THE SPECKLED LOON:

Creating Unique and Interchangeable Art

By Annie Bennett, Co-Editor

In 2014, North Dakota natives Susie Bommersbach and her husband, Todd, bought a small lake home in Minnesota as a family retreat. "It was pretty run down, so we renovated it along with the help of our three sons," says Bommersbach. "I knew I wanted to decorate it in a 'Northwoods Cabin' theme."

Bommersbach used scrap wood, leftover paint and craft supplies, and searched for tutorials on YouTube on how to redo the cabin. When the family finished the lake home, she posted pictures on social media and had requests for signs in the shape of different lakes from friends and family. "I added things, family names and GPS coordinates, on the signs," says Bommersbach. "These really became popular, and I created a whole line of lake-related signs when I started my business in 2015."

She notes she gave away a bunch as gifts, so she could perfect her technique. "I donated a sign to a silent auction. Someone paid $200 for it, and that inspired me to make my business official."

Creating a Business

Later, Bommersbach made a logo from a photo of a loon she took, which also helped in finding a name for the business, The Speckled Loon. She took classes on building websites and did local craft shows. "After a couple of years, I started only doing large, multi-day shows, as that is where I get my best results," she notes, adding she now does multiple craft shows per year, including many of the Pride of Dakota shows across North Dakota.

Both of Bommersbach's parents had many hobbies, including woodworking, photography, knitting, and scrapbooking. "I feel like I inherited a lot of creative energy from both of them," she says. "I've got new ideas popping into my head all of the time. So, my product line changes from year to year."

Bommersbach adds her customers are also a great source of inspiration. "I get some great ideas just by listening to the conversations they are having in my booth at craft shows."

Interchangeable designs make The Speckled Loon products unique.

She also credits her husband for his help and support in making the crafting business a success. "He frames all my custom pieces and helps me configure the equipment for my workshop," she says. "He helps me set up and tear down at every show."

The Products

Bommersbach still sells some custom lake signs on her website, but she also creates and sells interchangeable wraps for accent pillows, which are sewn by her sister, Janet Gratton.

The Speckled Loon's main focus is making interchangeable mini décor to sell at craft shows, which is its best-seller. The two-and-a-half inch square tiles come in dozens of designs, including different seasons, animals and sports teams. Customers choose from several frames and make unique and interchangeable pieces.

"It started with gnomes and trucks that hold little 'tokens' for seasons, holidays and sports," Bommersbach says. "Then we added interchangeable baskets that hold seasonal inserts. Last year, we added frames that hold mini signs."

Bommersbach notes the best seller is the "Oh Holy Night" tile inside of a frame in the shape of a country church.

Three years ago, The Speckled Loon was licensed to sell North Dakota State University and University of North Dakota products. Bommersbach notes these items, and other North Dakota-themed products, are customer favorites.

Memorial ornaments, which allow people to create tributes to lost loved ones, are one of the unique items sold by The Speckled Loon. "They touch people in a special way, and help them through a tough time," notes Bommersbach. "My favorite one is made from a special material that lets the tree lights shine through parts of the design, giving it an ethereal effect. It says, 'The sky looks different when you have someone you love up there.'"

The Speckled Loon has many repeat customers. "They come back for our interchangeable items, and we add new things each year," notes Bommersbach.

She says she gives customers a discount if they sign up for the email list and also emails coupons to use in the booths during shows. "My goal at shows is to have items you won't find with any other vendor. We want to deliver a unique, fun and affordable shopping experience for our customers," says Bommersbach.

The Process

Most of The Speckled Loon's products are made on two commercial-sized laser cutters in her basement. "I design everything on my computer using graphic design software. I try to design most things from scratch," says Bommersbach. "If I purchase a design, I always pick it apart and put my own spin on it."

When creating new items, she starts with a small batch to see how it sells at shows. "The best sellers then get mass produced," she says. "After 10 years in business, I can

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usually predict what my customers will buy."

When she makes several of one item, Bommersbach paints all of the wood first, then cuts it out on the laser. "After it is cut, I add details, such as shading and highlights to each piece and assemble everything."

The Speckled Loon attends seven shows each year – two in the spring and the rest during the fall/holiday season. With these shows and its website, more than 3,000 items are sold each year, which keeps Bommersbach plenty busy creating. "I start making items for the fall and holiday shows in April, after my spring shows are done," she says. "I try to have enough items for about three shows on hand at a time, as my fall/holiday shows are very close together."

DIY Classes

Bommersbach offers do-it-yourself workshops in Grand Forks each spring. "My classes offer a kit of interchangeable mini décor items," she says. "I provide all the supplies and instructions to complete the projects."

She notes the workshops are themed to match the current season or holiday. "I did a class in January that featured a highland cow with an interchangeable hat and mini tile for each season," she adds. "I usually do a spring-themed class and have a Christmas in July workshop where we do projects with summer and Christmas themes."

Bommersbach says as a North Dakota business and Pride of Dakota member, it is important to her to support other businesses in the state. "I buy as many of my supplies from North Dakota businesses that I can. I purchase my paint, lumber and components for our pillows from several North Dakota-based vendors," says Bommersbach.

"Being a lifelong resident of North Dakota, I'm extremely proud to have built a home-based business and remain in a community that I love," she continues. "North Dakota has been a wonderful place to raise our family."

Susie Bommersbach, pictured at a Pride of Dakota show, makes all her products in her home.

The Speckled Loon products are available at *thespeckledloon.com* and various craft shows throughout the state.