

Save The Wishbone

by Lynne Belluscio

Every year at this time, I remind myself that I need to save the wishbone from the turkey. I have a small collection of them, and “someday,” I say to myself, I’ll have to make a couple of wishbone dolls, like my grandmother made for me. I have three wishbone dolls, each with a cloth head, embroidered with eyes and a mouth and a gathered petticoat and dress. Of course they don’t have any arms.

As a kid I never thought too much of them, and they’ve been packed away for quite some time. I found two of them last night and will bring them to LeRoy House to show the kids when they come over next month for our “hands-on-history” program, Christmas Long Ago. We talk about handmade toys and these little dolls are part of the story.

Dolls were made of lots of different things - - spools, wooden spoons, clay pipes, handkerchiefs, clothespins, corn husks, apples and bed keys - - the wooden wrench used to tighten the ropes on a bed. This past spring, when Shelia Furr and I took the students on a tour of

LeRoy House as if we were Mrs. LeRoy and her maid, we showed the kids the bed wrench. We told a story about how the youngest LeRoy daughter, Mary, wasn’t allowed to play with her older sisters’ dolls, so she pretended that the wooden bed key was her doll. (Of course the story isn’t based on any documented story about the LeRoy children, but there seems to be evidence that little girls did play with bed wrenches, however, I’m still searching for more information about it.)

In the meantime, the question has come up, what kind of dolls might the LeRoy girls have played with in the 1830s? There were ten LeRoy children: three boys – Thomas, Augustus and Edward, and seven girls – Charlotte, Caroline, Helen, Catherine, Julia, Louisa and Mary. It must have been a very busy household!

This next year, in preparation for our 2014 Summer Exhibit “Let’s Play” we hope to have some toys that would be appropriate for the LeRoy children. Research is proving to be difficult, especially about dolls at that

time. Commercially made dolls were just being introduced in the 1830s. The china or porcelain dolls weren’t common until later in the century.

In the 1830s, store-bought dolls were more often wooden dolls, made in the Grodner Tal region of Germany. They were sometimes called penny dolls, wooden peg dolls or Dutch dolls (a variation of Deutch or German.) If the doll had a small comb in her hair, she is called a “tuck comb” doll, and they are very rare and very expensive!

The dolls at this time were not baby dolls. In fact, baby dolls were not common until the early 1900s. Many of the dolls from the early 1800s were “millinery dolls” that were dressed in the most modern fashions. Since the LeRoy family was wealthy and connected to New York City, it would make sense for the LeRoy girls to have millinery dolls, dressed in fashionable clothing. In fact, the *LeRoy Gazette* advertised that Mrs. LeRoy owned a millinery shop on Main Street. (I’m still not sure whether this is Jacob’s wife. I



find it hard to imagine that she raised a family of ten children, was married to a wealthy man and owned a millinery shop.) However, with a millinery shop on Main Street, there is a good chance that there were millinery dolls for sale.

The next problem is that original millinery dolls in original clothes are worth thousands of dollars. We obviously don’t have any in the collection. Right now I am watching ebay for some German penny dolls that will be a good substitute but they still aren’t cheap.

A long time ago, I bought one at an antique show for a couple of dollars and thought I’d try and find it and donate it to the Historical Society. Of course I “put it in a safe place” and couldn’t find it and had to clear out a closet looking for it. I finally found it and remembered that our old beagle chewed off one of the arms. So I am looking on ebay. When I buy one of the old wooden dolls I’ll see if some volunteers might be willing to make some fashion clothes. It should be a fun project. Give me a call if you’d like to help. In the meantime, save the wishbone.

