



DOLLS ON DISPLAY

BY LEIGH MACMILLEN HAYES



When ninety-three year old Hazel Currier purchased a doll that needed tender loving care almost fifty years ago, she had no idea that the cloth toy with bolted leg joints and a painted face would lead her on a journey that continues to this day. It all began when a niece and nephew came to visit Hazel and her husband Owen in Fryeburg. While the gentlemen went off to hunt, the ladies drove to North Conway and scoured antique shops. It was there that the scruffy 12-inch doll called out to Hazel for it needed a new dress.

With lace and material and using a treadle sewing machine, she crafted an outfit. "I dressed her and it was so much fun," she says. "Since then, any time I see a doll that needs tender loving care, I buy it."

Turns out, this fashion-minded lady has met many dolls that craved her attention. In fact, she had so many in her ranch home and knew that they would all need another place to live eventually, that she reached out to several organizations. Though she no longer lives in town, she was grateful that the Fryeburg Historical Society accepted her offer . . . and more than ten thousand, yes, more than 10,000, of Hazel's dolls became The Hazel & Owen Currier Doll Museum.

Enter the 1847 Fryeburg Town House at 103 Lovell Road (Route 5) and you are in for a treat, whether you like dolls or not. Two years ago, the historical society leased the building from the town. That March, a large U-haul truck arrived filled with boxes upon boxes of dolls, doll furniture, and doll

houses. "I tried to mark each box with what kind of doll was in it," says Hazel. "They had one helluva job going through all those dolls and arranging them."

For doll lovers, it's filled to the brim with flashbacks of childhood. For history fanatics or even novices, it's also a journey down memory lane because along one wall the dolls are set up in vignettes that depict Fryeburg of yesteryear, including Winter in Fryeburg, the 1832 Schoolhouse that now houses the town library, and a Tea Party at the Oxford Hotel that burned to the ground in 1906. And then there are all forms of dolls showcased throughout the rest of the room that served as the town's voting hall until the 1980s. Even the raised dias at the back center where the town moderator and three selectmen accepted votes, plus the row of ballot boxes added to the right wall at a later date, have become part of the backdrop for the doll arrangements in this building listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The museum is directed by Sally Whitaker. She notes that it took June O'Donal and a group of historical society volunteers from March until August to set up the displays. Terri Tomlin serves as their Martha Stewart as they continue to fine-tune the exhibits.

While placards commemorate different sections of the collection, the ladies are eager guides ready and waiting to share the history of the building, town and Hazel's story. Some of the furniture featured, including a sleigh that was created by local blacksmith

Loren J. Olney, came from the historical society's vast collection. Above the actual sleigh and other sleds adorned with dolls outfitted in winter attire, an enlarged black and white photograph depicts Mr. Olney sitting in his creation.

There's something for everyone, from Shirley Temples, to American Girl Dolls, Cabbage Patch Kids, Jesters and Clowns, Anna Lee, Raggedy Anns, plus storybook and cartoon characters. International dolls, celebrity figures, wind-up musical dolls, homemade dolls and collector dolls like James Dean, Michael Jordan, GI Joe, Betty Boop and Orphan Annie, all in their original boxes, are showcased in their own sections.

But my favorites are the Barbie dolls because of their dazzling outfits. Most of these are arranged via color and looking at them reminds me of opening a new box of crayons. I should add that there are some Kens as well, usually decked out in crocheted tuxedos, with bow ties and boutonnières—ever ready to lead Barbie onto the dance floor.

While I recognize doily patterns in some of the crocheted gowns, I'm equally impressed by the beads and other accessories that adorn them. "I string all the beads onto crochet cotton," explains Hazel. "It's a tedious task that takes forever. Some are seed beads and I use a wire to string those on as a needle won't go through them."

Another find that appeals to me is Midge in her wedding dress. I still have my Midge, Barbie's not-so-popular best friend. Like Hazel, my mother knit most of Midge's clothes, but she looks like a country girl compared to the museum-worthy dolls Hazel has dressed.

It's not just the dresses that are exquisite. Hazel turns old earrings into brooches, adds ribbons, rings, tiaras, and any other adornment that captures her whimsy, most of which she purchases at the Boutique, as she fondly refers to a local thrift shop she frequents. For every doll that she crochets a purse, she also adds a penny. Styling hair is another important feature, though sometimes a hat is necessary to hide any missing locks.

Her knack for creating stylish outfits dates back to childhood. She recalls turning grain bags with pretty prints into broomstick skirts, a free-flowing design that was deliberately wrinkled. If two bags had the same print, she'd cut her own pattern and fashion a bolero to wear with the skirt. And then she taught herself to knit, making a sweater



with some yarn she describes as an awful color. "I thought it was beautiful," says Hazel. "We had no money to buy anything extra. I learned to do stuff on my own."

She never sits with idle hands and that is obvious not only with the magnitude of dolls at the museum but also in every nook and cranny of her home. And yet, Hazel has displayed the dolls in such a way that it doesn't feel overwhelming. I say that, of course, for I visited two years after she'd presented the Fryeburg Historical Society with ten thousand.



The Curriers moved to Fryeburg in 1945. Hazel was a clerk at the A&P, while Owen worked for Farnsworth Brothers. They belonged to a camping club where people often put hand-crafted items out on tables to sell. One day she gathered some of her Barbie dolls on the dining room table and Owen asked what she was doing. When she told him she planned to sell them the next time they went camping, he suggested that she bring them to display, but not sell. "He liked them just as well as I did," she says.

After Owen passed away in 1992, Hazel moved closer to relatives. Her heart, however, has remained in Fryeburg all these years and she continues to make the hour plus drive periodically.

"When I moved away from Fryeburg, I kept collecting," Hazel explains. "It has kept me entertained. When I start crocheting I don't know where I'm going, but if it doesn't look right I rip it out and start again. No two gowns are alike. And each one begins as a guess. I start with nothing and it all comes into my head. It's fascinating and it all comes out quite attractive."

To say I'm in awe would be an understatement—of the extensive collection of antique, collectible and modern dolls, as well as the spry little lady who dresses them. For me, a visit to The Hazel & Owen Currier Doll Museum feels like entering a library filled with my favorite childhood stories where the books are actually dolls on display. ❁

The Hazel & Owen Currier Doll Museum
 sponsored by the Fryeburg Historical Society
 103 Lovell Road, Fryeburg, May - October
 Wednesday: 10 am - 2 pm, Thursday: 10
 am - 2 pm, or by appointment. Contact:
 whitaker9244@roadrunner.com to set up a
 tour. Suggested donation: \$5. Children under 12
 must be accompanied by a responsible adult.