

BRADENTON HERALD

Bradenton.com

Posted on Tue, Oct. 02, 2007

Luring them in: Cortezian Bill Miller creates fish art for fun

By NICK WALTER

nwalter@bradenton.com

CORTEZ

Many mornings, Bill Miller will eat breakfast at Cortez Café, his art turning the sky-blue walls into a virtual aquarium.

Funny, because Miller, 72, considers himself a "normal" guy.

Here's what the Cortez resident of 39 years does - he takes galvanized sheet metal and, with tools that he makes himself, bends, cuts and shapes the metal into a lifelike, three-dimensional fish species. For the scales, he'll paint through a screen or net. Finally, he'll paint the fish with intriguingly accurate colors until the fish shines as though it just broke through the water.

Miller is retired. This is his hobby.

"I make what I want to make when I want to make it," Miller said. "I don't want another job. I want to enjoy life."

He's certainly had more dangerous jobs.

Miller was born in Meadville, Pa., then moved to Michigan, where he met his wife, Mary. In 1967, they moved to Kissimmee to escape the cold weather. A year later, the Millers moved to Cortez to be closer to the water.

Turned out, Miller did things to help residents stay cool, in more ways than one. Until 1985, Miller worked in the air conditioning business. And, between 1970 and 1990, he volunteered for the Cortez Fire Department.

Not a single man in the fire department was paid.

"We stuck together out here," Miller said.

Once, a car slammed into a gas tank and knocked the top off the tank. The tank caught on fire and car settled on the tank. Miller and other firefighting volunteers showed up at the scene and couldn't get the car off the tank. A nearby house burned down.

"There were many dangerous times," Miller said. "It eventually was too hard on me."

These days, he's not just known as the guy who used to volunteer for the fire department. Not even as the man who makes vividly realistic fish.

"They just know me as Bill Miller," Miller said.

Sure, he's just Bill Miller. But this gentleman can repair just about anything. He was brought up to believe that if something was broke, you took it apart and put it back together. If something is wrong with you're car, don't call a repairman. Buy a book.



"Sometimes, I have to threaten to call the repairman in order to get something repaired," Mary Miller said. "But after the first few times, when he finally thinks I'm serious, he'll go ahead and fix it."

Someday, if you want to see, or buy, some fine, fishy art, head to Cortez Café at 12108 Cortez Road, which is where Miller displays and sells his fish.

If you catch a fish you want replicated, take a picture to the cafe. If Miller's not there, you can still buy or request a replica.

"It's an excellent alternative to taxidermy," said "Mad Snooker" Capt. Dave Pomerleau, who purchased a model of the unofficial, 44 pound, 11-ounce state record snook he landed in 1995.

The average price for a fish is \$50. He makes fish of just about any species as well as various animals such as squirrels and lobsters made of wood.

Why so cheap?

"There's not much profit," Miller said. "It's a thing I enjoy and it pays for the material. People ask me, 'Why is it so low?' I say, 'Why don't you buy them all and go sell them, do whatever you want to do.' They don't seem to want to do that."

The profit he does make goes for the high school and college tuition of the Millers' adopted daughter, Danielle Miller, a freshman at Edison Academic Center.

"She's ours now," Mary Miller said. "That in itself keeps us young. A lot of people look at Bill and I and say, 'I wouldn't want to be in your shoes for anything in the world.' Well, you know what? I wouldn't want to be in theirs, either."

