweight plastic foam has built unusual display business for Lorenzo

DiGregorio (left) and son Rudi of Southbridge. Looking on is Rudi's daughter, Catherine, 9.

The head of a clam digger, complete with sea-wearer and corn-cups, stares at you from the wall, as does a primitive but attention-getting longhorn steer.

On a workbench, a family of gracefully curved reindeer look inquiringly at the hands that produce them.

THESE, and countless other imaginative figures from sail boats to sea gulls have come from the minds and hands of this "frustrated artist" and his father, Lorenzo DiGregorio, founder of the flower shop.

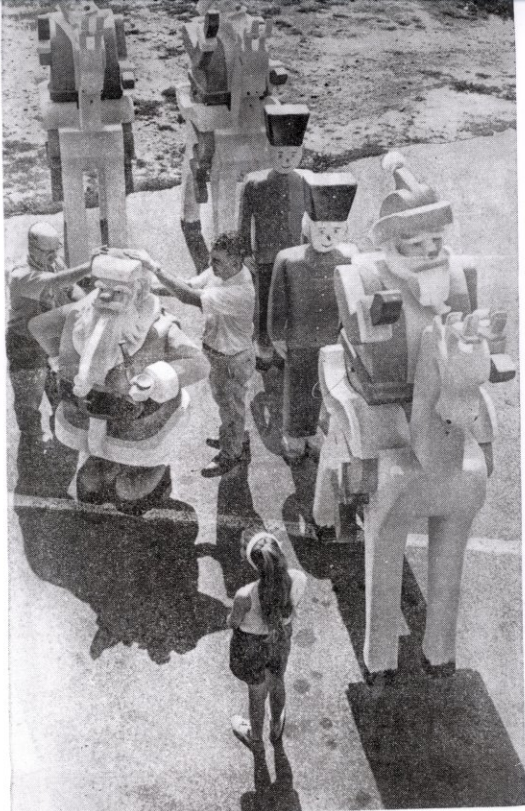
All of them have been designed and executed by special techniques in plastic foam.

The foam is so full of air spaces that a small piece of it will float a hefty human being in water, so porous that stems of decorative greenery can easily be thrust into it, yet so firm and nonabsorbent that when it is properly finished and coated with special paints it will last indefinitely in all kinds of weather.

The DiGregorios are by no means the only ones who use plastic foam today. Their approach to it, however, and their insistence on creating original designs and hand-crafting them for specific uses set them apart from the commercial, mass-produced display industry.

Also, some of their techniques and machinery are unique, the results of experimentation that began way back in 1943 and 1949 when plastics were first being broadly exploited.

IT BEGAN, actually, when Lorenzo became fascinated by the material as a base for creating better floral displays. It developed further



LIGHT CHRISTMAS. Featherweight plastic foam has built unusual display business for Lorenzo

DiGregorio (left) and son Rudi of Southbridge. Looking on is Rudi's daughter, Catherine, 9.