

Roped into tradition

by Catherine Wargo

MOUNT DESERT — Cheryl Chase had no intention of making Turks Head rope bracelets when she opened her Northeast Harbor shop, Impressions, in 1972. What she had in mind was to fill the little space with her stitchery, candles, batik work and other crafts and spend her time in the store making more.

But within two years the braided nautical bands that shrink to fit any wrist or ankle and have to be cut off to be removed, had become a fad throughout the country — at least any place within sight of the sea — and Ms. Chase figured since she knew how to do them, it would be foolish to buck the tide of popular demand.

Thirty years later she is still filling that demand. A demand that continues to be so strong, Ms. Chase no longer has time to fill the shop with her other crafts, and Impressions has now evolved into a gift and home decorating shop with a Maine theme.

"Oh, I still make balsam bags and ditty bags, but most of my time in here is spent on the bracelets," she says.

In fact, today Ms. Chase is making a rope bracelet for a father, who is accompanied by his son. The boy got the bracelet earlier in the week, and when his father saw it, he remembered getting one years ago, when he was a child. He returned to Impressions to get his own.

"I'm on the second generation, now," says Ms. Chase.

"Thank God it's not the third." Well, not yet at least.

The Turk's Head knot can be found in any knot book, according to Ms. Chase, and the bracelet is actually an old sea-faring tradition started by bored or idle sailors on whaling ships who passed the time tying knots and making handcrafts with materials at hand. Fittingly, Ms. Chase honed her skills in this field on sailors, as well. Not old salts, but the young ones who arrived every summer to sail in the Northeast Harbor Fleet bullseyes.

Ms. Chase was born on Mount Desert Island one summer when her father — a teacher in Massachusetts — was working at the Fleet. As a child she continued to spend her summers here, and after learning how to make the bracelets from a friend of her older brother she'd make them for some of her friends down at the Fleet.

As an adult she married, moved here year-round, and opened her own shop on Main Street in Northeast Harbor. One day, one of

her old Fleet friends came into her shop and asked if she still made the bracelets.

The rest is three decades of history, apparently without any end in sight.

"It just keeps getting more and more popular," says Ms. Chase. She adds she has never advertised this product, preferring to keep her little side business as a word-of-mouth thing.

Now she pulls out a clipboard of appointment sheets, a system she started using about three years ago. The days are full of appointments, some families coming in with four or five kids, and the parents themselves getting bracelets, as well. "The bracelets are non-sexist, non-ageist, anyone can get them. Kids are getting two or three these days, and on their ankles, too."

She says the bracelets were originally thick white cotton rope. These days she has switched to thinner rope, which makes a more delicate band, and has added colors which she dyes herself. She says bright blue is the most popular.



Some of her customers have been returning to Cheryl Chase to renew their rope bracelets for 30 years. PETER TRAVERS PHOTO

Ms. Chase says she has had requests to make her bracelets on stuffed animals, dolls, around casts, for parties — including entire wedding parties. Although she's been asked, she won't do dogs' collars. For one thing it would take too long, and for another, since the bracelets have no clasp, she's not sure it would be safe around a dog's, cat's or anyone else's neck.

In the past 30 years Ms. Chase's rope bracelets have become something of an MDI tradition.

They can last six or seven years," says Ms. Chase, "but most kids get one each year. They come back every year and I cut the old one off, and do a new one. I think the bracelets are symbol of summers on the island. In the winter kids can look at the bracelets as a reminder of their summers in Maine."

Ms. Chase says she now keeps a rope bracelet book at the counter of her shop. Kids can sign the book when they get a new bracelet, and when they come back the next year look up their old signatures — like growing children checking their old height measurements scratched onto a door frame.

At the front of her shop there's a Dan Falt bench, in the shape a big wooden cat, where kids can sit to wait their turn.

They talk to him sometimes, and sometimes they fall off," she says. "It can get a little out of control in the summers." Ms. Chase says she makes about 500 bracelets

a summer, mostly in July and August. She obviously enjoys the face-to-face relationship with the children and considers watching them grow as a perk of the accidental business.

Actually, Ms. Chase does not make her primary living from the bracelets which at \$10 a pop don't really cover the time, effort and materials she puts into them. But she wants to keep the price low enough to make them affordable to her best clients. It's the gift shop

that pays the rent. Still, she says she's happy to keep her hands busy weaving the loops of rope that bind her in a continuous coil to the past.

When asked about the future of her business, Ms. Chase laughs, and says, "Well, I guess I'll just keep doing it until I move away, or die."

Until either of those sad events occur, Ms. Chase accepts 15-minute bracelet appointments Monday through Saturday from 11 a.m. 1 p.m. and 2 to 4 p.m. Call 276-5528. ■