

The Origins of an Heirloom

...By Wendy Tomlinson, 2008

Beloved by young and old alike, in nations around the world, the Teddy Bear has become such an integral part of society over the past century, that it is hard to imagine our lives without our ubiquitous furry pal.



Rhonda with her furry friend

By definition the Teddy Bear is an enduring traditional form of stuffed toy animal, for the purpose of a child's plaything, but in recent years some Teddy Bears have become highly sought after by adult collectors. Teddy Bear collectors or 'arctophiles', from the Greek word 'arcto' (bear) and 'philos' (lover), will go to extraordinary measures to adopt that special friend, setting the world record for the most expensive bear at a Christie's auction in 1994. "Teddy Girl" by Steiff, the lifelong companion of the late Colonel Bob Henderson, sold for over \$170 000 dollars.

The first documented Teddy Bear in North America, was created by Morris and Rose Michtom, of Brooklyn, New York, after being inspired by a cartoon that appeared in the November 16 1902 issue of The Washington Post.

The cartoon drawn by Clifford Berryman depicts the often-told tale of US President Theodore Roosevelt refusing to shoot a bear cub. The black bear having being captured and presented to him on an unsuccessful hunting trip in Mississippi, where he was attempting to settle a border dispute. Reportedly Roosevelt refused to fire at such a helpless creature and went on to successfully use a bear image in his political campaigns.

The Michtom's sewed a soft bear toy and placed it in the front window of their candy and stationary shop, with a copy of the cartoon. The wide-eyed little bear stood upright, resembling the cartoon drawing. "Teddy's Bear" was such a huge hit with the buying public that demand immediately skyrocketed and the Michtom's quickly went on to found the first Teddy Bear manufacturing company in North America, the Ideal Novelty and Toy Company, still in operation today.

Coincidentally, across the ocean in Germany a young Richard Steiff was sketching his favourite animals at the Stuttgart Zoo, the bear cubs. In 1902 Richard presented his sketches to his disabled aunt, Margarete Steiff, who

owned a small toy factory, and she insisted that they create a prototype bear, based on the drawings. Highly collectable and sought after today, the Steiff bears still have the distinctive humped back and long nose, more like the real bears of Richard Steiff's drawings.

Teddy was an instant success. Played with, cuddled and talked to they could sit, turn their head, move arms and legs and in some cases, growl. Teddy Bears were made in wool and mohair and came in a range of colours, from silvery white to black, with shiny boot button eyes and felt paw pads and stuffed with long thin strips of wood, generally pine.

By 1906 it was clear that the Teddy Bear craze was in full swing when composer JK Bratton wrote "The Teddy Bear Two Step", eventually becoming the song "The Teddy Bear's Picnic". And between 1903 and 1915 Steiff manufactured and sold millions of bears, each with its trademark ear button.

World War 1 would interrupt the flow of bears to North America and by the 1930's economic depression in the US meant most of the large scale Teddy Bear manufacturers stopped production and the tradition of hand sewn natural fiber bears came to an end.

In the post war era consumers wanted washable toys and liked the idea of bears made of nylon and acrylic plush, with plastic eyes and stuffed with foam rubber stuffing. In the mid 1980's a new craze of Teddy-mania swept around the globe again, when Steiff began producing their limited edition bears and individual 'bear artists' began creating one of kind heritage quality Teddy Bears in home based studios.

One such artist is Rhonda Ridgeway of Kozy Kabin 'Handcrafted Hugs', located near Durham Ontario. Rhonda started making Teddy Bears in 1995, after inheriting her grandfather's vintage fur coat. From then on Rhonda's customers have been keeping her busy making nearly four thousand one of a kind collector bears for adults, from her own patterns and designs.

Rhonda has been crafting all her life and began sewing after purchasing her first sewing machine in elementary school. Her bears are exquisitely detailed

and finished with a very high level of skill. From the hand-blown glass eyes, and lacy ribbon adornments, to the vintage accessories and handmade hats. Rhonda uses English and German mohair, chenille bedspreads and some faux furs, but most of her Teddies are crafted from 'previously enjoyed' real fur coats.

The coats are shipped to her from customers across North America. It might be Grandma's mink, or a once beloved fur coat forgotten in the back of a closet. Many of Rhonda's bears are memorial bears, made in remembrance of a loved one and she has even made bruises from Grandpa's hunting pants and a schoolteacher's favorite blazer. Clients often ask this talented bear maker to personalize their Teddy with keepsake jewelry and spectacular antique christening gowns or add unique items such as miniature musical instruments and eyeglasses.

A full-length fur coat can often be used to make more than one bear, depending on the size of the finished bear and the size and condition of the coat. To purchase a bear from Kozy Kabin 'Handcrafted Hugs' expect to pay about one hundred dollars, if the customer provides the coat, and up to two hundred dollars to adopt a bear from Rhonda's collection.

When asked if she ever gets tired of making the same thing, she says, "But it's never the same- each (one) Teddy Bear is unique." "I couldn't make two the same if I tried!"

Each bear is painstakingly created in Rhonda's studio and takes up to two days to complete and clients should expect to wait up to 12 weeks to receive their completed custom Teddy Bear. During the Christmas season Rhonda is overwhelmed with requests and asks clients to place their orders early in the year.

With their charismatic little personalities and high quality workmanship, it is easy to see why 'arctophiles' everywhere are falling in love with Rhonda Ridgeway's heirloom Teddies. If you would like your own 'Handcrafted Hugs' Teddy Bear log onto www.kozykabin.ca for more information and upcoming craft show dates or call 519-369-3736.



Natural Hugs & Warm fuzzies

- Falling in love.
- Having your 2:00 class cancelled on a beautiful day.
- Laughing so hard your face hurts.
- Watching a child do something for the first time after you taught them.
- A great idea.
- A scholarship.
- A hot shower.
- No line at the book return.
- A hug.
- A special glance.
- Acting in the theater.
- Clean sheets.
- Getting mail.
- Walking your dog.
- Love.
- Falling asleep in the sun on a cool day.
- Taking a drive on a pretty road.
- Hugging a big teddy bear.
- Playing miniature golf.
- Getting a strike in bowling.

LONGING TO BELONG

See the multi-ethnic throng
hear their multilingual song
different races, different faces
ever struggling to belong
They come from lands beyond
the sea
with hopes and dreams of
breathing free
and in the end, O Canada
they'll proudly stand on guard
for thee

William Bedford, Toronto

...often imitated but never duplicated.

