

— photos by ROBERT L. SMITH



# Oh, You Beautiful Dollhouses

There's a new museum in  
Fort Erie that tells real history  
in its own kind of small talk.

By ERNA P. EATON

**W**HEN MILDRED M. MAHONEY saw Colleen Moore's "Million Dollar Castle" on display in the former J.N. Adam department store on Main Street, she promised herself right then that some day she too would have a real dollhouse.

"It was still the Depression," Mrs. Mahoney recalls, "and I was reminded of the dollhouse I had as a child — an orange crate."

Now Mrs. Mahoney's orange-crate dollhouse, along with a miniature of the 1932 Million Dollar Castle, which toured the country, and some 200 other dollhouse and miniature rooms filled with tiny furnishings are on display in Bertie Hall at 657 Niagara Blvd. in Fort Erie, just two miles

east of the Peace Bridge. Mrs. Mahoney's collection has become a dollhouse museum.

The collection, spanning two centuries of dollhouse making and with an insured value of \$1.5 million, went on display in June in historic Bertie Hall, a charming red brick house with two-story pillars built in 1826, purchased by the Niagara Parks Commission for the Mildred M. Mahoney Silver Jubilee Dollhouse Museum. The words "silver jubilee" appear in the title because the Mildred M. Mahoney Foundation, which sponsors the museum, was established in 1977, the silver jubilee year of Queen Elizabeth II's reign.

As a serious collector of miniatures, Mrs. Mahoney has been pursuing her hobby for over 30 years and is still collecting. Many of the houses have been acquired through estate sales

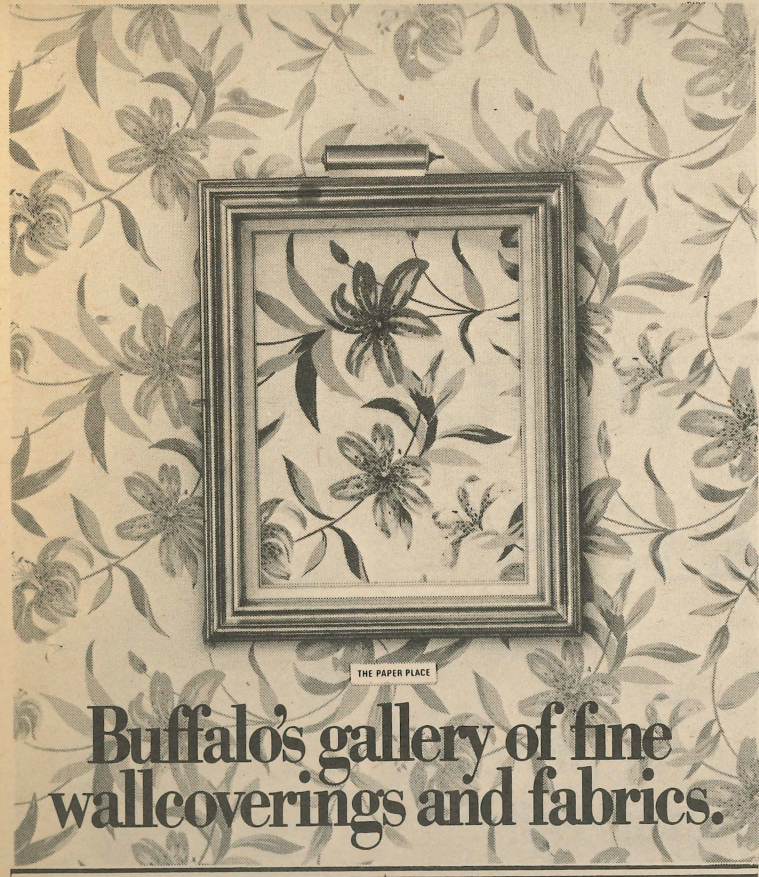
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Figures enliven the milliner's shop in the Room of Shops.



This dollhouse is modeled after the Donovan House, which burned to the ground last year.



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# Dollhouses

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and through catalogs from such auction houses as Christie's and Sotheby's in London, England. Antiques dealers with whom she is acquainted are also on the lookout for items that might be of interest to her.

Mildred Mahoney is the widow of William B. Mahoney, noted defense lawyer, a one-time chairman of the Erie County Democratic Party and brother of the late Assembly speaker Walter Mahoney. She became an avid collector of miniatures as a result of her interest in antiques and contact with dealers when she ran antiques shows for the benefit of local charities.

Miniatures collecting ranks third in the world of hobbies, says Mrs. Mahoney — behind coins and stamps.

Miniatures collectors in the United States alone spent \$90 million last year on their passion.

"Originally, when collecting miniatures became popular in the 18th century, especially in England," she explains, "this was a hobby for adults, not children. It was not unusual for Chippendale to receive an order for adult furniture plus an order for miniature copies from the same client.

"Dollhouses were called 'baby houses' then and were designed as showcases for

collectors' possessions. In those days, children were given a few miniatures as gifts and were allowed to display them only at Christmastime."

Mrs. Mahoney is being assisted in her work at the museum by four university students who are receiving credits for their art or history majors and who guide tours and do research under the auspices of Experience '83 Program in Canada. A tour takes about two hours.

"The setting and the collection are a perfect marriage," says Mrs. Mahoney, who begins a tour with the oldest house, of Palladian style, 1780. The windows are painted black as a protest against a tax in England at that time on clear glass windows in houses. Historical tidbits like this are an educational aspect of the collection.

Of particular interest to Buffalonians would be a 1928 house that is a duplicate of one in the city's Central Park section. She made a trade with the friend who owned it. The house has a butterfly staircase, swinging French doors and upholstered furniture made by Arcade Manufacturing Co.

The museum also contains a replica of Mrs. Mahoney's workroom in her Bertie Township home, where she does all the

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## the baby's room

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restoration of the dollhouses and their furnishings. Some years ago, Mrs. Mahoney obtained a miniature of the Donovan house on Fort Erie's Stone Mill Road. The 125-year-old house burned to the ground last winter, and its small copy has a special place in one of the display rooms.

One of the most diminutive of the displays is a castle made of stained glass with delicately detailed copper roof. It was made for Mrs. Mahoney by Carlton Moore, an artisan now living in the Midwest.

Royal character dolls are housed in a copy of the Versailles palace. The miniature has the emblem of the Sun King, Louis XIV of France, and 44 stained-glass windows. "The wood is so old it feels like metal," says Mrs. Mahoney. She estimates the Versailles miniature would bring about \$50,000 at auction today.

**O**F SIMILAR VALUE is her favorite, the Marygate, 1810, which is five stories with complete "below stairs" rooms, Biedermier rosewood furniture with gold stenciling, ivory and ebony accents, and a complete but very tiny set of Shakespeare — with readable type.

"Ugly but important" is Mrs. Mahoney's description of the Sturge family home that was in the Vivian Greene Museum in England. (Mrs. Greene's husband is novelist Graham Greene). It has a half-round dining room cabinet made by a violin maker. At auction, according to Mrs. Mahoney, this house would bring about \$30,000.

The House of Many Rooms contains her favorite room, which she furnished in art deco style. The room is white with lavender moire upholstery on white Lawson style furniture, made by a faculty member at New York Institute of Design. The ermine rug was made from a wrap which belonged to the late Mrs. Edward H. Butler, publisher of The Buffalo Evening News.

There are folk-art dollhouses of 1850 that have a Ukrainian character; folding dollhouses of the early 1900s; a kitchen room that has a general store containing 5,000 pieces; and a Nuremberg kitchen of 1840 from Germany, described by Mrs. Mahoney as a real educational toy (its purpose was to teach girls kitchen cleaning).

There is an empty house, about 11 feet long, which Mrs. Mahoney is thinking about doing in World War II style, complete with blackout curtains, auxiliary lights and sand buckets recalling a part of modern history that is unknown to many young people today.

And if the collection isn't enough for you, there is Bertie Hall itself. The Prince of Wales who became Britain's King George V slept there in 1866, and the house is a lovely old place complete with a tunnel to the river.

Admission to the museum is \$2 (Canadian) for adults and \$1.50 for children and senior citizens.

The museum will be open seasonally; it will close this year on Nov. 1.

*ERNA P. EATON is a reporter for The News Living Section.*

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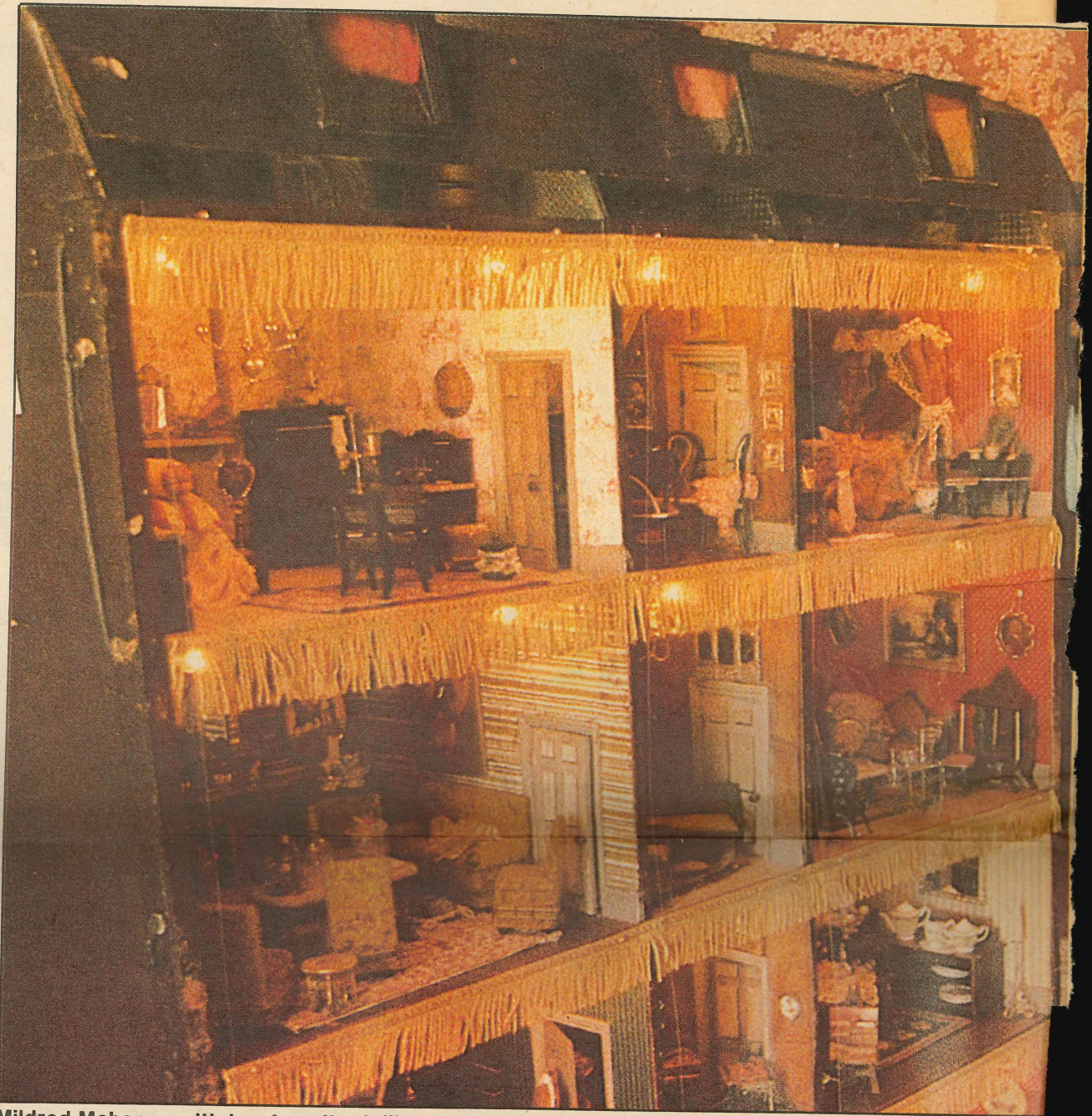
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This stained glass house was made especially for Mrs. Mahoney by artisan Carlton Moore.



Mildred Mahoney with her favorite dollhouse, the Marygate, which is filled with Biedermeier rosewood furniture.



Details from houses, above and right, show the perfection of original set.