

Doll House makes town a tourist attraction



Never Too Old

Kenston Forest students visited the Doll House Museum recently and were fascinated by the stories of Mrs. Margaret Armbruster, shown here.

Who would have thought that Blackstone would get its mark on the tourist's map because of a doll museum. Certainly not Margaret Mills Armbruster, who started her doll collection 50 years ago with a china-head doll name Louise.

"I never thought it would turn into this, just by wanting a china-head doll," she said Thursday while waiting for the first of two bus loads of visitors, one from Great Falls and the other from Chesapeake.

It had not taken long for the news to spread, just four years since she moved her museum from New Port Richey, Florida, in 1983. Invisible fingers seem to reach out and touch the hearts of Virginia doll lovers. A mysterious energy animates otherwise circumspect adults as they peek and poke through the eight rooms of the refurbished Victorian home on Church Street next to Armbruster's Restaurant. Just listening to their exclamations of discovery evokes sleeping memories of our own childhood.

A doll museum speaks of many things: like a Grecian urn each turn reveals something new about the culture from which the dolls came, the people who once owned the dolls, and, to be sure, about the doll collector.

"There're the Kennedys, Teddy Roosevelt, Lincoln.." It was "touch history" and the Lilliputian representatives of great personalities were all Mrs. Armbruster's personal

friends. A tour through the museum would be like a record without its needle if she weren't present to play the stories connected with each doll and pieces of Americana that filled in the spaces between them.

"The Amish didn't put faces on their dolls because they didn't want to create any graven images." Imagine a doll without a face. A few words said more than a whole book.

Doll collectors are a determined and tenacious people, if Mrs. Armbruster can stand as an example. Passing a pair of Caribbean Indian dolls, she pointed to one object whose doubtful meaning was in need of a story.

"See that water jug. I had tried three times to get that out and they would take it from me in customs each time... but I finally got it!" she said proudly as if a great tug-of-war had been won.

And this "doll mother" was as determined to keep her family under her roof as she was in gathering them. "I had one woman in Florida who begged and begged me for this doll, but I wouldn't sell it... No, I don't sell anything!" And what mother would sell her children?

For this reason most dolls came willingly to her doorstep, some literally a "baby in a basket." No matter how they arrived, however, a common need seemed to unite their owners: Please don't sell my doll!

Like Amy—a doll whose original hair was replaced with the soft never-to-grey hair of its owner—dolls are much more than bits of ceramic, plastic, and a cloth pinned together. A doll is at once a little girl's first love and the adult's quick-fading memory of childhood's magic... Please don't sell my doll!

Walking through the rooms of eyes that never blink a collective presence seem to speak to Mrs. Armbruster: "They look like they want to talk to you... Children say their eyes are looking right at them." Children were her favorite visitors.

The doll museum is like a living organism that draws its nutrients from the soil and the gardener who tends it. One room is reserved for Blackstone's memories, where among other things antique dresses and patch-work quilts, pieces of a town's living fabric, hang from the wall.

Dolls seem to come from another world, a smaller, animated world where every object contains a surprise. "Oh yes!" Mrs. Armbruster concurred, pointing to a crucifix that suddenly materialized in the spine of a catfish. She loved opening the door to delight. "There's a lot of things for people to discover if they'd only take the time."

The museum's collection of dolls, miniature houses and furniture, and other period items have become a non-profit corporation so that the bond Mrs. Armbruster has made with those who gave their dolls so trustingly will never be broken. Few things are sadder than an abandoned doll.

One doll story stands out and speaks for the others. "This is Frozen Charlotte," Mrs. Armbruster said, pointing to ceramic doll no bigger than a salt shaker.

She was a little girl in Vermont who was going by an open wagon to a party with her boyfriend. It was a bitterly cold night but she didn't dress warmly enough... Charlotte are OK?... But she didn't answer. When they got to the party, she was frozen. In her memory they made this doll that society people could but by their dinner plates so guests could stir their tea and later take home.

Like the dolls these stories have a way of reaching out. You just can't tour the doll museum without having your imagination stirred and your "frozen Charlotte" taken home somewhat thawed. (May 28, 1987)