

Tiny Construction Firm

Miniature Houses Being Built Here

By CINDY FALCONE

The start of a mass-produced miniature house named the "Visalian" began with a cabinet maker's fascination with an old ranch house, off Highway 198 east-bound just past the Farmersville exit.

Howard Hill and family own the One-of-a-Kind Wood Shop on East Main St., Visalia. The Wood Shop began as a gift store with a small line of miniatures in one corner of the showroom.

The miniatures became so popular that now the Wood Shop has become exclusively a miniature shop.

In addition Hill's business has now expanded to that of a manufacturer of miniature kits, filling orders for "Visalian" kits internationally.

Howard Hill had driven past the picturesque mansion hundreds of times, never failing to detect the subtle beauty and grace of the house peeking out from beneath the hovering ancient shade trees, which seem to be shielding the house from the prying eyes of highway travelers.

Lodged in Howard's subconscious was the design, shape and style of architecture of the charming house.

So when designing his first miniature model house it was only natural that the tiny model would come to emulate the house he had so long admired.

The home is that of the Hillards, a family which spans the entire history of Tulare County and has been documented by local historical writer Annie R. Mitchell.

Abraham Hillard was born in Northampton County, Pennsylvania in 1816. The next record of him places him, his wife and family on the long overland journey to California in 1852.

After first settling in Stockton the family emigrated to Woodville. In 1854 they left Woodville and took up land in Visalia.

Like most pioneers of that time Mr. Hillard was a cattleman. The family went through the destructive floods of 1864 and 1868 and also the terrible dry years of the seventies when cattle died from thirst and starvation.

The same richness of history which rests about the Hillard ranch can now be shared by miniature hobbyists everywhere.

"I enjoy building the Visalian because it gives

me an opportunity to capture some of the history of Visalia," said Lincoln Hall, an avid miniature house hobbyist.

The first "Visalian" miniature house was built through a joint-effort between Howard and Gloria Hill and a class of 16 miniature enthusiasts.

With the guidance of Howard's imagination and woodworking know-how bit-by-bit they pieced together the first model house now known as the "Visalian."

Of the 16 class members four persevered through the class to go on and finish a "Visalian" model of their own.

Because of the difficulty and investment of time involved in building an original miniature house without a kit, Howard has worked up a "Visalian" kit, containing all the pre-cut pieces needed to assemble the framework of the house.

The trimmings to the "Visalian" such as shingles, molding, brickwork, electrical wiring and interior decorations are all purchased extra. It is conceivable that by the time a hobbyist completes his own version of the "Visalian" he could spend \$600.

Finished miniature houses with lots of authentic detail are priceless to collectors, some selling completed for as high as \$4500. A finished miniature house can be compared to a painting -- it is a piece of art.

Aside from the cost of materials involved, the hobbyist's labor is immeasurable. For instance Phyllis Stafford, a local miniature hobbyist comments that her husband spent a lot of time "putting all those little shingles on one by one."

Another hobbyist, Gerry Hall, commented that the miniature hobby taught her and her husband a lot about the mechanics involved in building life-size houses.

"Now we understand more fully why it took so long for the contractor to complete our house. Putting the frame up is easy but the finishing up of the molding and electrical wiring is what takes a lot of time and planning."

Gloria Hill admits the miniature hobby can be expensive, especially for such luxurious items as her custom-designed chandelier kits costing \$42 unassembled and \$82 assembled. The kit contains 101 real crystals, brass fittings and

electrical wiring. A comparable life-size chandelier would cost \$500.

Common to all miniature hobbyists is the enjoyment of vicarious living in one's dream house. They work on their tiny houses and imagine themselves actually owning and living in a house just like it.

Phyllis Stafford gets enjoyment from redecorating her miniature house. "Perhaps I'm a frustrated decorator. I re-papered one little room three times and it cost me \$1 each time. I couldn't do that in my own house."

Gerry Hall also uses her miniature house in a vicarious way. "I'm artistic and I get a chance to do things in the miniature house that I'd be afraid to do in our own house."

Lincoln Hall, assistant superintendent at College of the Sequoias, finds various rewards in his miniature hobby. "It's total commitment, when I'm working on it it absorbs all my thoughts."

"People with jobs like mine, that don't see a final product, enjoy this hobby because you start with nothing and end with something quite attractive. Also it's something my wife and I can work on together."