Carving a Place in History

BY GREGORY LEFEVER

Whimmydiddles and flipperdingers made their young lives bearable.

When the early American child could escape for a few moments from carrying wood and carding wool and tending the oxen, these simple wooden toys—sometimes crudely carved, sometimes created by skilled craftsmen—supplied one thing the rest of the day sorely lacked—fun.

Wooden toys are the oldest manufactured playthings in the United States, though they did not originate with the English settlers. When the earliest colonists conducted their first trade with Native Americans, the English were introduced to cornhusk dolls and peculiar wooden gadgets that had entertained native children for centuries.

Elsewhere wooden toys had a similar time-honored heritage. Archaeologists have unearthed jointed wooden dolls and little carved horses and chariots dating to 1100 B.C. Ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans whittled a variety of wooden toys, and craftsmen in the Middle Ages sold miniature carved knights, animals, and dolls at country fairs.

Although plentiful in 17th-Century Europe, wooden toys were initially scarce in the New World. Early settlers, focused on carving a subsistence living from the hostile wilderness, had little idle time. Childhood—much less children's playtime—was not condoned.

The Puritan ethos considered childhood a hotbed of sin. Idle hands were the Devil's tools. Child's play was a waste of God's time. Parents swaddled their infants to discourage

SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM, GIFT OF MRS. JOSEPH HARRISON JR.

Colonial toymakers often copied the wooden toys crafted by Native Americans. Playing with a miniature bow and arrow would have taught this Seminole child important skills for his future as a hunter or warrior. *Osceola Nick-A-No-Chee, a Boy*, 1840, by George Catlin.

WINTERTHUR MUSEUM

Jacob's Ladder was among the permissible "Sunday toys" that entertained colonial children. This c. 1790 example was likely made in Germany or Pennsylvania.

crawling, a gait regarded as animalistic and beneath humankind. At age seven, children dressed as adults in miniature—called "breeching" for boys—and took on whatever farm and house labor they could handle. Among a hundred other chores, they chopped and carried wood, gathered berries, churned butter, and gathered eggs.

They had little time for toys. What toys they had—such as tops and puzzles—they shared with adults. Researchers believe that relatives or the children themselves carved most early wooden toys from scrap wood, sometimes mimicking the wood, cob, or husk toys made by nearby Indian tribes.

Few examples of these Puritan-era wooden toys survive. When they broke or lost their attraction, they were discarded or tossed into the fire. Most of what we know about them comes from period depictions in drawings, woodcuts, and paintings.

SUNDAY ARKS AND COFFINS

Although the Puritans and their immediate descendants scorned toys and playtime as frivolous and sinful, they allowed one crucial exception: "Sunday toys," simple wooden toys, created by local craftsmen or brought over from Europe, that conveyed Biblical themes and reinforced moral lessons.

"Noah's Ark" was a mainstay. Sometimes simple, sometimes ornate with up to 100 pairs of animals, these wooden toys date as early as the late 1600s and continued to grow in popularity throughout the 18th and 19th Centuries, peaking in the Victorian era. Many Noah's arks were imported from Germany or carved in America by German immigrants.

"Jacob's Ladder" proved another popular Sunday toy, made from six thin blocks of wood hinged together with three ribbons. The child held one end and, with a twist of the wrist, flipped the block sequentially over. Versions of the toy date back to ancient Egypt and its appeal is universal, showing up in nearly every world culture since. Its westernized name comes from Genesis 28:12, in which Jacob dreamed of angels climbing up and down a ladder between Heaven and Earth.

Other examples of wooden Sunday toys bore names inspired by Bible stories. "Wolf in Sheep's Clothing" was a small, carved wolf garbed in a removable fleece costume. The illusionist game "Pillars of Solomon" had two wooden pillars connected with a string that when cut still appears to attach the two pillars.

Various wooden figures suitable for educational play on the Sabbath were called "Church Dolls." Even with them, play was no tea party. Little carved coffins with removable wooden corpses symbolized an all-too-familiar event in an age of high infant mortality. Church Dolls also gave children another permissible Sunday activity: practicing composing and delivering sermons.

THE FOLK TOY REIGNS

With more Europeans settling the colonies in the early 18th Century, the strict bonds of American Puritanism loosened and childhood

became freer. The rural nature of colonial America still placed heavy burdens of field and household work on young people, but many parents now recognized playtime and toys as vital to a child's well being.

This more lenient attitude toward playtime coupled with the limited availability of commercial playthings in the mostly rural society launched the golden age of the American folk toy. Young boys with jack knives created some rudimentary folk toys. Fathers, other relatives, and local woodworkers whittled more elaborate figures, puzzles, and toys.

"Rural children's toys were simple, homemade contrivances," said Jack Larkin, curator and chief historian at Old Sturbridge Village

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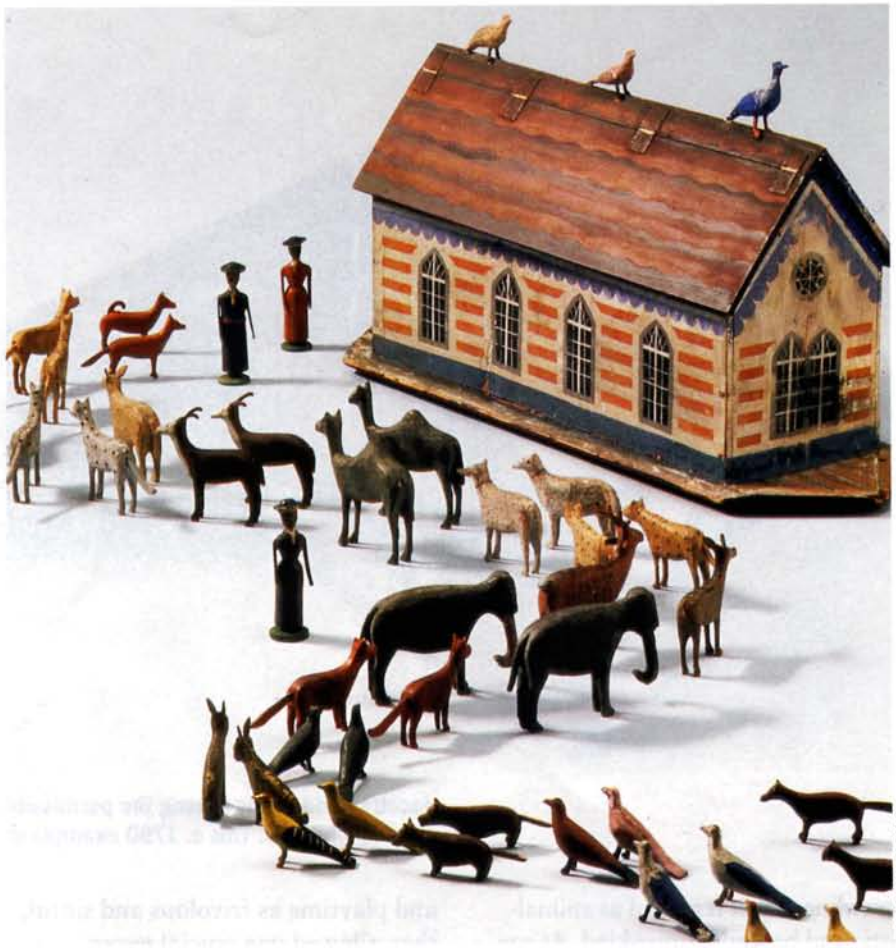

WINTERTHUR MUSEUM

Noah's Ark remained one of the most popular children's toys from the colonial through the Victorian era. The best arks were imported from Germany, such as this mid-1800s example.

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in Sturbridge, Massachusetts. "Store-bought, shop-made ones were rare."

They carved from local wood, sometimes adding leather, cloth, hemp, corncobs, string, and whatever else was handy. They did not choose haphazardly but used the best material for each purpose and toy.

"It is surprising to see how quickly the woods were assigned to fixed uses, even for toys," wrote Alice Morse Earle in her 1898 *Home Life in Colonial Days*. "In every state pop-guns were made from elder, bows and arrows from hemlock, whistles of chestnut or willow."

Although European and Native American toys influenced some American folk-art toy designs, many sprang from the imagination of their creators. The best of these lasted well into the next century, copied from generation to generation.

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WINTERTHUR MUSEUM

Wooden toys in 18th- and 19th-Century America ranged from the simple to the complex. This Merry-Go-Round with carved figures dates from the early 19th Century. The American Humming Top next to it, made about 1800, was among the first toys to make noise. Also noisemakers, the Chirping Birds date to about 1825, but their origin is uncertain.

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In addition to wooden tops and puzzles, one the most popular toys of this period was the "Ball & Cup," a wooden cup on a handle with a ball attached by a string, the object being to swing the ball upward and catch it in the cup. "Jumping Jack" and "Limber Jack" were jointed dancing figures. Acrobatic "Flap Jack" flipped over on the strings that suspended him between two sticks. Wooden noisemakers such as the "Bull Roar" and "Rattle Trap" marked the passing of the days of "quiet toys."

The "Hoop" rolled along the ground, pushed along by a stick. Multiple players, each with a stick, could toss it back and forth without stopping its spin.

A "Flipperdinger" had a wooden tube plugged at one end and a small air hole poked near that end. The child attached the top of an acorn—also with a hole poked through it—over the hole in the tube and rested a lightweight ball made of corncob in the inverted acorn top. By blowing gently into the tube, the child could elevate the ball and keep it suspended in mid-air.

COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION

This wooden peg doll was likely made in Germany but clothed in America about 1850. "Nell" belonged to Ida Saxton, who became the wife of President William McKinley.

To use a "Whimmydiddle" the child rubbed together two sticks—one notched and one with a spinner attached to its end. Rubbing the notched stick against the other caused the spinner to spin. The child controlled the spinner almost mysteriously with the subtle placement of his index finger and thumb.

Unlike the folk-art toys that have become obscure, the "Hobbyhorse" has never lost its popularity. Children still mimic galloping riders using a stick about two feet long with a carved wooden horse's head at one end.

COMMERCIAL TOY MAKING

As the Enlightenment uprooted fundamental beliefs, substituting reason for superstition in the 18th Century, attitudes toward children

COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION

When a small wire crank on the side of the base is turned, the toy couple swings gently between the two posts. German toymakers constructed it about 1840 from wood, composition, wire, and paint.

also changed. Parents began to recognize childhood as a natural stage of human development well suited for moral and scholastic education. Toys became more gender specific, functioning as tools to familiarize children with their pending roles in life. Boys were encouraged to play with carved farm animals and implements, while girls enjoyed dolls and other domestic toys.

Some toys, such as "Locke's Blocks," proved to be excellent tools for honing mental skills. The story goes that one day the prominent English philosopher John Locke saw a friend's children playing with wooden blocks on which they had inscribed the letters of the alphabet. Locke observed that the eldest child had learned to spell using the blocks and was so impressed that he described the blocks and their educational value in his 1693 volume, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. Locke's Blocks inaugurated a new era of teaching toys.

The new attitude toward childhood paralleled the rise of the toy industry. Factory-made toys began to appear in America in the early 18th Century. A number of cottage industries sprang up across New England, among them the country's earliest commercial toy makers. These were primarily cabinetmakers and other skilled woodworkers or talented farmers who whittled playthings in their evening hours.

By the later decades of the century, toy stores were operating in all of the colonies and wooden toys grew more elaborate. Toymakers embellished toy ships, puppets, and dolls with paper and cardboard. Wooden dollhouses, with architectural styles ranging from the elaborate to the simple lines of the rural homestead, found favor with children and adults, especially in more affluent households.

European toymakers—especially those in the German states—dramatically increased their imports to America. Known for creative, colorful, and sturdy toys since the Middle Ages, German toymaking rapidly evolved into a true industry with Nuremburg as its center.

The owners of the earliest American toyshops usually traveled abroad to obtain these quality playthings.

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Caspar Wistar Morris of Philadelphia made this dollhouse in about 1825 for his twin daughters, Elizabeth and Sarah, when they were about 12 years old. Built from yellow pine and poplar, the cupboard-like house has two hinged doors that open to reveal four rooms. The upstairs parlor here reflects the dollhouse's original yellow ochre color scheme.

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Soon, however, prominent German toymakers standardized their offerings and promoted them in catalogs. This early version of mail-order selling vastly increased the number of German wooden toys exported to America.

In Salem, North Carolina—itself founded by immigrants from the German states—village children welcomed the influence of German wooden toys. "The best documented German wooden toy that was locally owned is a Noah's Ark from the Erzgebirge region that was a first birthday gift for Francis Leven Fries in 1813," said Johanna Brown, curator and director of collections at Old Salem.

"The January 1804 records of the Moravian church note that a proposed shop in Salem would carry 'Nuremburg toys,' which probably would have included an assortment of wooden toys," she said, noting a later reference to a proposed toyshop.

"The point is, there is ample evidence that, at least in the early 19th Century, German wooden toys were being sold in Salem, and it is quite possible that the ark purchased for little Francis Fries' first birthday was purchased in a Salem shop."

MASS PRODUCTION AND BEYOND

As Romanticism arose in the 19th Century, the stature of childhood rose. Romantics considered childhood a precious period of purity.

"Early 19th-Century children played fantasy games in the kitchen, the bedchamber, the yard, or an adjoining pasture," wrote Larkin in *Children Everywhere: Dimensions of Childhood in Early 19th-Century New England*. "They used themes from Bible stories, recent history, or moralistic children's fiction. Children played house with 'rag babies' and bits of broken china, fought Revolutionary battles and Napoleonic campaigns, or held prayer meetings and preached sermons."

But toys and the toy industry were changing. Although children still fondly played with wooden folk toys, early in the century New England tinsmiths began making simple toys such as whistles. Soon tin soldiers gained popularity.

In 1838, the Philadelphia Tin Toy Manufactory became the country's first toy manufacturer of record. For another decade all tin would be imported, but with the opening of the tin ore mines in Illinois in the 1840s, American tin toys became more plentiful and economical.

Soon another material gained popularity for toys. In 1850 India Rubber Toys advertised "the most durable and economic toys of all, consisting of air balls, ball rattles, doll heads and animal figurines."

Wood remained the material of choice for American toys for a few more decades. The transition from wooden folk toy to mass production started in 1847 in Hingham, Massachusetts. Carpenter William S. Tower formed the Tower Guild, a 20-member cooperative of woodworkers and carpenters who provided a steady supply of quality wooden toys to the growing marketplace.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JUDITH LILE

Crandall's District School set c.1876. Each wooden figure is stamped and painted.

As industrialization rapidly grew after the Civil War, toy manufacturing expanded to a larger scale and Crandall became the country's most prominent name in wooden toys.

Charles Crandall of Montrose, Pennsylvania, and his son Jesse set up shop shortly after the war. Although their company first became famous for their wooden alphabet

blocks and building blocks, it also made wooden figures and animals, wooden games and puzzles, horses, sleds, and even tricycles. Highly collectable, Crandall toys are often recognizable by the use of colored lithograph paper glued to the wood. The company operated in New York and Pennsylvania until 1907. The Crandalls earned more than 400 patents for toy-related innovations.

By the latter half of the 19th Century, cast iron eclipsed wood as the choice for toys. Iron was a natural choice for American manufacturers. Rich in iron ore, limestone, and coal, the United States dominated the world's iron industry. American toy manufacturers sold cast-iron banks and toy vehicles worldwide until World War II halted their production.

Even in today's age of plastic, many progressive child educators—such as adherents of the Montessori and Waldorf methods—favor using wooden toys because of their organic and traditional play value. Thousands of cottage-industry woodworkers still produce wooden folk toys across the United States and throughout the rest of the world.

Certainly toys have come a long way from the whimmydiddles and flipperdingers. As Larkin noted, "Today's children may no longer be producers, but they have become toy consumers, participants in a multi-billion-dollar part of our market economy. Children from homes in quite modest circumstances today have toy collections which would have stunned even their wealthiest counterparts in times past." ✻

Contributing editor Gregory LeFever writes on a variety of historical and design topics.

COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION

A number of talented carvers, most of German heritage, worked in Pennsylvania throughout the 19th Century. One carved this giraffe about 1850.