

NEWSDAY, SUNDAY, JANUARY 20, 2008

'The Joys of Toys' in Southampton



Aileen Jacobson | On the Isle *January 20, 2008*
Children love toys. That's a given. But what about adults?

They're usually just as entranced, says Bob Skinner, curator of a new exhibit, "The Joys of Toys," at the Rogers Mansion in Southampton.

"I suppose it's a nostalgia for childhood," says Skinner, 78, a retired fine arts professor at Southampton College, as he sits in an upstairs nook filled with various kinds of building blocks. Most of the exhibit is a collection of please-don't-touch antiques. But this is the area where kids will actually be able to play. And maybe parents will want to join in.

Proust had his madeleine, but exhibit visitors of a certain age may find that the object that triggers remembrance of their past is a set of Tinkertoys. Or a tin airplane, a wooden sled or an electric train.

"Bob has his own following here," says Tom Edmonds, director of the Southampton Historical Museum and Research Center, of which the mansion is part. An exhibit on antique tools that Skinner organized last year was a big hit, Edmonds says.

Edmonds expects the same for this one, based partly on the reaction of a little girl who saw a log cabin dollhouse before the show opened. She peered inside the empty house a very long time, he says, and "with her imagination, she made it into something incredible."

About half the items are from the museum's collection. The rest are on loan from Skinner and other collectors. The mansion, on Meeting House Lane, was built in 1843 for whaling captain Albert Rogers, whose portrait sits above the fireplace in the "best parlor," Skinner says.

In the 1890s, the house was sold to Samuel Parrish, an attorney (and founder of East Hampton's Parrish Art Museum), who expanded it to include a spacious "billiard room." That room has now been transformed into the exhibit's main gallery, with specially built platforms for the train and for such large objects as sleds. Toys are on display elsewhere, too, including out-of-the-way rooms where the permanent collection sits in glass cases.

The museum - a complex with other buildings at this site and elsewhere - has been receiving donations for more than 110 years, Skinner says. And a surprisingly large number of them have been dolls and dollhouses, many of them handmade.

"This is folk art," says Skinner, who lives in Water Mill with his wife and taught art and art history at Southampton College for some 30 years, before retiring in 1996. The parents who carved and sometimes painted these toys probably didn't think of them as art, he adds. He particularly likes a hand-size tin car with meant-to-be-round wheels carved from what seem to be rubber erasers. "It's primitive, but it's one-of-a-kind," made simply but with great care.

Some classic toys are still constructed by craftspeople, though he has older versions. These include wooden squeeze toys that



Bob Skinner is curator of "The Joys of Toys," an exhibit at the Southampton Historical Museum's Rogers Mansion.

make acrobats or, in one case, a Charlie Chaplin figure do all kinds of gyrations when two boards are pressed together.

Another older toy features chickens that peck on a board when a child moves it around, swinging a weighted string that makes the hens click and clack, "enough to drive a mother crazy," he says. Toys of the 19th century, including blocks and pull-toys, featured animals more than toys now, he says.

"Kids knew animals better then. They lived on farms more, and they used horses" for transportation. They also learned from toys: In a jigsaw puzzle of New York State made around 1860, each county is a separate piece - though Staten Island's Richmond County has gone missing.

Although the toys are interesting by themselves, Skinner has a grander scheme in mind. "What I'm trying to do is show how toys have changed" from the 19th to the 21st centuries, he says. The sled exhibit ends with the round plastic disc ubiquitous on snowy hillsides today. The board game display ends with a Game Boy. "I think it's kind of sad that all children today have to do is use their thumbs," he says.

Dolls haven't changed that much, he says. Early ones, including some American Indian examples decorated with exquisite tiny beads, were often elaborate. He's borrowing an American Girl doll from his 9-year-old granddaughter, one of his six grandchildren, to demonstrate what's popular today.

Skinner says he's acquired his own collection through visits to antiques shops and shows, or from friends. "I lost all my toys in a fire," when he was in his teens, he says. He did, however, carve ride-on locomotives for his three daughters, and is including one in the exhibit.

Lots of vehicles - rocking horses, locomotives, fire engines, a hay wagon, a Tonka jeep, a dump truck - and a small model of a 1920s gas station are on display. They show changes in society at large, Skinner says: "Toys tend to follow adult toys."

An early wooden sled has the word "Comos" carved on it - not Rosebud, that iconic memory-jogger courtesy of Orson Welles. Skinner laughs at the idea: "Wouldn't that have been wonderful?"

"The Joys of Toys," through March 29, Southampton Historical Museums and Research Center, Rogers Mansion, 17 Meeting House Lane, Tuesdays-Saturdays 11 a.m.-4 p.m., \$4 adults, free for members and children 17 and younger, 631-283-2494.