

Toy story: Actor changed roles to open unique shop

BY KAREN KRAMER

In the middle of Bleecker St. between Sixth and Seventh Aves. is one of the small shops that is still keeping Greenwich Village unique. For nearly 40 years Grover Van Dexter, a small, wiry man in his mid-80s, has been lorded over wooden carousel horses, tin dolls, miniature trucks, animated Betty Boops, Mickey Mouse cutouts and many other antique toys.

Van, as everyone calls him, has been living in Greenwich Village for more than 50 years, and has had his antique toy store, Second Childhood, here for nearly 40 of those years. He originally came to the Village to be an actor but it was his love of antique toys that brought another dimension to his life. It is a passion that started nearly 80 years ago.

"When I was a little kid in the Depression my father lost his job," says Van Dexter as a porcelain doll looks over his shoulder. "He had a garage full of things...you know, hand-saws and all kinds of tools, things like that. And he liked to make things out of wood. So he started making wooden toys such as airplanes. And at Christmas he would take them into Camden, New Jersey, and we would park his Model T Ford in front of City Hall and sell those toys. I'd be out there freezing, freezing, freezing. One time a woman came and put a whole quarter in my hand. She felt sorry for me, a little kid freezing like that. I never forgot it. Maybe that's why I started collecting toys later on in life." He pauses and then adds, "I'd sure like to find one of those wooden airplanes again."

Van Dexter remained a Jersey kid, attending elementary and high school there. It was in 10th grade that the acting bug bit. "When I was in high school we had to do a variety show for school. I had a terrible inferiority complex and I decided I was going to do some birdcalls and cluck like a chicken. I died a thousand deaths walking up to the stage but they loved me. So that started me on my road to show business."

For Van Dexter it was a short leap from birdcalls to opera and after high school he left New Jersey for city life. "I moved to Philadelphia and got a job with the Light Opera Company, did the 'Merry Widow,' the 'Mercado,' you name it. When I came to New York City in the early '50s I started doing off-Broadway. You weren't really making any money then, you just did it for the experience."

Naturally, there wasn't much stability in being an actor and Van Dexter had many side jobs. "I started working at the old Whelan's Drug store on Sixth Avenue and Eighth Street. One day some guy named Steve McQueen walked in. At that time I had a three-bedroom apartment around the corner and even though the rent was \$105 I couldn't afford it. So Steve moved in and became my roommate. He was so poor he didn't have a pit to hiss in. One day when I



Villager photo by Elizabeth Robert

Grover Van Dexter in his store, Second Childhood

came back from being on tour my landlord was furious because McQueen was upsetting the whole building. He used to rehearse all throughout the building, the roof, stairwells, anywhere. I had to kick him out but next thing I knew he was on some TV show called "Wanted: Dead or Alive."

Van Dexter also worked with Jean Erdman — another Villager — on her famous piece "The Coach With Six Insides." He later worked with actors Martin Landau and Shelly Berman, but it wasn't until he had been in the Village for several years that the idea of owning a store with antique toys came about.

"Well, around 1960 I was touring in a show around the States and I started collecting toys. A friend at the time was also collecting toys. One time he said to me, you're collecting, you're running all over the place, why don't you pick up some toys in your travels around the country? So I began to pick up toys everywhere. I had so many toys that my roommate got annoyed and jokingly suggested that I open up a store. We started looking around the Village here.

"This place was a mess," Van Dexter says, gesturing around the long, narrow store that is now bright and colorful. "Nobody wanted to be on Bleecker Street at that time. I took the store and it was only \$150 a month and we did everything ourselves. We opened in 1969."

Van Dexter is proud of the toys that he sells, treasures you can't find anymore. He winds up a tiny merry-go-round and grins as the tin animals move gracefully around a pole, accompanied by a lovely tinkling sound. Another toy, a beautifully crafted wagon, drawn by six horses and standing 8 inches high, was made in 1953 in honor of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth. "It was originally made for kids

to play with," he says, "but if you dropped it, the piece would break because it's made of lead. You wouldn't dare sell that to a child today because of lead poisoning. These days it's all stuffed toys — stuffed this and stuffed that. Beanie Babies and what not. You couldn't sell these toys on the market today," he said of his wares. "It's for collectors only."

Today Van Dexter lives on Bleecker St., just a few short blocks from the store. Each day he walks to work wearing the same uniform of casual slacks and one of the colorful shirts that he had designed for him. It looks like a conventional polo shirt until you get close and see that instead of an alligator or a polo player there is the scripted insignia with the name Second Childhood. He had them made in different shades of blues and greens and always wears them belted neatly into pressed slacks. His slim physique has changed little since his days as a dancer and with his traces of red hair, pale blue eyes and trim carriage he looks much younger than his age.

Maybe it's the toys that keep him youthful because Van Dexter shows no signs of slowing down. When he turned 80 he signed a new 10-year lease on the store, and at the age of 85 this former actor got new head shots made, ready to go onstage if the call should come. To keep his mind occupied he keeps a supply of crossword puzzle books under the counter (where he prefers to stand upright rather than sit.) When there are customers, he jokes and banters and has endless patience for the steady stream of tourists who come in and browse and often ask the same questions. Serious collectors, however, come from all over the world and he remembers many of them by name. "They haven't come from the North or South Poles yet," Van Dexter says laughing, "but I'm working on it."

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