



Susannah Wright is a special creation of Mrs Newcomer for a Bicentennial doll contest.

Dolls, dolls and more dolls

Homestead Notes



Mrs. Newcomer holds Benjamin Franklin and Betsy Ross, door stop dolls made and sold by members of the Mountville Fire Company Auxiliary.

Shirley Newcomer lives in a little girl's paradise

By SALLY BAIR
Feature Writer

It is a little girl's paradise. Holly Hobbie, Raggedy Ann and Andy, Betsy Ross, and Benjamin Franklin live side by side with newborn dolls, double dolls, Bicentennial dolls, and just plain lovable dolls.

Where could this paradise be? It is not a toy store; it is the basement of Mrs. Charles Newcomer's Mountville Home at 100 Central Manor Road.

It is in this basement that each doll is lovingly stitched, stuffed, and dressed. And, it is quickly evident that each one takes on a personality of its own in the process.

Shirley Newcomer says she began making dolls about 25 years ago, even though she had three sons. She had moved here from Louisiana and didn't know many people. She said, "I was new in the neighborhood and had plenty of time on my hands before my first son was born. I made his whole layette." As her family grew she began sewing in earnest for her boys, and also found some time for needlepoint and embroidery.

Because she had plenty of time, she said, "My mother sent me a book of gifts to make. There were dolls and bean bag patterns which I used."

Gradually she began collecting doll patterns, and turning them into the real thing. She said she makes dolls "out of almost anything, and some of them can get pretty intricate."

Many of her patterns have come from women's magazines, and she said she

feels many women don't undertake these dolls because they must enlarge patterns from grids. She said, "It's really easy after you've done it once." Obviously, from her collection, there's not a doll pattern which escapes her notice.

There is a lot of hand sewing in constructing the dolls and putting heads and arms on bodies, but sometimes even the clothes require hand work. Mrs. Newcomer said, "Some of the clothing is too little to get under the sewing machine needle." She said she saves up the hand sewing and does it in the evening while she watches television.

Her dolls are dressed completely including panties, petticoats, slippers and other accoutrements. But she said it was a shock for her to discover that apparently colonial ladies did not wear panties. So, because she likes her dolls to be correct, she does not add panties to her colonial dolls.

She has a set of "Little Women" dolls, made of cloth to resemble those dolls which were once made of kid. The dresses have lace and ribbons, and the petticoats feature tucks which serve as stiffening to make the dresses stand out. They also wear felt slippers and separate spats.

Despite the delicate appearance of some of her dolls, Mrs. Newcomer said she makes them so they can be played with, and actually has a built-in tester in her granddaughter. She stuffs the dolls with polyester fill and says the dolls are washable and dryable. That

isn't the case, of course, for the several dolls which have been topped off with real hair instead of the yarn variety.

She does not always follow patterns, and shows a real touch of creativity in several of the dolls she has made. One is made to resemble a real state trooper with a uniform authentic in every detail. This will be an heirloom for her granddaughter since it is patterned after her daughter-in-law's father. She also has created a doll which resembles those often pictured on card shop paper bags.

Most of the doll faces are embroidered, and in many cases they proved too small for a standard embroidery hoop. Mrs. Newcomer solved that problem by cutting out the top of an empty margarine tub and cutting the center out of the lid. When you place fabric between the two pieces it serves nicely as a miniature embroidery hoop.

The Bicentennial year has been an inspiration to Mrs. Newcomer, and she dressed a wide variety of dolls for the occasion. She helped the Mountville Fire Company Auxiliary, of which she is a member, make door stop dolls to resemble Betsy Ross and Benjamin Franklin. They are authentic to the detail of having tiny scissors in Betsy's sewing basket and spectacles on Benjamin's face.

She also dressed "Barbie" dolls as a colonial family and she made many stuffed dolls in colonial costumes. She made two well-dressed

colonial dolls, one of which features a fur-lined cape and red velvet muff. Two matching dolls are a boy dressed in typical colonial garb and a country girl. The country girl is carrying her knitting in her apron - the knitting has been done with toothpicks. To complete her colonial doll grouping she has a newborn in a basket bed and a colonial toy doll puppet constructed as pioneer children might have made it with scraps from their mother's sewing basket.

As her real Bicentennial project, Mrs. Newcomer decided to respond to a newspaper announcement of a doll contest being coordinated partly through the William Penn Museum in Harrisburg. The contest rules said the dolls had to be dressed as an historical Pennsylvania figure.

After some thought and research, Mrs. Newcomer narrowed the wide field of possibilities to Harriet Lane, niece of Pennsylvania's only president, James Buchanan, and Susannah Wright, daughter of the operator of Wright's Ferry. Mrs. Newcomer finally selected Susannah Wright because of her interesting history, although there was no picture available.

Susannah's father, who hailed from Lancashire, England, played a role in the naming of Lancaster, and was commissioned by the Crown to experiment with hemp. After being educated in Europe, Susannah came to this country and became the first person in America to raise silkworms. The fabric

was spun in England, and then Susannah herself made homemade dyes to color the silk, some of which she presented to the queen. She was interested in herbs and plants and compounded medicines. She and Benjamin Franklin were friends, and it is said that he wrote the "Ode to Hospitality" with her in mind.

Yet only a few things are known about her person. She was "not pretty," was a small woman, and was a Quaker. She was at the age of 75, and at this age that Mrs. Newcomer chose to depict her. Susannah, the contest doll, is dressed as a Quaker, with an inside bonnet of white, and an outside bonnet of grey, and a grey dress. And, according to legend about the colonials, Susannah, the proper Quaker, is dressed without panties, but with silk stockings. She is wearing wire-rimmed spectacles, and Mrs. Newcomer achieved a very effective wrinkled face by stitching through the face at intervals.

Despite the careful study, Susannah was not a winner in the contest. Organizers expected 50 dolls and got well over 200. There were two winners selected from the total. But Mrs. Newcomer enjoyed carrying out her Bicentennial project and seeing the other dolls entered in the contest.

Mrs. Newcomer makes dolls occasionally for friends and for their friends, but she said she is really not interested in taking orders for her little people because then "it ceases to be a hobby," then.

She is a member of the Columbia Hospital Auxiliary and gave them several dolls for their Christmas bazaar many years ago. Consequently, she has worked with them on making other dolls for the annual bazaar.

She is not demonstrating her work at the Lancaster Town Fair as she did last year at a request by the organizers. She said it is too difficult to have dolls to sell and to resist people who want to order them. And she repeats again her reluctance to go into any kind of doll-making business.

She does enjoy talking about her work and in the process of preparing for talks she has done a little study of the background of dolls. She said dolls have been discovered into prehistoric times, but they were not toys then. Rather they were fashioned in the image of ancestors and put in graves. Since people did not know where they were going when they died, they tried to put the good attributes of their ancestors in these dolls, hoping to make the way smoother.

Eventually, Mrs. Newcomer said, dolls were put on top of graves, in bigger and bigger sizes. Eventually they were made full-sized and of wax in the image of the person in the grave. This, she said, is the way wax museums were begun.

Mrs. Newcomer was a medical technician before her marriage and said she has no formal sewing training - except high school sewing, "which I hated."

(Continued on Page 43)