

Forgotten rag doll given to Smithsonian

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By Anne Muth Orlando



Ed Becker

Mary Seubert donated this Nancy Hanks doll to the Smithsonian.

When Mary Seubert received a rag doll as a young girl, she didn't think much of it. After all, the doll was old and, unlike most of her other dolls, its eyes didn't blink and it didn't talk.

The doll had belonged to her mother, the late Jane Walsh Seubert, who was a substitute teacher in history, Latin and Spanish in the North Allegheny School District during the 1970s and '80s.

"I remember my mom telling me that the doll's name was Nancy Hanks, who was the mother of Abraham Lincoln. My mom had majored in history and was a lifelong history buff, so I received all of the biographical details of the historical figure of Nancy Hanks but nothing about where the doll came from," said Ms. Seubert, of Pine.

"I played with the doll like I did the rest of my dolls. I didn't treat it any differently, and my mom never requested that I take special care of it," she said. "When I outgrew the doll, my mom packed it away for future grandchildren."

Little did she know that the doll would end up in the Smithsonian Institution.

On Oct. 6, Ms. Seubert donated the doll to the museum in her mother's name.

The road that led to the Smithsonian National Museum of American History was long and winding. After the death of her parents -- her dad, Bob, died in 1997 and her mom died in 2003 -- Ms. Seubert was sorting through their belongings and came upon the Nancy Hanks doll. She set it aside and didn't think much about it for several years.

Last year, she and her brother, Paul, who lives in Jackson, Calif., decided to try to find the doll a home. They knew the doll was old but didn't know whether it was rare or had any value.

Ms. Seubert took it to a local antiques dealer, who offered her \$25 for it, which she rejected.

She and her brother asked family and friends if they knew anything about the doll and searched the Internet with no success.

In October 2007, her boyfriend posted a message to an Internet news group about antique dolls. Several months later, it produced a response that included a link to the Indiana Historical Society site showing a woman holding a Nancy Hanks doll.

Ms. Seubert soon learned that Portia Howe Sperry created the Nancy Hanks doll as well as an Abigail rag doll during the Great Depression. At the time, Ms. Sperry, who was born in 1890 in Illinois, managed the Brown County Folks Shop in Nashville, Ind. She hired local women to make the dolls, which were sold for 25 cents each.

"I was excited to finally have information about the doll," Ms. Seubert said. She quickly contacted the Indiana Historical Society, which was still in touch with the Sperry family. Apparently, the family had an Abigail doll but not a Nancy Hanks doll. Both the Sperry family and the curator for the Indiana State Museum expressed interest in obtaining the doll.

The next step was to have the doll appraised by the American Society of Appraisers, which set its value at \$600 to \$700.

Ms. Seubert gleaned additional information about the doll, including that very few Nancy Hanks dolls were produced and even fewer remained. According to the appraiser, the dolls were "simple and inexpensive" and "were purchased to be played with," so few are still around.

In June, Ms. Seubert sent photos of the doll to Nancy Davis, curator of the Division of Home and Community Life at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. A few weeks later, Ms. Davis told her the Smithsonian was interested in obtaining the doll.

The doll is of particular interest because it "provides a fascinating way to address the issues of the Great Depression," Ms. Davis said. "Portia Howe Sperry, the doll's designer, put local Brown County, Indiana, women to work making the Abigail and Nancy Hanks dolls during this difficult economic time. This activity, added to its playful use by Jane Walsh and her daughter Mary Seubert in Pennsylvania, make it a compelling story."

After careful consideration, Ms. Seubert decided that the best place for the doll was the Smithsonian. "That way, it would be seen by the greatest number of people who would appreciate the historical value," she said.

She arranged to donate the doll in person, packed it in a pink box and traveled to Washington, D.C., where she carried the doll on the Metro subway system. She personally donated it to the curator in her mother's name, Jane Walsh Seubert.

The doll will be part of an exhibition on the topic of American enterprise in the Great Depression.

"We will discuss the various ways Americans coped with this financial crisis, and we hope that Portia Howe Sperry will be one of those case studies. Her doll will be on display as a product of her effort," Ms. Davis said. The exhibit is scheduled to open in 2011 and remain for 30 years.

"I feel good about it," Ms. Seubert said of her donation. "The doll will be preserved and won't deteriorate any further. My only wish was that my mom were still alive to see this doll go to the Smithsonian. This is the type of thing she enjoyed -- she would have loved the historical and educational aspects of the doll's placement in the museum."

Correction/Clarification: (Published Dec. 10, 2008) The credit line was incorrect for the photos that ran with this story as originally published Dec. 7, 2008 about a historically significant rag doll that was donated to the Smithsonian Institution. The photos were taken by freelance photographer Ed Becker.

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