



Pioneer Toys

Freinds Made of Rags and Wood



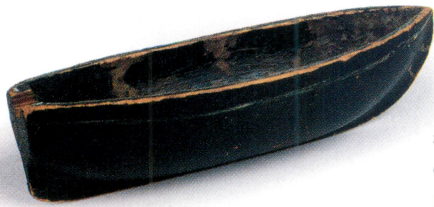
SINCE ANCIENT TIMES, toys have played an important part in the life and development of children.

In ancient Egypt, children enjoyed balls, pull-toys and toy animals. Children of ancient Greece and Rome had fun with boats, carts, hobbyhorses, hoops and kites. Tops probably developed hundreds of years ago in China or Japan. During the Middle Ages in Europe, the most popular toys included puppets and rattles. Always, some children have invented many of their own toys by imitating the work and following the interests of adults.

It was no different for pioneer children, who not only “sang as they walked and walked and walked and walked”—they also played.

“She wasn’t much to look at, just a few rags loosely stitched together,” Elizabeth Connor wrote of her rag doll, named, appropriately, Lizzie. “But she was real to me. I talked to her, and sometimes it seemed to me that she talked to me. We laughed together. We cried together. We made the trek together. She was my playmate, my best friend, and I was happier because she was there.”





"She wasn't much to look at, just a few rags loosely stitched together," Elizabeth Connor wrote of her rag doll, named, appropriately, Lizzie. "But she was real to me. I talked to her, and sometimes it seemed to me that she talked to me. We laughed together. We cried together. We made the trek together. She was my playmate, my best friend, and I was happier because she was there."

William Wright didn't think of his hand-carved wooden flute as his best friend, but playing it was his favorite pastime as he made his way across Iowa with his family in 1849. That's why it was so upsetting when he awakened one morning to find his flute missing. "I searched everywhere for the flute, but I couldn't find it," he wrote in his life history. "When my brother, John, suggested that someone might have thrown it on the morning cooking fire, I cried. I pled with my father to make another one for me, but he could never manage to find the time."

It wasn't until years later that it occurred to William that the disappearance of the flute might have had something to do with his total lack of native musical ability. "Maybe someone in the Company was tired of hearing 'Waiting For The Reapers' over and over again," William wondered, adding: "It was the only song I knew, but I played it with spirit and energy."

Most pioneer toys had at least two things in common: they were small, and they were hand-made. Size was an important factor, because there wasn't room in the back of a wagon or handcart to carry something big and bulky. And the home-made nature of most toys gave each a unique appearance and design. Some toys were strictly utilitarian, and could only be identified by those who made them and those who played with them. Other toys were so intricately designed and created, they were almost works of art. B.H. Roberts confessed of having so much admiration, as a child, for one particularly handsome, hand-carved toy buffalo, "to this day I sometimes wonder about my standing in heaven, so great was my jealousy and covetousness."

On the trail, a toy didn't even have to be a toy to be important to pioneer children. One company leader wrote in his journal about breaking up a bit of commotion between two boys who were fighting over a sturdy stick. One claimed it was his rifle, while the other said it was his hobby horse. "To me, it looked like a stick," said the captain, "so I broke it in half and gave a piece to each boy to use as his own imagination saw fit."

And that was the key ingredient for almost all pioneer toys. With a little bit of imagination, a stick could be a gun or a horse, depending on the creativity of the youngster who held the stick in his hands. A piece of wood could be a toy animal, a little flour mixed with water could be modeling clay.

And a few rags could be a doll. A confidante. A friend. A toy. ▼

