

Pat's Magical Mansion

PAMELA FRY

IT IS CHRISTMAS time and the house glows with the traditional warmth of the season, from the Christmas tree in the parlour to the wreath on the front door. Outside, snow has already begun to gently coat the roof and garden. Within, all is bustle and activity.

The maids are busily preparing dinner in the kitchen; Mama, in the dining-room, is admiring the perfection of the table-setting; Grandpa glances through the bookcase in the library; the four children, including two babies, are all involved in their own pursuits; and Papa is in the bathtub.

In every room light glows from shaded lamps and sparkling chandeliers. Here, most obviously, is the home of a prosperous and happy late-Victorian family, who enjoy life thoroughly, love to entertain, and take continuous pleasure in their spacious and colourful surroundings.

This is the house that Pat Merrick built with her magical fingers — a breathtaking, twelve-room Victorian mansion. As she herself fluently explains, the making of it became a true journey into the past, a recreation of half-forgotten childhood fantasies.

The house came into existence at the Stone Road Farm Studio, situated just east of Westport, Ontario, on Noonan Road North. Pat and her husband, Dick, have been living here for the past eight years. (They also did most of the renovations on their own farm house, as well as the design and building of the Studio. But that is another story.) The Studio is unquestionably one of the most enchanting toyshops in the world.

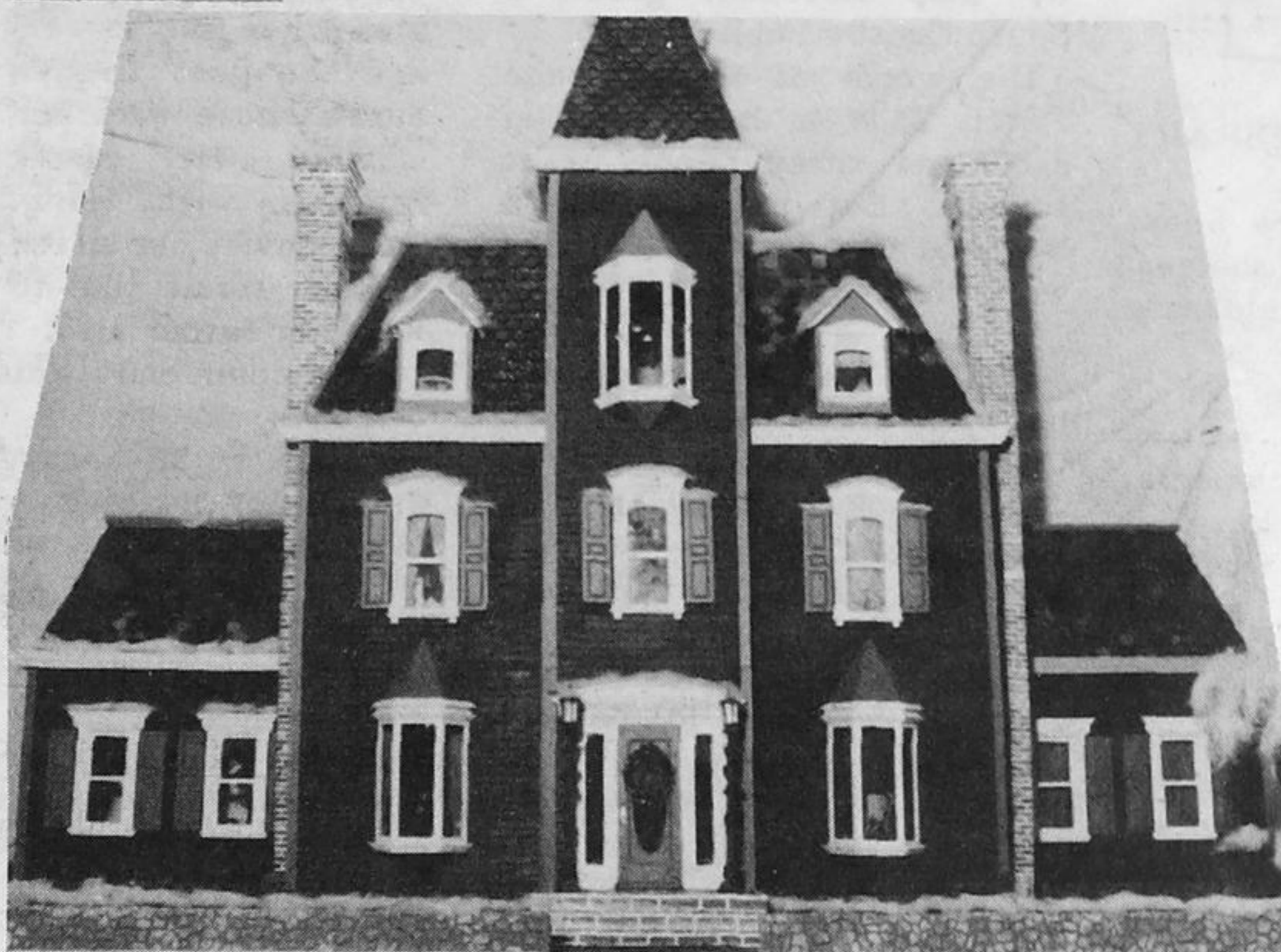
Pat first established her reputation through the creation of exquisite porcelain period dolls. Living in Toronto, and skilled as both an artist and needlewoman, she started making dolls as a hobby and for the delight of her own children. But soon she found herself selling them as well — and the demand quickly outstripped the supply. Then came the decision to move to the country, where she could open a toyshop and pursue her "hobby" along professional lines in relative peace and tranquillity. Dick, who is a design consultant, still works a couple of days a week in Toronto. (It must be added that the huge success of the toyshop has made the concept of "peace and tranquillity" entirely obsolete!)

Once established at the Studio, Pat found herself increasingly fascinated by the creation of perfect reproductions of original 19th-century bisque dolls. Feeling that she needed more experience in the art, she took several courses (she is now a qualified teacher), and established a kiln at the studio. Here she carves and paints the head of each marvellously individual doll. Every detail of genuine antique clothing and jewellery is meticulously researched and designed. But then Pat has always been a perfectionist.

Today, the spacious, galleried Studio is a paradise for children, crammed with every imaginable kind of toy, including a vast selection of teddy-bears, who even have their own giant beehive with accompanying honey-pots.

There are dollhouses as well, which Pat and Dick worked on together. In fact, the first doll's house to bring Pat immediate acclaim and publicity was her reproduction of a 1904 house, made for Westport's seventy-fifth anniversary in 1981. She has refused all offers to sell it.

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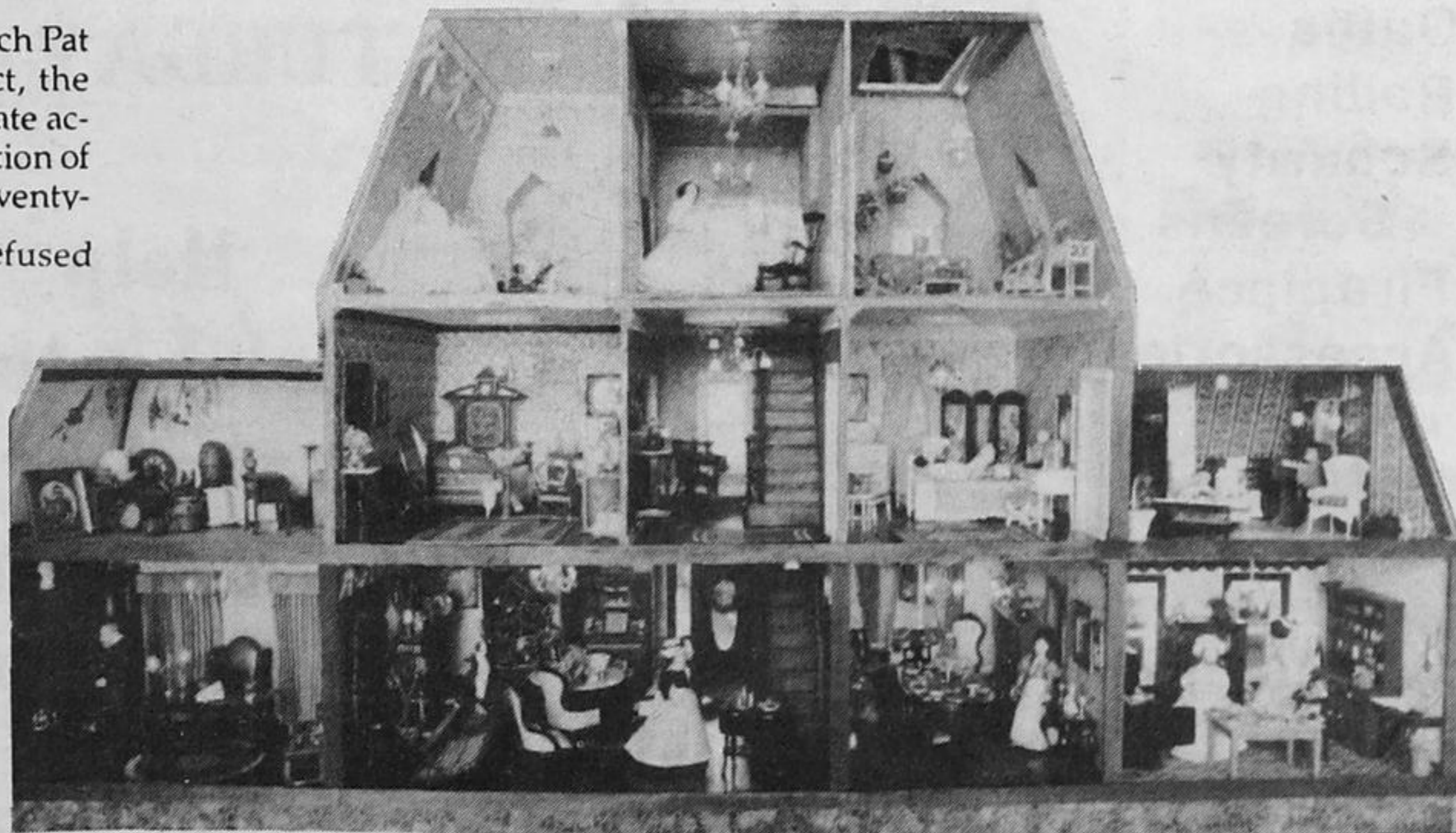


WHICH BRINGS US to her latest masterpiece — the dollhouse, which she also has absolutely no intention of selling. It is delightful to hear her describe how the thought of creating it first came to her. Her face lights up and her eyes sparkle, when she tells of a particularly dark and windy January day.

Sitting alone in the Studio, she was wondering what on earth she could do to cheer herself up. The kiln was in storage, so there could be no more doll-making for the moment. Dick was in Toronto. How to escape from the cold and depressing present into another, more exciting world? A fantasy world. And then she thought: why not a dollhouse — but one that would be truly alive; truly recreate the past; be full of warmth and people and things actually happening! The making of something that would be, in her own words, "super-fun and super-beautiful."

Thus the project began, and by working approximately sixteen hours a day (as well as running the toyshop), she completed the house in under six months. Most miniaturists would have considered it a lifetime undertaking. But, as Pat explains, she became so absorbed in the project she began to feel that she was actually living in the period. Every day and every night for as long as she could keep her eyes open, she was totally absorbed. And, most happily, Dick provided able and active support whenever he was at home.

As it now stands, the house is worth about \$12,000. It is five feet wide and almost four feet tall. The parlour is 19 by 13", the kitchen 13½ by 10", and the library 10 by 13". The parquet floors were cut individually by Pat, as were the painted wood-planks in the attic. The bathroom floor is covered by one-inch marble tiles.



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The construction of the exterior, including siding, shingles, and chimneys, was a joint effort by Pat and Dick. It took two days to hand-paint the bricks. When the question of lighting came up, Pat approached a local electrician, Con Le Clair. He became so fascinated with the project that he did all the wiring himself, and each tiny lamp is complete with plugs and switches. Lamp bulbs are one-eighth of an inch, and there is a twelve-volt master switch.

Other fascinating details, all handmade by Pat, are the hand-painted furniture, the parasol and the elegant white kid gloves to be seen in the master bedroom, and the hand-painted screen in the teen-age daughter's room. Most of the furniture was bought from experts in the United States but Pat, deciding that Victorians loved the ornate, added the decoration herself. She also wove the orange-gold carpet in the dining-room, to match the gold-plated settings which had been made by Fran Cameron of Ottawa. Sylvia Clark, from the same city, was responsible for the delectable-looking plates of food.

One must not overlook the library with its shelves of books. All of them are printed and illustrated, and all are readable (with a magnifying glass!) as are the wedding certificate, birth certificates, and Victorian diary. These, again, were made by American miniaturists.

Special mention should be made of the charming figures, including Papa in the bathtub, executed by Cecil Boyd, a talented young woman in Texas. Pat did not quite know whether to be amused or alarmed when two elderly ladies arrived one day and demanded to see "the dollhouse with the naked man in the bathtub." It had hardly been her intention to create a local scandal!

But she need not worry, because her beautiful house will continue to be enjoyed for much else besides the "naked man" and all the other amusing and charming novelties her lively imagination has invented. Not only is her house an extraordinary example of the miniaturist's art, it is also the outward expression of Pat's own sparkling personality; of her deeply felt conviction that everyone, no matter what their age, should never lose their capacity to have fun, to return, at least briefly, to childhood delights.

It is this vibrancy, this infectious spirit, that breathes life into both the dollhouse and the toyshop itself.

However, Pat's family do admit to one slight anxiety. They know how deeply she has become involved with her magical house. As far as she is concerned, it will never be "finished," because she is forever thinking up yet another delightful accessory or individual to add to it. So it is just possible that one day she will disappear completely, only to be found inside the house. And there she will be, a Lilliputian Pat, busily rearranging the parlour with Mama, or — in typically outspoken fashion — telling Papa to get the hell out of the bathtub!