

This is the End: Mildred Mahoney's Doll's House Collection

Words & Photos by Chris Mills

The definition of a dollhouse for Mildred Moudry, a poor little French girl born in Niagara Falls December 13, 1918, was a wood slat crate with a Sunkist Oranges label on it.



Bertie Hall, Fort Erie, was the site of the Mahoney Doll's House Collection auction on Aug. 14.



In 1932 Mildred's mother took her to see a travelling exhibit of the "Million Dollar Castle," an elaborate dollhouse owned by American actress Colleen Moore. This seemingly innocent event set a standard toward which Mildred would aspire, and exceed, the rest of her life.

Times were tough, and rumours say she became a cigarette girl at the Hilton Hotel in Buffalo, New York, and that a beauty contest figured prominently.

She met successful criminal attorney William B. Mahoney, 20 years her senior and the son of a powerful Buffalo, New York, family. His



Mildred's starter doll home was this orange crate. Courtesy Fort Erie Historical Museum.

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marriage to this little upstart from Niagara Falls may have scandalized the family.

Dream Dollhouses

They owned a waterfront property on Lake Erie in Crystal Beach, Ont., just down the street from the famed amusement park, from where she began to collect and create the dollhouses of her dreams. She travelled the U.S., Canada, and Europe, attending exhibitions and visiting galleries of dollhouses and miniaturist pieces.

Dollhouses are a unique world culture in which you can easily pay almost as much for a miniature armchair, stove or staircase as you would for the real thing. Chandeliers can cost close to \$500 today.

Furniture and materials from European

manufacturers Biedermeier, the most prestigious maker of miniaturist collectibles, and Gottschalk, formed the foundation of Mildred's new pastime.

Detail and authenticity are paramount. She sewed tiny lace curtains and reupholstered antique furniture with brocades and velvets from her cache of antique fabrics. Over the next 37 years she compiled hundred of pieces of staircases, chairs, materials, and houses, in addition to finished dollhouses, prompting an influx of collectors and historians to visit.

Replications of mansions, palaces, shops and historic homes dated from the 19th-century to 1980, but the full collection ranged from c.1780, including a house that was owned by seven generations of family before Mildred acquired it.

Mildred M. Mahoney put together a dollhouse collection valued at \$800,000.



Historic Bertie Hall housed the significant Mildred M. Mahoney's Doll's House Collection since the 1980s.



Magnificent obsession: Mahoney sewed lace curtains and reupholstered tiny antique furniture with brocades and velvet.

A Jacobean room had furniture made from 200-year-old oak. A Japanese palace came with Hina Matsuri dolls. Most were so large they'd overflow a typical card table, although some ranged up to 11 feet across.

Bertie Hall

But in 1982 Mildred's husband died, prompting the hunt for a permanent home for her

collection. She persuaded the Niagara Parks Commission to buy the Bertie Hall mansion, an authentic 1826 historic home overlooking the Niagara River.

The Commission leased it to the Town of Fort Erie, which then rented it to Mildred M. Mahoney's Doll's House Collection for \$1 a year, plus upkeep. Her collection was valued at approximately \$800,000.

She formed a non-profit foundation that, through liquidating her assets, provided enough money to give each dollhouse its own electrical wall outlet, and to acquire climate control to protect the centuries-old pieces that would otherwise have suffered the ravages of heat and humidity. Over the years, more were donated to

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The attention to detail in the vast collection drew historians and collectors to Bertie Hall.



The auction of the collection realized less than 10 per cent of the original value.

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the collection, including a toothpick house completed by someone in prison.

Mildred hired her best friend June Spears to curate, and part-timers to staff the exhibit and raise funds through bingo. Some of them remember Mildred as demanding, but fun, generous, but fickle.

"She'd call from home and ask us to close the Doll's House for an hour in order to get her some cough drops," said Yvonne Hopkins, a former summer student Mildred hired in 1983. "But she was also fun, and was always surrounded by a cloud of cigarette smoke. She'd call a friend out of nowhere and fly them to New York for an exhibition."

Julie Rivet, who ran bingo games in 1989, added "She never had children. She hated them. But she loved animals, loved her three boxers and her cats, and she was very active with the ASPCA in Buffalo."

They both attest that in her sixties, Mildred carried herself like a lady, fashionably dressed and immaculately coiffed. An existing portrait of her shows a handsome woman with Joan Crawford looks.

"She was very well groomed, but always kept her hair in a tight bun," said Julie.

Yvonne said, "Back then she always told me I should cut my hair. But when I saw her in hospital, she had this wonderful silver mane that hung down to her arms."

She maintained a tight rein over the Bertie Hall operation for the next few years until she contracted emphysema from a lifetime of smoking. Three days before Christmas in 1990, she died.

For the next 20 years, tourism, bingo and Mildred's estate financed the Doll's House, but eventually the tourists ran out, then the bingo, then the estate.

The pitiable entry fees couldn't support the expenses of operating the museum that, along with insurance for the house and the collection, ran in the neighborhood of \$100,000 a year.

Lawyer Steve Latinovich, executor of the foundation, says, "We did everything to cut back over the years. We had a voluntary board, and we tried for funding from various sources, including a one-year Trillium grant. But we just couldn't get the big one to keep us going."

The Auction

As stipulated in Mildred's will, the collection was auctioned. The biggest house went for \$11,000, most for considerably less. About 120 bidders,

former friends and rivals, showed up from New Jersey, Massachusetts, Delaware, and Canada. Long distance bidders filed from Florida, Maine, California and Illinois.

"It wasn't the biggest collection in the world, but we had the three top dollhouse buyers in America here," said Don Plato, of Don Plato Auctions in St. Catharines.

"About 10 per cent of the collection had been sold prior to auction because over the past few years it was needed to keep the place going. It's the same with museums everywhere: you need a new roof, you sell a few things."

Bertie Hall closed in August 2010. The auction realized a return of less than 10 per cent of the original \$800,000 value, and bills that continue to come in will reduce the take further. The final amount will be split between the Fort Erie SPCA, Cystic Fibrosis research and the Salvation Army.

The original orange crate from Mildred's youth is now in the possession of the Fort Erie Historical Museum.

Chris Mills is a writer and photographer in the Niagara Region. He only very rarely in any capacity whatsoever plays with dollhouses. He can be seen at www.chrismills.ca.