Remembering Mary Harris Francis

by Michael Canadas and David Robinson

“The museum is founded on the premise that while collecting is marvelous, sharing the collections with others is the best of all.”

Mary Harris Francis

It is with great sadness that we share with the readers of Antique Doll Collector the news of the passing of Mary Harris Guinotte Francis. Known to doll and toy collectors simply as “Mary Harris” or “Harris”, she was born and raised in Kansas City, Missouri. Mary Harris exuded great personal pride in her home city, as family members on the Guinotte side were among its founders. Mary Harris Guinotte attended the University of Missouri at Columbia and went onto a career in the teaching field. In 1951, she and John Byers Francis were married and they enjoyed a life together for fifty-three years until his death in the fall of 2004. Their eventful marriage produced four children who were central in Mary Harris’ life. It was always with great delight that she spoke of her children and was extremely proud of the fine citizens they turned out to be. Her grandchildren were her true joy and she was thrilled that they would phone her, on their own, just to chat.

Mary Harris was a gifted organizer and was a member of the Junior League. It was that organization to which she gave credit for her education in public service. For many years, she volunteered at Children’s Mercy Hospital, served on several school boards and had a wonderful time while involved in children’s theater. Mary Harris was also Vice-chair of the Francis Family Foundation, which since its inception, has given over fifty million dollars to the arts and sciences, mostly benefiting the greater Kansas City area. Mary Harris founded and funded the Child Development Institute dedicated to the training of early-childhood caregivers. Because of these and other achievements, Mr. Francis dubbed his wife “the Pioneer Lady” in reference to her fortitude and determination.

Remembering Mary Harris on a personal level is quite easy, because she is, in a word – unforgettable. A natural born storyteller, she always had a funny tale to share and for us, it was the charming, innocent, happenings of her childhood that were the most captivating. We do not think Mary Harris would mind if we shared a few of them with you, as they are simple glimpses that will help provide an intimate view of the friend that we loved very much.
Mary Harris confided that while a little girl growing up during the Great Depression, it was a dream to own a set of the wildly popular Dionne Quintuplets. At Christmas time, a visit to Santa found her begging the bearded one for a set. As Christmas Day grew closer, little Mary Harris began a daily, upstairs/downstairs search of her large family home, until one day she found a wrapped box. She waited until no one was home then carefully unwrapped the box, discovered the five dolls and played with each of them, taking off their clothing, trying on different outfits and eventually, putting them back on the dolls. She very carefully wrapped them all back up doing her best to cover her tracks. Then, on Christmas morning unwrapped them once again and gave an Oscar-winning performance that went something like this: “Oh Mother, they’re marvelous!”

Another story involved an eight-year old Mary Harris desperately pining after a special pair of shoes. Alas, her mother informed her she would have to earn and save the three dollars for the shoes if she wanted them. Well, that could take forever! So, at the next meeting of the ladies’ club, hosted by her mother, little Mary Harris worked as the coat check girl, taking the ladies’ coats and pocketbooks for safekeeping. Mary Harris went on to tell us that she earned her money for the shoes on that one day alone – not from her “paycheck” but from taking just a little bit of change from each of the pocketbooks she checked! She told us with a twinkle in her eye that her parents were so proud of her for earning the money for her shoes-all on her own.

Many of Mary Harris’ escapades involved the years she attended a French Catholic Girls School – the school where the exasperated nuns eventually buried her sewing tools in the schoolyard in an elaborate ceremony, due to her non-existent skill with a needle and thread! The one thing she desperately wanted to achieve in her years at the school was the supreme honor of placing Baby Jesus in the manger of the school’s crèche scene, a Christmas time honor that fell upon the most well behaved girl in the school. Fun-loving and mischievous Mary Harris never did make the cut, but she surely had a lot more fun than the other girls did.
Mary Harris enjoyed sharing her stories and we certainly enjoyed hearing them, but we did notice that each story always ended the same way – with her signature – her uniquely exuberant laugh.

For many years, the Francis family kept a summer home on Martha’s Vineyard, enjoyed by family and friends alike. It was on one of her trips East that Mary Harris purchased her first dollhouse, a large Mystery House. On the day it was delivered in a large moving van, as fate would have it, at the exact moment it was lifted down from the truck, Mr. Francis pulled into the driveway. “What’s that?” he asked. Mary Harris replied haltingly that it was a dollhouse and quickly went on to say (like a child trying to convince a parent to let her keep the stray puppy she had just dragged home) – “Oh John, it’s my heart’s delight and the only dollhouse I will ever need!” Over one hundred and fifty dollhouses later, Mr. Francis had proven to be very tolerant and supportive of Mary Harris’ collecting. His rationale was – better these than real houses and he was fine as long as their home retained some dollhouse-free zones.

It was Mary Harris’ mother that noticed her daughter’s home was beginning to resemble a museum, so why not open one she asked? Therefore, Mary Harris, together with life-long family friend and fellow collector, Barbara Hall Marshall set out to find the perfect location. After a bit of searching the women found a circa 1911 mansion on the campus of the University of Missouri that would be just perfect to house their collections of antique dollhouses, toys and artist miniatures. In 1981, The Toy and Miniature Museum of Kansas City opened to the public. Years later, Mary Harris would laugh that in the beginning they had no idea what they were doing. Neither of the founders had backgrounds in business, nor any business opening a museum, but with their love of collecting and plenty of hard work, they found sweet success where many before them and since, have failed. Under Mary Harris and Barbara Marshall’s patronage, the museum has since undergone two significant expansions. The most recent expansion pushed the museum’s size to 33,000 square feet and provided a spectacular, permanent gallery for the gift of an excellent marble collection.

The Toy and Miniature Museum never ceased to be a place of great joy for Mary Harris and it was not just the accession of the collection that she loved, but the installations of the displays, as her judgment and fine taste were utilized. With her eagle eye, absolutely nothing would get past her and with thousands of light bulbs in the building; Mary Harris would invariably find the one or two that required replacing. However, we know her favorite aspect of the collecting and museum experience was the
people she met – they were the most fun for her and even though she was shy by nature, Mary Harris was definitely a people person. She would often hold court in her office, painted a brilliant shade of her favorite color – orange, and her friends and museum staff alike would stop in and see the latest acquisition, which never languished in her office for long – Mary Harris could simply not wait to install the newest addition.

Mary Harris was a respected member of Toy Collectors of America and the United Federation of Doll Clubs and was an extremely generous member of Federation. The UFDC annual convention was the highlight of her year and no one had more fun than she. It is comforting that last year’s convention, held in Kansas City – her city, was surely one of the highlights of her twenty-four years of dedication to the Toy and Miniature Museum. From our point of view and that of other friends, it was just delightful to witness Mary Harris and Barbara Marshall receive so much affirmation. One popular compliment we heard repeatedly was in the form of a question posed to Mary Harris. “Aren’t you proud of the museum?” and Mary Harris would reply, “I’m not proud, I am amazed!” Touché. The museum is an amazing accomplishment – an accomplishment sure to be enjoyed by many generations for years to come, and due in large part to one woman’s superb taste, sense of fun and love of color. For us, it will remain a place to visit Mary Harris, as the museum is carpeted with her essence.

Mary Harris Francis was a very modest and extremely loving person with a real zest for life…a friend, a young soul always ready to play…a child. Darling Mary Harris, you will missed by many, but never forgotten. We believe that as long as one is remembered …a memory…they shall continue to live in our hearts and minds…in that case, Mary Harris, you have touched so many people and left such a lovely legacy, it is certain that you will live forever.

Mary Harris put laughter into life and into The Toy and Miniature Museum. I will miss her immeasurably but I am determined to keep her laughter alive in the Museum.

Barbara Marshall, Museum Co-Founder

Mary Harris loved antique dolls’ houses that she knew had been played with by children; Victorian Fancies – the wilder, the better; tiny little chin-doll head dolls with teeny narrow feet; Rock and Granger painted tin furniture in rare forms; Biedermeier dolls’ house furniture; nun dolls in various orders’ habits; folk art barns and tramp art houses; funny little dogs (especially bulldogs) and cats of all materials; Gottschalk Red Roof houses and buildings; early and fine Frozen Charlottes; twin dolls; superb children’s tea sets; Marklin ornate pieces; her Hitties and all the “prizes” her friends gave them; Steiff dolls and animals; rare marbles and marble games; folk art black dolls; the Schoenhut Teddy Roosevelt Safari; and all things Christmasy. She had an eagle’s eye for both quality objects and dust and she loved to decorate and redecorate her dolls’ houses and to change displays in the Museum. She had the ability to always squeeze in one more acquisition into a full case; the drive to go to one more auction or convention, and the faith to believe objects out there which she adored would find their home some day in The Toy and Miniature Museum. She loved the Imari colors of orange and blue, interacting with visitors, watching and playing with children, celebrating her birthday, and giving presents to family and friends. Her collections in The Toy and Miniature Museum are her gifts to the public and nothing would please her more than to know that they will continue to be shared and enjoyed by countless visitors. Thanks Mary Harris for that legacy and for teaching me so much and for letting me “play” with you!

Mary Wheeler, Collections Manager

I will remember how passionate she was about her toys, her joy at Christmas and her childlike play with her dolls’ houses. She has left us all an incredible collection that will be shared by the generations to come.

Sandi Russell, Assistant Director