

Hobbyists have opportunity to show wares

Home-hobbyists who plan to craft dolls and decorations to sell at Christmas markets and church bazaars should call on Ontario's Consumer Ministry before getting started.

Whether shaped like a pooch, pillow or potholder, if items are stuffed or padded, the crafts person must be registered with the ministry's Upholstered and Stuffed Articles Branch.

The branch works to protect the public from unclean or used fillings in articles for sale in Ontario.

"The biggest problem in registering home hobbyists is not that they're unwilling to fill out the form and send away their minimal annual fee," says director Murray Fitzpatrick.

"It's simply that some people still think registration applies only to the big manufacturers."

In fact, a separate registration form and fee schedule were designed specifically for home hobbyists and craft operators in the mid-1970's.

At that time, Fitzpatrick says, boutique-type shops were just becoming fashionable, and country fairs and markets were starting to enjoy a popularity revival. This meant a big jump in the demand for the small decorative items people can make at home.

Flea markets are now springing up or expanding all over Ontario, and the Consumer Ministry hopes shoppers will look for the label before stocking up on those cute Christmas hearth-warmers.

"More than 700 home hobbyists are currently registered with our branch, and the number continues to grow," says Fitzpatrick.

"On their labels, which should be clearly visible when you purchase the item, the three main ingredients of the stuffing and the producer's registration number should appear."

Helping ensure that articles really do contain new, clean, material only is the job of branch inspectors, authorized to visit producers' premises at any time.

In addition to inspecting during production, staff take many samples directly from store shelves. If something is amiss, the item will go to the branch laboratory for examination.

At Canada's only government facility for testing stuffed articles in Etobicoke, Ont., the investigation continues. "If our testing establishes there is a cleanliness problem, it's our responsibility to ensure that the articles are removed from sale," explains Fitzpatrick.

The branch works closely with retailers, who don't want to sell contaminated goods any more than the public wants to buy them.

Why the emphasis on new materials for stuffing, especially in light of the current interest in recycling?

"It's a public-health and safety consideration," Fitzpatrick says. "Although used stuffing may appear to be clean, it can too easily hide germs and insects."

"Materials that have been chemically broken down and fully reconstructed are acceptable, of course. An example would be plastic that is broken down, then re-formed into the pellets used to stuff bean-bag style chairs."

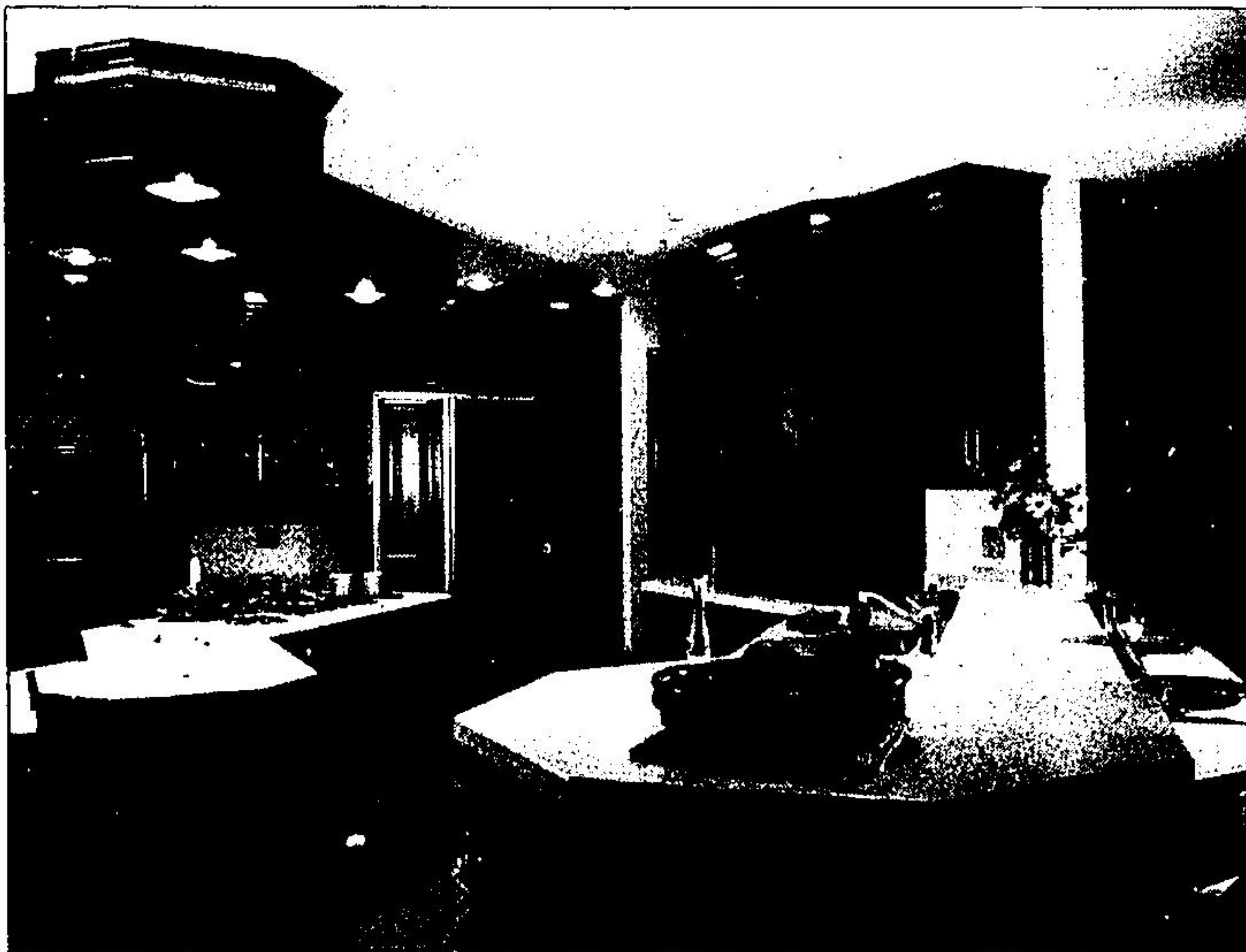
When the first provincial legislation on stuffing was introduced, in the late 1930s, a common nickname for Toronto was "bedbug city." Poor public health standards had resulted from the use of unsanitary stuffings in mattresses and chairs across Ontario.

Consumers can help protect themselves against the recurrence of such an infestation by always looking for the registration tag when they buy.

Taking the time and small fee required for registration - annual

charges range from \$15 to \$75 depending on the number of articles produced - will help home hobbyists ensure they'll get return business from retailers and shoppers alike.

To find out how to register, write the Upholstered and Stuffed Articles Branch, Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations, 4th Floor, West Tower, Shipp Centre, 3300 Bloor St. W., Etobicoke, Ont., M8X 2X4. To reserve a copy of a soon-to-be-released brochure on branch services call the Consumer Information Centre toll free at 1-800-268-1142, or (416)326-8555 in the Toronto area. Ontario residents with an (807) area code only may call the (416) line collect. The TDD line for the hearing impaired is (416)326-8566.



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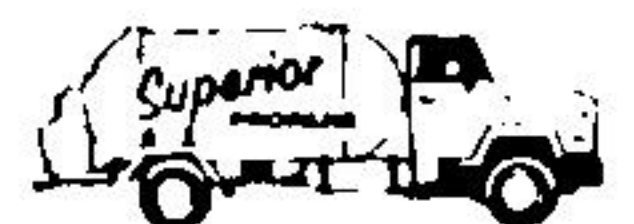
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