

The Dionne Quintuplet Dolls:

An Informational Packet

Carly Seeck

US History to 1877

Professor John Lee

December 22, 2017

The Living Quintuplets

On May 28, 1934 in the small village of Corbeil, Ontario, a Canadian mother gave birth to five identical girls. Weighing at only 14 pounds together, each girl could easily fit into the palm of their mother's hand. With the help of women from nearby villages who brought breast milk, and the Canadian Red Cross nurses who provided an incubator, the five quintuplets survived. It would seem that for the first time in history, a set of premature quintuplets lived through infancy. These five tiny girls would bring a ray of joy to the world around them, marking a new age for childbirth.¹

The news of the quintuplets spread like wildfire and their quickly rising fame soon transformed the girls' world into that of a tourist attraction. Taken away at a young age, the children would be sent to Quintland, a hospital compound, and would be raised under Dr. Dafoe and his staff. To the outside world, the girls were characterized as privileged. Round-the-clock nursing, a swimming pool, and a playground were given to them as entertainment. This, however, came with a heavy price. Quintland was entirely surrounded with glass that allowed visitors to view them up to three times a day. Ordinary activities seemed to be turned into promotional events in which tourists could watch. Altogether, Quintland would generate millions of dollars that would essentially keep the province of Ontario from bankruptcy.²

The five girls struggled at Quintland. The constant presence of tourists and the feeling of

1. Dennis Gaffney, "The Story of the Dionne Quintuplets," PBS, March 23, 2009, accessed October 15, 2017, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/roadshow/fts/wichita_200803A12.html.

2. Ibid.

isolation was enough to make the children uncomfortable. The windows in Quintland were one sided, but the shadows never seemed to escape the young girls. The feeling of constant eyes upon them continued to make them suspicious, anxious, and confused. At the age of nine, the Dionne couple would win back custody over their children from the government of Ontario, and proceed to take them home. However, the girls would find no comfort from their unloving mother and overly controlling father. As a result, the quintuplets cut off all connection with their family at the age of eighteen.³

Despite the large sum of money owned by the quintuples in their early years. The quintuplets suffered from financial problems later in life. In their sixties, Cecile, Annette, and Yvonne would ask the Canadian government to compensate them for the trust fund money that had been taken or lost. With the support of a public outcry, the three sisters received a compensation of four million dollars. It would seem that sheltered life in Quintland did not prepare the girls for the real world.⁴

After being in isolation at Quintland, and a hated home life, only two of the quintuplets still remain today. Sadly, Emilie would die of a seizure in 1954, Marie would die from a blood clot in 1970, and Yvonne, surviving into her late sixties, would pass away in 2001. This left Cecile and Annette as the surviving sisters of today.⁵

3. 1. Dennis Gaffney, "The Story of the Dionne Quintuplets," PBS

4. Ibid.

5. Ian Austen, "2 Survivors of Canada's First Quintuplet Clan Reluctantly Re-emerge," The New York Times, April 02, 2017, accessed October 17, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/02/world/canada/ontario-dionne-quintuplets.html>.

Dionne Quintuplet Merchandise

The Dionne quintuplets were a much needed breath of fresh air for many Americans during the Great Depression. The joyful news of the mother of five inspired many young girls, and brought hope to homes everywhere. Soon the names of Annette, Emilie, Yvonne, Cecile, and Marie, sprung from the mouths of children, creating an open opportunity for marketing. Coloring books, spoons, paper dolls, bowls, mugs, soap, books, and baby dolls appeared, satisfying customer demands. Out of all these items, the most desirable was by far the baby dolls produced by the Alexander Doll Company.⁶

Joanne Dass from Mason City was no exception to this. Raised on a farm in Wellsburg, Iowa, Joanne owned many of the Dionne merchandise. A silver spoon, a coloring book, and the quintuplet doll “Cecile” was some of her favorite childhood toys. Joanne stated “The dolls were very popular because many young girls were intrigued with the idea of one day becoming a mother of five!” Joanne, like many others, had very fond memories of the Dionne quintuplets, and will continue to cherish the Dionne legacy today.⁷

The Dionne quintuplets, like many Alexander Dolls, could be seen with clothes such as rompers, coats, leggings, hats, rayon socks, and shoes with decorative buckles. Colors of the decorative clothing usually included the colors purple, blue, yellow, green, and pink, in which corresponded with one of the quintuplets. The dolls are also commonly seen in simple tan and white rompers with varying pins that identifies that name of the quintuplet.⁸

6. Joanne R. Dass, “Joanne Dass Interview,” 2 Dec. 2017.

7. Ibid.

8. Pamela Wiggins, "What Makes One Dionne Quints Doll Set Worth More Than Another?" The Spruce, April 4, 2017, accessed October 17, 2017, <https://www.thespruce.com/dionne-quints-alexander-doll-set-auction-149460>.

Composition, Condition, and Pricing

The Dionne dolls, like most dolls of the early 1900's, were considered a composition doll. Composition dolls are created most commonly with a mixture of glue and sawdust, making it easy to mold the dolls head and body. The down side of this material was that it could easily develop fine cracks, called crazing. These cracks were due to changes in temperature and moisture in the air, making it almost impossible for dolls to last unscathed. Unfortunately, crazing can drastically fluctuate the price of antique dolls. If the dolls contain many cracks, the price of the individual doll or set usually plummet.⁹

To doll collectors today, condition, clothing, markings, size, and originality, is what differentiates a fifty dollar Dionne quintuplet set from a two thousand dollar set. For example, a perfect set of Dionne quintuplet dolls produced by the Alexander Doll Company with original outfits and pins could easily be listed for a value of one thousand dollars or more. On the other hand, a less than perfect condition Dionne quintuplets set was sold for only ninety dollars in September of 2016 at Morphy Auctions.¹⁰

The Madame Alexander quintuplet set displayed in the Kenny Pioneer Museum have been appraised by Scott Gram, a doll enthusiast from Phoenix, Arizona. Scott estimated the auction value of the dolls to be from one hundred to one hundred and fifty dollars, assuming they are not original. If the dolls were indeed original, the auction value of the dolls would be increased to a value of two hundred and fifty dollars to three hundred dollars.¹¹

9. Denise Van Patten, "Why Composition Dolls Are Collected," The Spruce, February 17, 2017, accessed December 04, 2017, <https://www.thespruce.com/composition-dolls-overview-774702>.

10. Wiggins, "What Makes One Dionne Quints Doll Set Worth More Than Another?" The Spruce.

11. Scott Gram, "Dionne Quintuplet Appraisal."



Figure 1. A set of Dionne quintuplets sold by Morphy's Auctions. The set included Alexander tags and gold “human hair” stickers on several of the dolls. The dolls have original undies, shoes and stockings, and a gold name pin. The five dolls had slight crazing, but were in great condition. They were sold for a price of \$2,400 including a buyer’s premium in September 20th, of 2013.¹²

12. "Set of Alexander Dionne Quintuplet Toddlers," Lot Detail - Set of Alexander Dionne Quintuplet Toddlers., accessed December 04, 2017, <http://auctions.morphyauctions.com/lot-110041.aspx>.



Figure 2. A set of Dionne quintuplets featured on Antique Roadshow. The set was appraised by Marshall Martin at a retail price of \$2,500 on July 12, 2008.¹³



Figure 3. A Dionne set selling on EBay at a starting price of \$275.¹⁴

13. "Antiques Roadshow," PBS, accessed December 04, 2017, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/roadshow/season/13/wichita-ks/appraisals/dionne-quintuplet-dolls-ca-1935--200803A12/>.

14. "Madame Alexander All Original Dionne Quintuplets Full Set," EBay, accessed December 04, 2017, <https://www.ebay.com/itm/Madame-Alexander-All-Original-Dionne-Quintuplets-Full-Set-/162778410586>.

The Value of an Antique

It is easy to argue that the Dionne quintuplets have lost their fame. On the bright side, if you put aside the masses, individuals such as auctioneers, collectors, and antique dealers still cherish the Dionne quintuplet merchandise. To collectors, these items are viewed in three directions, the price, market, and the demand of buyers. When a collector views the Dionne quintuplet dolls, the first thing they think of is its value, and in tangent the market. This means that without a desire for the merchandise, the dolls would be worth nothing. Fortunately, a market does exist, and collectors can be seen all around the world searching for the perfect doll.

In addition, collector's desires range from broad to very specific. It is most common for collectors to include a range of dolls with different rarity, style, and brand. All though this may be true, a small portion of collectors narrow their desires to simply a brand such as the Alexander Dolls. Collectors and antique dealers buy these dolls with the hope of flipping the item for a higher price, and achieving revenue. On the other hand, collectors also might simply enjoying the antique, and never deem to sell it.

The Dionne quintuplet legacy will be carried on because of true collectors. Who instead of collecting dolls for money, collect because of childhood memories. The living Dionne quintuplets and their merchandise represented hope and joy for many children during a dark time. Thankfully, these memories will live on because of collectors spreading their love of the quintuplets from generations to generation. Museums, which sole purpose is to preserve and recognize the history of meaningful artifacts, will also promote the charm that the quintuplets once spread throughout the world.

Annotated Bibliography

1934: Quintuplets born to Dionne family in Ontario. CBC news. March 09, 2017. Accessed December 03, 2017.
<http://www.cbc.ca/archives/entry/1934-quintuplets-born-to-dionne-family-in-ontario>.

A short written summary covering the background of the quintuplets. The website also included a six minute and forty-five second radio recording from May 28, 1936. The radio program covers the second birthday party of the Dionne quintuplets. To celebrate, the audiences gets to hear the cries of the five quints when there were only six months old, a year old, and also at two years old. The radio broadcaster expresses the health of the quintuplets to be in very good shape, and interprets the birthday of the quints to be a time of joy and happiness.

Absolutely Mint Set Of Vintage Madame Alexander Composition Dionne Quintuplets. Ebay. Accessed December 03, 2017. <https://www.ebay.com/itm/Absolutley-Mint-Set-Of-Vintage-Madame-Alexander-Compostion-Dionne-Quintuplets-/362166891417>.

An Ebay search of "mint condition Dionne quintuplet dolls." The dolls came with a listed price of one thousand dollars. The item was listed under the account name 1996forward, and also included a picture of the Dionne set.

Antiques Roadshow. PBS. Accessed December 04, 2017.
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/roadshow/season/13/wichita-ks/appraisals/dionne-quintuplet-dolls-ca-1935--200803A12/>.

The website features an appraisal of a set of Dionne quintuplets by Marshall Martin. The set also included a rocker that features the names of the quintuplets. Marshall appraises the item at a value of two thousand five hundred dollars in 2008. A picture is also provided by the website.

Austen, Ian. *2 Survivors of Canada's First Quintuplet Clan Reluctantly Re-emerge.* The New York Times. April 02, 2017. Accessed October 17, 2017.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/02/world/canada/ontario-dionne-quintuplets.html>.

Ian Austen wrote a lengthy article covering the lives of Annette and Cécile, the last two living Dionne Quintuplets. Austen explains that the two quints are currently fighting to preserve their childhood home from the North Bay's chamber of commerce. The article covers the mistreatment of the five sisters in their earlier years and then proceeds to account for the life of Annette and Cécile today. The article has a lot of information about the lives of the quintuplets, but ignores the Dionne merchandise.

Dass, Joanne R. *Joanne Dass Interview*. 2 Dec. 2017.

An interview with Joanne R. Dass about her experience with the Dionne quintuplet merchandise as a child. Joanne was raised on a farm in Iowa and heard of the famous "miracle babies" through the daily newspaper and radio. She owned a Dionne Quintuplet sterling silver spoon, coloring book, and the Cecile Doll produced by the Alexander Doll Company. She provided a lot of information, and also insight into the vast popularity of dolls in the late 1930's.

Dewan, Shaila K. *Yvonne Dionne Dies at 67; a Quintuplet Who Made History*. The New York Times. June 24, 2001. Accessed December 03, 2017.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/06/25/world/yvonne-dionne-dies-at-67-a-quintuplet-who-made-history.html>.

A medium length article that discuss the death of Yvonne Dionne at the age of 67. The article goes into detail about the quints background and adds many references to autobiographies the Dionne sisters published. Dewan explains movies and different events the Dionne quintuplets were associated with and also many focal point in the Dionne quintuplets lives.

Dionne Quintuplets. Kovel's. Accessed October 17, 2017. <https://www.kovels.com/price-guide/dionne-quintuplets/Page-2.html?start=225>.

Short and brief paragraph over the early years of the Dionne Quintuplets. The article then proceeds to an extremely extensive list of Dionne Quintuplet antique merchandise. The list includes details over the item, the company that created it, and the year it was last priced.

Gaffney, Dennis. *The Story of the Dionne Quintuplets*. PBS. March 23, 2009. Accessed October 15, 2017. http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/roadshow/fts/wichita_200803A12.html.

The life story of the real Dionne quintuplets from birth to old age. The article explains to the reader that the quintuplets were seen as a tourist attraction and a mean for entertainment in the late 1930's. The author gives examples of the harsh life the quintuplets went through as a profitable celebrity, such as being put on display at the Quintland hospital, and dealing with abusive and unloving parents. The article as a whole provided extensive information and many useful facts.

Gram, Scott. *Dionne Quintuplet Appraisal*. December 3, 2017.

Scott Gram, a doll enthusiast, appraised the quintuplet set over phone. He was offered multiple pictures and settled with the price of 100-150 dollars according to the photos. Scott also included information about many different variations of the dolls and the prices that they sold for.

Madame Alexander All Original Dionne Quintuplets Full Set. eBay. Accessed December 04, 2017. <https://www.ebay.com/itm/Madame-Alexander-All-Original-Dionne-Quintuplets-Full-Set-/162778410586>.

An Ebay search of "Dionne quintuplet sets." The item was listed under the username robernicodemu0, and a picture of the set was also provided.

Madame Alexander Dolls. Collectors Weekly. Accessed October 17, 2017. <https://www.collectorsweekly.com/dolls/madame-alexander>.

Medium length summary over the history of the Madame Alexander Doll Company. Provides facts and thoroughly explains the effects the dolls had on the world around them. The article as a whole provides great information about composition and history of dolls, but has no relation to the specific Dionne quintuplet dolls.

Patten, Denise Van. *Why Composition Dolls Are Collected*. The Spruce. February 17, 2017. Accessed December 04, 2017. <https://www.thespruce.com/composition-dolls-overview-774702>.

A detailed article with information about composition dolls. The author writes about the materials composition dolls are composed of, the different types of dolls, and also characteristics and sizing most used. Patten also shows the relation between heavy damaged dolls and a significantly lower retail price. Cracks, wear, and many other factors were used as example throughout the article. The author also included a section over crazing, and explains the reasons many dolls are known to easily develop cracks.

Set of Alexander Dionne Quintuplet Toddlers. Morphy Auctions. Accessed December 04, 2017. <http://auctions.morphyauctions.com/lot-110041.aspx>.

A lot of Alexander Dionne quintuplets that closed on September 20, 2013. The set brought 2,500 dollars including buyer's premium. A picture of the quintuplet set was also provided.

Wiggins, Pamela. *What Makes One Dionne Quints Doll Set Worth More Than Another.* The Spruce. April 4, 2017. Accessed October 17, 2017. <https://www.thespruce.com/dionne-quints-alexander-doll-set-auction-149460>.

Very brief article that explains the value of two different sets of Dionne Quintuplet dolls. The author explains a few facts about the real Dionne Quintuplets in their early years, and then completes the article with comparisons between the values of the dolls according to their condition. The picture used in the article is sourced from Morphy Auctions.