

Historic Childs: The Murray Dollhouse, Part 2

Posted 31 October 2021 at 9:14 am

By Doug Farley, Cobblestone Museum Director – Vol. 2 No. 41



GAINES – In last week’s article, we looked at the origin of the Murray family dollhouse, a nearly 90-year-old children’s treasure in the Hamlet of Childs.

The dollhouse was created by Mary Miller Murray in 1934, and much enjoyed by the Murray children: George, Joyce and Janice. Also, much enjoyed by countless other children who played out their fantasies and dreams while rearranging miniature furniture or posing the miniature people going about a typical days activities in the “life” of a miniature family.

Janice Mann Beech (shown at right) inherited the dollhouse from her mother and father, Mary & Curtis Murray. Later, Janice's children also enjoyed playing with the dollhouse.

On October 12, 2021, Janice donated the dollhouse to the Cobblestone Museum for the enjoyment of the current generation of children as well as future generations.

Moving day was accomplished without a lot of fanfare. Janice had worked ahead of time to carefully wrap individual miniature furnishings in tissue paper and lovingly stacked them in handle sacks to make the move from Heritage Estates, where she lives, to the Museum's Vagg House on the corner of Routes 98 and 104.

Former Museum director Bill Lattin and current director Doug Farley arrived at 1 p.m. to load the dollhouse into Bill's hatchback to make the short trek. Janice came along on her own with all the furnishings to supervise the placement of the dollhouse in its new home and to unpack and reinstall the tables, couches, chairs and much more!



Every miniature piece of furniture in the dollhouse was crafted to recreate the workings of an actual full sized piece of furniture. Tiny cabinet doors swing open and closed, and

dresser drawers pull open to reveal miniature pieces of clothing, and more. Straight pins were cut-off to serve as hinge pins.

Kitchen drawers are complete with miniature wooden silverware that Mary Murray carved by hand. Janice recalled, "We used to play with the silverware outdoors. That was a very bad idea! I think all that's left are a few knives." A dining room setting is complete with hanging Tiffany style lamp, parrot on a stand, and dinner on the table.



Mirrors used in the dollhouse were originally given by various companies to advertise their products. Twentieth century ladies carried the mirrors in their purses and used them to check their makeup when out-and-about. One mirror reads, "Red Cross Stoves, Ranges and Furnaces" on the back side. It is shown above in its room setting in the dollhouse.



The dollhouse candles are real candles, but of course, much smaller than life-sized. A small piece of sewing thread was dipped in candle wax to give the appearance of small candlesticks that sit inside small brass candle stands. Above, one of the “children” plays with a miniature-miniature table, chairs and stove. And irons rest against the small fireplace and “family” portraits adorn the walls.

In order to maintain domestic tranquility when two kids were playing “house” at the same time, all things had to be equal. Janice explained, “There needed to be at least two of each item so both children could have their own.”



Janice remembers that her mother had a hard time crafting people that would be the right size to fit in the dollhouse. She said, "I think 'Grandma' looks terrified!" Her face has circles with dots in the middle that were supposed to simulate spectacles. Janice's daughter, Mary Beth Chassagnol, made a mini-knitting basket (shown) for "Grandmother" who resides in the dollhouse. She made it from a walnut shell and little pieces of yarn and straight pins for knitting needles.

Janice explained that Mary Beth was an artistic child. Later, in adult life, Mary Beth was a scenery painter, working in New York City. On one occasion, Mary Beth rewarded herself for a successful year at work and planned a trip to Paris. While in The City of Light, she ventured out to eat at about 2 a.m. Andre, her future husband, came out of the restaurant and opened her cab door. He later said he knew it was love-at-first-sight. Mary Beth needed a little more convincing. The couple married in 1984 and resided in France. Mary Beth passed away in 2020.



The "maids" room has its own wood stove, Strong Museum shopping bag, and a can of Crisco, bottle of milk and box of Cheerios.



“Grandpa” has a woolen hat. The lampshades have pleated coverings held in shape with a hidden wire, just like their full-sized counterparts. A bust of King Louis of France and the Holy Bible sit on the coffee table.



The dollhouse kids had their own toys like a mini-rocking horse. Janice said her family loved playing croquet for many years. So it was only natural, at some point, to add a croquet set to the dollhouse toys. The miniature croquet set was purchased in more recent times at the Strong Museum of Play in Rochester.



After a busy day of setting up shop, the miniature “family” takes a well-deserved rest. Cobblestone Society members are welcome to attend a “Housewarming” for the dollhouse on Saturday, November 6th at the Annual Meeting. All others are encouraged to call the museum at (585) 589-9013 to request a Vagg House Tour.