

# Corn Husk Dolls Preserve American Heritage

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 GROTTUES, (Virginia) — Using a crop residue that is normally tilled back into the soil, Pat Broyles creates works of art.

It's an endeavor that sends the rural Virginia woman and her family hurrying into neighboring cornfields each fall to harvest cornhusk. From the vanloads of husk-enclosed ear corn the Broyles haul to their log cabin home, Pat gathers and stores a year's worth of raw materials. After husking, the ear corn is returned to the grower.

The cornhusk creations designed by Pat Broyles' nimble fingers are not just craft items, but folk art collectibles. In fact, Pat's limited edition cornhusk Santa with Elves piece was featured as the color cover of the 1991 Christmas edition of *Early American Life* magazine.

Pat Broyles' career as a cornhusk folk artist began in 1982, when she read a magazine article on the traditional dolls. An aunt of Pat's husband, Steve, showed her how to make her first basic doll.

"It interested me because it was an early craft; and I love being creative with my hands," recalls this lifelong-lover of antiques. "I made a couple of dolls, did a few craft shows and I was hooked."

Pat's dolls range from the traditional bell-skirted type to lifesize, intricately-crafted ones, complete with hands and fingers made of twisted-shaped cornhusk. Lifesize dolls are dressed in vintage baby

garments and shoes she acquires through auctions and antique shops, costly both in the time it takes to locate them and the expense. Other dolls wear garments sewn from vintage fabrics.

An initial part of many of the designs is dyeing the husk to the soft shades which enhance the traditional look of the dolls. Pat soaks quantities of the husks in various dyes until they reach the desired shades, then spreads them on her enclosed back porch to dry. Stored dry, in plastic bags, the husk keeps well. Before use, the husks are soaked in warm water for about 10 minutes for pliability.

Faces of the large dolls are flat husks, their soft skintone shades and facial features painted on. Customers, Pat says, often ask if the heads are made from wood.

"Fingers took me a long time to get the way I wanted," she smiles. "I'd work awhile, throw the husks down in frustration, then go back to it later and try again."

Persistence paid off for this self-described perfectionist. The hands on her large dolls, with fingers and thumb of rolled, twisted, cornhusk, look almost realistic enough to open and close.

Using real hair was another challenge Pat tackled, after reading that the very early dolls had human hair. Tedious to work with, the hair must have enough length for fashioning into a style typical of the earlier era the doll represented, like braids or twisted into a bun.

"I've never seen anyone else take cornhusk to this extent," Pat admits of her passion for detail on her art pieces.

That attention to tiny detail is evident in all of Pat Broyles' work. Tiny birds and miniature



Pat Broyles displays her cornhusk folk art on furniture pieces crafted by her husband, Steve, from salvaged, Civil War-era wood.

packages - all of cornhusk - decorate her soft-green, shredded-cornhusk trees. Her Amish dolls each holds a pieced, handmade miniature quilt; one of the four quilt designs incorporates more than 50 tiny pieces of colored fabric. And, the numerous Santas that take shape from Pat's gifted fingers sport beards of soft, curly, white sheep fleece.

Santas are popular with the clientele at the numerous country craft shows Pat attends. Many of her Santa ideas are gleaned from those depicted on antique Christmas postcards.

Her limited edition Santa piece with elves selected by *Early American Life* for its Christmas issue cover stands nearly two feet high and features a woolly-bearded cornhusk Santa, dressed in a ticking-striped cobbler's apron, sitting on a chair of antique wood. Small, red-capped elves work about a doll at his feet and on a wooden ark he holds on his lap, with one "overseeing" from the vantage point of Santa's shoulder. The piece takes Pat about two months to complete.

Both Santa's chair and the toy ark are crafted from antique wood by Steve Broyles. Broyles, an artisan with old wood, built some furniture pieces for Pat's use in her party craft show displays. Before long, customers were inquiring about purchasing the tables and cupboards.

"I love old buildings; old buildings talk to you," says Broyles, "You find burn marks, dates, carved initials on old pieces of wood. And, if there's such a thing as working at your hobby, I'm doing it."

Employed by the Museum of American Frontier Culture at Staunton, his love of old wood and old buildings is lavished on the living history structures of several working farms. The Shenandoah Valley museum depicts how the German, Scotch-Irish and English style-farms of the early settlers evolved into the American farm.

Years ago, Broyles set about salvaging wood from his father's "home place," where the old bank barn had deteriorated beyond repair.

"I thought he was crazy," laughs Pat. "He made us save every piece that had any possible reuse value. Now, we're using that wood."

The "old" furniture he creates



A miniature ladder, fashioned from old wood by Steve Broyles, holds a band of Pat's whimsical cornhusk elves.

out of vintage wood is already "distressed," even down to the chipped, cracked paint. Occasionally, some paint touchup is necessary, but even that is carefully matched and applied to retain the look of antiquity.

Old wood goes into the Santa chairs, forms the wings of the cornhusk angels and is the material from which the Noah's Ark toy in Pat's line of designs is crafted.

Steve builds the arks in two sizes and Pat crafts and colors the people and pairs of animals for the ark, from cornhusk sheep to a pair

of brightly-striped snakes. One of the ark sets was presented as a gift to America's ambassador to England.

Their love of wood and antiques set the Broyles on an unusual task some years ago. With a 16-year-old son and 14-year-old daughter, their log house was being outgrown, so they purchased a log cabin to move and add to their home.

"The four of us spent a summer building a stone wall from the old chimney; we had to go to the creek

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With real human hair, garbed in a vintage dress and shoes, this cornhusk doll is a unique, folk art collectible.



Cornhusk dolls, Santas and shredded husk trees are among the folk art creations Pat Broyles displays at regional craft shows.



This limited edition cornhusk art piece, Santa with Elves, was featured on the 1991 Christmas issue cover of EARLY AMERICAN LIFE magazine.

# Homestead Notes