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CHILDHOOD AMNESIA

Lost Memories of a Paper Doll Collection

Barbara Brabec writes about the paper doll collection she didn't remember she had as a child and then ties this discussion to her research on the realities of “childhood amnesia.”

Adapted from her memoir,
[*Marcella's Secret Dreams and Stories: A Mother's Legacy*](#)

WRITING A BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIR about my mother taught me more about memory and the things we forget as we grow older. In my mother's privately-published memoir (which is included within my book), she mentioned that my sister, Mary, loved to play with her collection of paper dolls, a fact I didn't question. But when both my sisters visited me in 2017 to celebrate our “landmark birthdays,” Mary brought with her a surprise gift for me: the collection of paper dolls that I had completely forgotten was once mine. She had ended up with this keepsake when Mother closed our home in Buckley and had turned it up when she was downsizing her life for a move.

I remembered that I loved to draw as a child and recognized my own artistry in the collection, but I still have no memory of cutting out paper dolls from the newspaper or drawing my own paper dolls and designing wardrobes for the 33 dolls in this collection. What surprised both of us was that neither of us had any memory of ever playing with these dolls, though from the size of the collection it was surely a major childhood pastime. All I remember to this day is that I loved to draw as a child and carried my artistic talents into adulthood.

This memory failure prompted me to do a web search on childhood memories, and I soon found several articles on the topic of “childhood amnesia,” something that has apparently puzzled psychologists for more than a century. If this prompts you to ask yourself what your earliest memories are, you'll find additional perspective by searching the web for “childhood amnesia” and also “childhood memories.” I've included some links at the end of this story to get you started.

I believe we all have selective memories and choose to remember certain places and life events that had a great emotional or physical impact on us, like my stepping on a nail when I

was about six and Daddy sticking my heel in a cow pile. As an adult when I first told Mother I remembered being on a paddlewheel boat as a child, she said I was only three at the time. But I can still see that paddlewheel turning in my mind today.

An excerpt from *Marcella's Secret Dreams and Stories*
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Barbara's Childhood Paper Doll Collection

~ The Rest of the Story ~

WHEN MARY HANDED ME my special birthday gift in an unwrapped Christmas card box that looked very old and worn, I had no idea what to expect when I cautiously removed the lid.



Inside I found what looked like an old autograph book with something between its pages. When I slowly opened it and saw what it contained, I was flabbergasted.



“This must be yours,” Mary said, “because it sure isn’t mine.”

The photo bellow is what I saw when I opened the book.

Within the pages of this little book, I found 33 paper dolls, each between four and four and a half inches tall, and I was rather impressed by my creative filing system for the collection. Each doll had her own page with her name written at top.

Although the title on the page at right indicates this is a Tillie doll, it's Brenda Starr. It quickly became obvious to me that my sister or I didn't always put the dolls back in their original "compartment."

I've never forgotten how much I loved to draw as a child, so I immediately recognized my own artistry in the collection. I used to draw a lot of pretty long-haired girls in beautiful dresses, but I was stunned to realize that I had no memory of ever



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cutting out paper dolls from the newspaper or drawing my own paper dolls and designing wardrobes for them and many of the other dolls in this collection.

I think I probably outgrew this childhood pastime to move into sewing dresses for my tiny Hollywood Doll, at which time Mary, being five years younger than I, began to play with the doll collection. Since few adults retain childhood memories before the age of seven, perhaps this explains why neither Mary nor I remember playing with these dolls. They were probably just one of many things that occupied our time in those days.

Famous Paper Dolls

SEVERAL DOLLS IN THE COLLECTION are ones that I drew myself, but they are simply different poses of the three commercial dolls I was cutting out of the newspaper, namely, Brenda Starr, Tillie, and Mopsy. At right is a picture of one doll I drew and hand colored, along with some of the gowns I designed for her.



Each of the commercial dolls came in different poses, usually with two or three different outfits. Using colored pencils, I designed larger wardrobes for most of the dolls. Below are some of the dolls I found as I looked through the little autograph-book filing system. Perhaps you can figure out the names of these dolls:



I especially loved designing formal gowns for the dolls, like the pink and yellow one at left. The yellow top/pink-bottom gown below left is my creation, as well as the red and yellow dress to its right.

As I later enjoyed looking through my collection, I researched paper doll collections on the Web and tracked down some interesting history about the comic strips that inspired the three dolls I collected:



The "Brenda Starr, Reporter" comic strip

was created in 1940 by cartoonist Dale Messick, according to the caption on a *Chicago Tribune* photo. Messick was a greeting card artist from South Bend, Indiana who changed her first name from Dalia to Dale when told that "editors and readers would be more receptive to a gender-neutral moniker." Brenda Starr was named after a 1930s debutante, and the doll looked a lot like actress Rita Hayworth.

"Tillie the Toiler" was created by cartoonist Russ Westover, who based this character on a strip originally titled "Rose of the Office." When he changed the title, King Features Syndicate bought the strip and ran it from 1921 to 1959.

The "Mopsy" comic strip was created in 1939 by Gladys Parker, a writer and one of the few female cartoonists of that era. The idea for the strip was prompted by a comment from cartoonist Rube Goldberg who said her hair looked like a mop. Mopsy was portrayed as a working girl like her creator, one who was always surrounded by admiring men who appreciated witty comebacks, something Parker was famous for. There were different dolls in the "Mopsy Modes" collection, each of which had different hair colors and styles of dress to fit a particular profession. The strip ran for three decades.

The Market for Vintage Paper Dolls

MY WEB RESEARCH revealed that there is a large market for paper doll collectors, especially for those dolls that are still uncut on the old newspapers. On the Kovel's website I found this information:

"The first American paper dolls were published by Crosby, Nichols and Company of Boston, Massachusetts, in 1854. By the 1880s, sheets of printed paper dolls and clothes were being made. The first paper doll books were made in the 1920s. Collectors prefer uncut sheets or books or boxed sets of paper dolls. Prices are about half as much if the pages have been cut."

In talking with a couple of neighbors about my paper doll collection, I learned that their grandchildren now play with plastic dolls that have magnetic dresses. And when I mentioned this to my sister Mollie in one of our Skype conversations, she said "Wait a minute," and then came back with the stand-up cardboard dolls she played with as a child. One had magnetic qualities where you would rub the doll or the dress to magnetize it and it would stick to the doll. She also has two stand-up "Teen Time" dolls that apparently date back to the late fifties and early sixties.

Related Articles on the Web

- [Why can't we remember our early childhood?](#)

EXCERPT: “Most of us don't have any memories from the first three to four years of our lives—in fact, we tend to remember very little of life before the age of seven. And when we do try to think back to our earliest memories, it is often unclear whether they are the real thing or just recollections based on photos or stories told to us by others.”

- [Exploring Childhood Amnesia:](#) Why can't we recall our earliest memories?

EXCERPT: “By comparing recall at different ages, memory researchers have identified the rate of normal forgetting that occurs for memories developed from the age of eight onward. From that point on, amnesia for early childhood events becomes well established with little change over time.”

- [Traces of Times Lost:](#) How childhood memories shape us, even after we've forgotten them.

EXCERPT: “Before we get into middle school most of the evocative impressions we may have held onto from toddlerhood to elementary school have vanished.”

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BARBARA LAUNCHED BarbaraBrabec.com in 2000 and quickly began to populate it with home-business articles and resources. Over the years she added hundreds of articles on several other topics related in one way or another to the larger topic of LIFE.

Now, LIFE itself is Barbara's focus. Unlike her original website, her new domain launched in 2021 features only her own writing—new content and an archive of timeless and relevant articles in fourteen life-related categories, all updated and reformatted for republication on the all-new [“Barbara Brabec's World.”](#) It reflects Barbara's current writing interests, latest books, and professional services.

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