

The Enterprise

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What in the World is a Whatnot?

By Nancy Gillahan

Growing up many years ago, my mother had what she called a whatnot, a set of shelves on which she placed figurines and other delicate glass or porcelain items, pretty enough to be displayed and admired. Until recently I didn't know there was another kind of whatnot. Our good friend and longtime Berea resident, Robbie Robinson brought in what he called a "Whatnot Jug", a gilded jug covered with dozens of odds and ends.

Many of us at the museum were awed and amazed at this wonderful piece of folk art. Robbie explained that his whatnot jug was created by his cousin Marjorie's grandmother when she was just a young girl, probably 8-10 years of age, sometime between 1860 and 1870. Having never seen anything like this, I was prompted to do a little research.

The "whatnot" became a fad for a period of years following the Civil War. Young girls collected everyday items or bits of wood or metal of every description and imbedded them in the side of a jug or other vessel such as a wine or milk bottle. The "whatnot" apparently has a number of other names: memory jug, forget-me-not jug, memory vessel, mourning jug, spirit jar, and whimsy jar are a few of the names I discovered. Whatnots or Memory Jugs sometimes served as an inexpensive memorial for poor families in the Appalachian South and were placed on graves in place of headstones. A whatnot can be any kind of vessel that is first covered with some kind of adhesive such as putty, plaster, or cement. Then while the adhesive is still damp, various small objects are imbedded in the surface until the jug is covered. In the whatnot that Robbie brought in you will find an old pair of glasses, a clothespin, a spring, buttons, a pipe, a peach pit, a walnut shell, a long nail, a belt buckle and many other

objects. The jug was topped with a small figurine of a young girl and finished with a coat of gold paint.

Robbie brought the whatnot jug to the museum on a day when the ladies of the Berea Doll Club were there for their monthly meeting. To say that the ladies were interested in the jug would be an understatement. They were truly amazed. The meeting was suspended while everyone took time to examine it closely and note the different objects fastened to the side. Robbie was happy to explain its history to everyone. The whatnot has been in Robbie's family for many years and he obtained it when no one else in his family wanted it. When he



brought the whatnot to us, Robbie also gave us the provenance for anyone that is interested in its history.



Needless to say, we are excited to have this delightful piece of folk art and are grateful to Robbie for donating it to us. Our hope is to display the whatnot in the Girl's Bedroom on the second floor of the museum. We are looking for a large glass dome to put over it to help preserve it and a lazy susan so that it can be turned to see all the amazing objects attached to its side. When you come to the museum we'll be happy to show it to you. In the meantime, we would love to hear from our readers to find out if anyone else has their own whatnot to tell us about. We'd love to hear from you.

Nancy Gillahan and Robbie Robinson with the Whatnot



A MERRY CHRISTMAS from all your friends of BEREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY- - -

Kathy Brown, President, all the Officers and Board Members, and Staff.

***Louise & Dave Allen, Editors
Gene Jeffery, Computer lay-out***