

SUN-TIMES/Nancy Stuenkel

At the Bradford Exchange in north suburban Niles, a fountain is as much at home as a filing cabinet.

## Founder's Big Ideas Bloom at Niles Firm

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Special Writer

Big ideas, big deals, big ideals. J. Roderick MacArthur, super-salesman, did things big time.

His pet project was the "genius grants" program funded by his family's MacArthur Foundation. He made millions with his own Bradford Exchange, a worldwide buying and selling forum for collectors' artwork plates at 9333 Milwaukee Ave. in north suburban Niles.

Eight years after his death, plate-collecting has millions of fans, and the firm is bigger than ever. It remains in the MacArthur family and is growing like a garden.



### City glances

The Bradford Exchange, in fact, is a garden. Seven hundred people work there in a one-of-a-kind showcase studded with tropical plantings and bamboo, palm and orange trees.

Waterfalls, a rambling brook, glass-bottom bridges, skylights, cozy parks, dining patios: They're all over the place. The Exchange has grown so much that it now

spreads over 150,000 square feet. The public can see and enjoy some of it free: a small museum with 300 historic plates, a garden stroll.

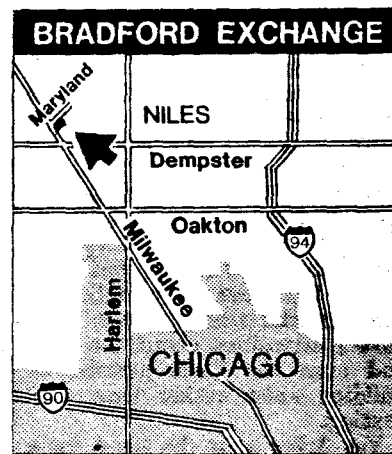
Viewed from outside, the Exchange is a cluster of linked buildings that barely hint at what's inside. Who would guess there are enough gardens in there to fill half a dozen tennis courts, all in the pursuit of employee happiness? Think of a string of Caribbean patios and you get the idea.

"When I first came in, I had no idea what it was like, although I lived nearby," said Robert E. Weiler, office services manager. "It's gorgeous."

About a sixth of the indoor space is under billowing fiberglass tents. Why tents under a roof? Well, why not?

"They were MacArthur's idea," said architect Thomas Hickey, designer of all these goodtime spectacles. MacArthur also had the means: the tenting cost more than \$1 million.

Hickey keeps adding happy spaces. The latest wing has vine-clad sun screens outside the windows and prize gardens inside



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designed by Daniel Weinbach and Wendy Schulenberg.

Sprinkled amid all this are open cubicles where people put in a day's work.

MacArthur launched the company in 1973 by remaking an old store, spending a small fortune to do so. Weiler remembers the parties as the firm grew, MacArthur's feisty spirit—and the gallant way he met his death from cancer.

The Bradford Exchange is essentially a mail-order business, dealing in collectors' dolls and miniature houses, as well as china. Brokers in a glassed-in area take phone calls from thousands of people checking current prices or buying and selling. It's like a stock market—but with gardens.