CROW INDIAN DOLLS: CONNECTING LORE, LEGEND AND LANDSCAPE

Preserving a tribal art for future generations

By Cynthia Logan, photography by Paul Dix

Birdie Real Bird's large hands flutter as she gestures toward a Crow Indian doll about 12 inches tall. It's hard to imagine them working buckskin with sinew thread and tiny beads for nearly 100 hours to create this art piece. Yet they're graceful, expressive hands that transmit the enthusiasm she has for sharing her heritage with middle school children. Soon she'll have them on their feet attempting the "Crow Hop" (none of the teens will exhibit her 54 year-old exuberance or agility). The doll is 10 years old, the first Birdie ever made. She's dressed as Real Bird's mother dressed, and the way Birdie appears today, her long braids caught up with a simple leather tie.

The artist runs her hands over the purple wool shawl that's layered over a long-sleeved cotton calico dress, held in place by an elaborately beaded belt, the traditional garb worn by Crow tribeswomen at the turn of the 20th century. "I want to keep this alive," she comments. "Crow women don't dress this way any more." Her calf-high moccasins are covered by rain boots, and look like athletic taping coupled with crocs. She removes the rubber covers, revealing stunning, handmade footwear. Then she resumes her lesson, showing the children beautiful beaded vests, cradleboards, moccasins and belts.

Real Bird (whose "real" name in Crow is *First Many Times* comes from a long line of beading craftswomen. "I learned to

Below: Native American Crow, Birdie Real Bird maker of tradtional crow dolls, admiring her dolls. **Right:** Cradleboards at Crow Agency, Mont. made by artisans: (from left to right) Jamie Demotiney; Janice Little; Zita Yellowmule.

Indeed, Native American Indian dolls have a spirit, and were often considered living beings. Centuries ago, a child's first doll may have been a small tree branch with forked legs and a scrap of buckskin tied around the waist.

bead as a child and now it's almost an addiction," she confesses. "I need to do it every day."

Tiny black beads have made their way onto the doll's head, a departure from the traditional use of horse or human hair. Besides, says Birdie, "horse hair braids on a doll ruin the proportions."

Doll maker Susan Stewart makes a point of using only human hair, occasionally substituting buffalo hair for "man dolls." Also Crow, she is the manager at Chief Plenty-Coups State Park and is fond of using antique beads from the 1920s for her dolls' eyes, producing a glistening, life-like effect. Since her dolls sell for about $600 each, Stewart separates the "play dolls" from "those you might hang on the wall as an art piece."

Both women began making dolls a decade ago. While Real Bird wanted to preserve the memory of her mother, Stewart desired to give her granddaughters what her own grandmother had passed on to her. Both use buffalo or horse matting to stuff their dolls, and are careful to preserve proportions. Stewart, trained in contemporary art, calls it "the eight heads high" principle: "the body should be eight times the height of the head, so that "when you stand them in a corner they look like little people."

Indeed, Native American Indian dolls have a spirit, and were often considered living beings. Centuries ago, a child's first doll may have been a small tree branch with forked legs and a scrap of buckskin tied around the waist. Other objects fashioned as dolls were river rocks, cattail buds, corncobs or buffalo bones. Some were nothing more than European (traded) ceramic heads. Yet all were treasured as toys, functioned as teachers and storytellers, and served to instruct children in tribal ethics. They were used in medicine bundles and religious ceremonies, and were even attached to sacred structures, thought to convey their own medicine. Dolls reflected myths, events, and people — some represented the enemy and were used like talismans. "Sundance dolls" were traditionally made by men and tied to the associated lodge. They usually had no arms or legs, and looked like a pillow with a head on it.

Though women did not often handle sacred objects, they were members of the Tobacco Society and participated in the most revered Crow rite: the Tobacco Planting Ceremony. Winona Plenty Hoops, now 91, held the most recent planting in 2004, she wore her red-ochre cloth dress with seed bundles tied on to it. Plenty Hoops' great-granddaughter is carrying on the tradition.

"Nearly all American Indian dolls

Left from top: Native American Crow, Winona Plenty Hoops (Yellowtail) maker of Native American Dolls • Two year old Shania kisses a doll made by her father Cedric Thomas Walks Over Ice.

are made to represent adults," writes Forrest Fenn in *Historic American Indian Dolls and the Children Who Played With Them*. He details the influence of European traded goods such as pony beads (segments of drawn tubes of glass, larger than seed beads). As white men entered Indian country, they brought wool cloth in red, green and navy blue that the Crow traded for furs. Around 1865, muslin replaced the use of buckskin in making doll bodies. Husk fragments could often be seen in the Calico cotton dresses worn by both dolls and women. Earrings and necklaces were often made from conical dentalium shells, or from the traded abalone.

Real Bird credits doll-making for teaching her more about her own culture: "The Crow believe everyone has three mothers: Mother Earth, your mother and your home. Each is vitally important." Deemed a Folk and Traditional Arts Master Artist by the Montana Arts Council, she has inspired renewed interest among Crow women in making the traditional elk-tooth dresses worn at weddings and pow-wows. The valued "ivories" are the two canine teeth male elk use to whistle during rut. Teeth from a young buck's first elk kill were saved for his bride or a daughter. From 450 to 700 ivories were needed to create the famed dresses, of which there remain only 10 or 12 — most now sport heishe shells, crushed bone or another substitute for genuine elk teeth.

It's not just the dresses that are

Clockwise from top: Doll by Winona Plenty Hoops • Doll by Birdie Real Bird of Hardin, Mont. shows intricate beading and stitch work • Doll with Elk-Tooth Dress by Winona Plenty Hoops of Lodgegrass, Mont.

It's not just the dresses that are disappearing: Mary Foote who helps her mother, Evelyn Bear Ground, make dolls estimates that of approximately 7,500 residents on Crow Reservation there are only around eight doll makers and, of those, even fewer who follow the old ways.

disappearing: Mary Foote who helps her mother, Evelyn Bear Ground, make dolls estimates that of approximately 7,500 residents on Crow Reservation there are only around eight doll makers and, of those, even fewer who follow the old ways. "We were taught not to put faces on the dolls, so they could be whoever you wanted them to be," she says. "And different families within the tribal clans might 'own' certain colors, so you couldn't use them unless you were given the right to." Of particular importance was red ocher. It is found naturally in hematite-rich volcanic regions and was also produced by heating yellow ocher (limonite). Another source of the color red was Chinese Vermillion, a dry powder pigment mixed with water or animal grease bartered to Plains Indian tribes by European traders.

Large museums or private collectors own most dolls made before the turn of the 20th century. Even the modern Native dolls are snapped up: Just a few years after Real Bird began her craft, two were sold to the Smithsonian. Her "Warrior Doll," patterned from a photo circa the 1800s, was also purchased, as were two of Plenty Hoops'. The newly inspired Native American doll-

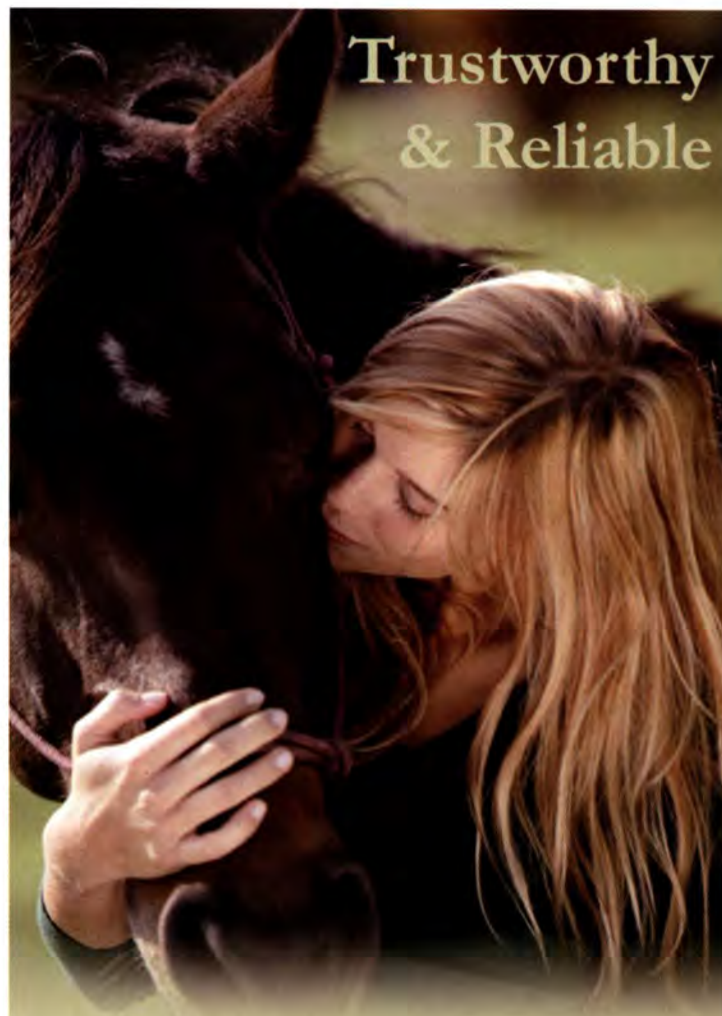
Above: A young girl wears a traditional Crow Elk Tooth dress and carries a doll adorned with Heishe shells. **Left:** Cedric Thomas Walks Over ice made this warrior doll without a face, according to tribal tradition.

makers intend not only to keep this art alive, but also to make sure it thrives.

THE WORKTABLE IN REAL BIRD'S home is covered with earth paints, along with patterns, buckskin, buffalo hair, various-sized beads and sinew thread. An ice pick stands out. "I use this to stuff with," she says, picking it up. "See, I leave a little space at the neck and the foot, and after I've pushed the buffalo matting in until it's just firm enough, I sew those places — it's kind of tricky." Compared with the work of another artist's doll, Real Bird's is solid to the touch, the other, stuffed with cotton batting, smooshy. It's not just the stuffing that's tricky; after cutting the buckskin from her hand drawn pattern, Real Bird starts sewing at the inner thigh, then moves to another area, centering first the whole piece, then finding the median from "the center in the center," each place becoming more specific, as in East Indian art and in beading. "You can't just start someplace and sew continuously around the form," she explains. "You'd end up with everything all bunched up and askew."

Unlike Real Bird, who spends about 100 hours on each doll (or "about a month after I've gotten it stitched and stuffed"), Cedric Thomas Walks Over Ice works quickly. "If I sit down and work eight hours a day, it takes about 10 days for me to make a doll," he says. At 33, he's been doing it since he was 16, and makes nine or 10 dolls a year. One of a handful of male doll-makers, "CT" Walks is dynamic and colorful. His work reflects the traditional blank face and many of his dolls exhibit the distinctive, stand-up hairdo worn by Crow men. His *Traveling Medicine*, a stunning horse and rider piece sporting vibrant color, intricate beading and profuse owl feathers is another Crow doll now owned by the Smithsonian.

"These artists are both traditional and innovative," says Putt Thompson, owner of The Custer Battlefield Trading Post near Crow Reservation, a promoter of Native American art and a doll collector. It is exciting to see Birdie and Mary Lou Big Day come out with their own thing." Big Day was chosen as Artist of the Year at the Indian Arts and Crafts Association competition in Albuquerque, New Mexico, this year, the first Crow to receive the honor. Her winning entry was a miniature scene depicting a doll moving the family camp, and incorporated traditional tribal designs and geometric patterns. Titled, *Crow Traveling Medicine Beaded Doll*, the piece contains buckskin, rawhide, wool, horsehair, mink, seed beads, earth paints and brass beads. "Years ago, the grandmothers would go into



Come meet your dream horse at La Cense Montana.

We spend over two years creating a trustworthy and reliable partner for the recreational rider. La Cense offers finely trained recreational riding horses.

www.lacensemontana.com
406.683.8777

LA CENSE
MONTANA
NATURAL RANCHING

AQHA Fundamentals of Horsemanship:
An Educational Partnership with La Cense Montana

Circle **89** on Reader Service Card

But whatever the price, these dolls convey a spiritual connection to a people, a tradition and a landscape and, as treasured commodities, are a way to preserve an indigenous culture.

the mountains and receive a vision," relates Big Day. "The Spirits would tell them how to make a doll, particularly how to paint the face, a sacred aspect of the creation that could only be captured with earth paint." (The painting or beading of the face has evolved over time as the artists realized their work was better understood and appreciated with facial features).

A Texas kid, Thompson was fascinated with arrowheads and enthralled with American Indians. At 11, he saw an Indian Expo in Oklahoma and later lived among the Pawnee. After moving to Crow Agency he noticed a lack of appreciation for tribal arts, and so commissioned some cradleboards. "Dolls can be big business. I found one in Bozeman and offered $10,000 and they wouldn't take it," he states. He has appraised dolls at $40,000 for the Heritage Museum in Billings.

According to Thompson, what in 1987 sold for around $1200 to $1500 would today cost twice as much. But whatever the price, these dolls convey a spiritual connection to a people, a tradition and a landscape and, as treasured commodities, are a way to preserve an indigenous culture. "You couldn't put your money into a better piece of ethnography, because these things are beautiful and have personality — not to mention the artistic application of quills, beads and other materials that have survived time. Thompson, who likes the historic aspect of Native American Indian dolls, has at least 15 at his GarryOwen Trading Post; 15 at Custer Battlefield; and 10 at home. "You can't own enough of it; it's Montana history — the history of the people that held the land for so long before we even got here — right here in our back yard." BSJ

Premier Ranch & Recreational Properties

View All Our Properties:
www.countrywestrl.com

ROCKY MOUNTAIN ROAD ACREAGE
GALLATIN VALLEY, MT

Come and see the beautiful views from this 20-acre parcel nestled in the foothills of the Bridger Mountains. A spring on the property could be developed for stock water. Several Forest Service accesses are very close. The property is perimeter fenced and easily accessed year round. Offered for $575,000.

GOAT MOUNTAIN ELK RETREAT

100.52 +/- acres - Gorgeous views from every window of the Bridger Mountains and the Crazy Mountains can be found on this ideal 100+ acre elk hunting retreat located in the beautiful Smith Creek area, Meagher County, Montana. A remote property bordered on two sides by Forest Service with a 2,600 square foot cabin and 3-car garage with all the amenities including septic, underground power, and well. Elk, moose, bear, mule deer, and mountain lion all have been seen on the property. May be purchased turnkey, fully furnished for $1,500,000.

15 South Tracy, Suite 4 ★ Bozeman, Montana 59715 ★ 406-586-9334

Circle **90** on Reader Service Card