



Olive Hepburn and part of her doll collection.

Her craftwork is undiscovered treasure

by Lindsay Eaglesham

Olive Hepburn has over 200 babies, but, "Thank goodness," she says, "I don't have to feed them."

That's because her 'babies' are baby DOLLS.

Tucked away, some in bed, some in cribs and cradles some larger ones on rocking chairs and on dresser tops, virtually taking over the top floor of her home at Hope Bay, the collection makes a stunning impression on the visitor.

There they are, the collection of a lifetime which began with her own two childhood dolls, in quiet repose, an unnaturally silent assembly of plastic, celluloid, rubber, plaster, bisque and porcelain babies and toddlers. Oh, and a few oddities such as grown-up Ken and Barbie and G.I. Joe dolls in the company as well.

The eighty-one year old Peninsula native (who, by the way, doesn't look a day over 65, and is as youthful and fair-skinned as one of her rose-cheeked Eaton Beauties) has really been only seriously collecting though since her husband Gordon died in 1976. But before then she crafted her own tiny figures from plaster and rubber casts, painting and dressing them according to her own design. Gordon, a fine local carpenter, helped her by making ingenious wooden bodies for the dolls, with tiny moveable limbs.

And, of course, when it's known you have a penchant for collecting a certain thing, relatives and friends will add to your collection with their gifts.

"I have dolls from all over the world. People have brought me back beautiful examples from Germany, Russia, Scotland," Olive said in a recent interview.

"When I first started to collect, people thought I was barmy in the head."

Now she feels that doll-collecting is much more common than it once was. Also, the investment value is attractive to many collectors. Dolls, she says, can be works of art and can increase in value accordingly. Today, the stamped-out mass produced kind are nothing like the old hand made dolls which were lovingly crafted, often from fine china, with features such as coloured brown-glass eyes, hand painted faces and quality workmanship.

Olive picks up a Queen Victoria Doll off a beautifully quilted bed shared by maybe 50 other dolls of every shape and size.

"See the features on this. Looks just like Queen Victoria, don't you think?"

Dolls, she believes, are a tribute to artistic imagination. The varieties of design, materials, dress and whim are amazing. Apple head dolls decorate an antique dresser near the bed where the 'pretty doll' convention is taking place. Then there are miniatures with their own tiny tea sets,

chairs, tables and party settings. Cupie Dolls, with their peaked hair and plump cheeks, abound in different materials, from celluloid to rubber, to plastic and china. Large stuffed dolls, bigger than five-year-olds, stand in corners or sit in full size rockers, and china-faced Eaton Beauties grace a smaller bed.

"The Eaton Beauty you could buy for a dollar," said Olive.

That was back in the 1920's when Olive could have one delivered through mail order. Her brood of Beauties are in excellent shape, looking hardly the worse for their age, a marvel for a dollar (even 70 years ago) with dainty china heads, rouged cheeks and lacey dresses.

"But they were really show dolls," said Olive. "Children wouldn't cuddle them so much as they would the stuffed dolls."

Speaking of stuffed dolls reminded Olive of her patient husband who withstood her passion for crafting and collecting. "One day he couldn't find his clean underwear," she recalled. "He joked that I'd probably used them as stuffing in one of my dolls."

But it's not only collecting and stuffing dolls that has occupied this lively lady all her life.

Olive was curator of the Bruce County Museum in Southampton for 13 years, and is a woman of many talents — though her modesty will hide them unless you press her.

She has always been talented in arts and crafts. Her mother was good with her hands, she says. Her ceramics, displayed throughout her home, are delicate creations, her paintings are imaginative, and her quilts and tapestries are positively brilliant.

In a tiny, cozy piano room off her front porch hangs a magnificent four-foot-square embroidered tapestry she completed as a special project to celebrate the 1967 Centennial of Confederation.

It's a beautifully conceived montage of colourful scenes depicting the broad spectrum of pioneer life on the Bruce Peninsula. The feel of history is generated by this genuine folk art in illustrations of pioneer life, farming, fishing, Indian settlements, maple syrup collecting, lumbering; and people involved in daily pursuits — the preacher travelling in his buggy; the farm woman spinning; a settler drawing water.

The entire work is set in a four seasons context, with scarcely a symbol of early pioneer life missed or omitted.

Olive Hepburn's work seems to be an incredible undiscovered treasure in the Bruce.

Did she sign her Centennial tapestry? "I can't remember," she says. "I wonder if I did. I wonder if I should."

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