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FEATURES

Doll Devotion Annual Sale Of American Girl Dolls, Doll Furniture And Accessories Attracts A Zealous Crowd Of Shoppers

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By Joanne Cleaver Chicago Tribune

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What would happen if you crossed Thelma and Louise with the Little Women and went bargain-hunting?

Probably you'd have a scene like the one that took place at a warehouse in late July, the site of the Pleasant Co.'s annual benefit clearance sale of its extremely popular American Girl dolls, doll furniture and accessories.

The hundreds of women crowding into the warehouse don't bother to shop by the armload. Many bring in empty baby strollers and wagons, which within minutes are barely visible under teetering piles of doll trunks, beds, tables, chairs and all manner of clothes, hats, books, musical instruments, dishes and other necessities.

Some are even more shameless.

“You just sharpen your elbows and roll,” said Dena Shepherd, of Spring Green, Wis.

She and three friends are veterans of the sale. Just before the door to the warehouse opened, they unrolled homemade gingham bags as long as their bodies and pulled the sturdy handles around their necks. Then they charged.

“You can shop with two hands,” yelled Shepherd, stuffing wooden doll lunchboxes down the bag she was wearing. “Last year we did the whole warehouse in 15 minutes.”

Such attitudes underscore the runaway popularity of Pleasant’s products. Formed nine years ago by Pleasant Rowland, the company produces the American Girl line of books, which chronicle the exploits of prototypical 9-year-old girls at various points in American history, such as Addy, a fictional African-American girl who escapes from slavery just before the Civil War.

The furniture, doll clothes and accessories are drawn from details in the books, allowing children to re-create scenes as they play.

The concept has proved popular indeed. The company’s 1994 sales were \$150 million. The books, paper dolls and craft kits are widely available through mass merchants, but its mail-order catalog and the warehouse sale are the only places consumers can buy the dolls, their gear and even look-alike period clothes for real girls.

Everything at the sale is discounted 20 percent to 50 percent (the dolls are \$50 instead of \$83 in the catalog), adding to the shoppers’ determination.

That partly explains why, barely an hour after the sale began, Jim O’Day, of Fargo, N.D., was standing guard over a knee-high heap of boxed dolls and

furniture that grew every few minutes when his wife, Cindy, dashed over to add to the stack.

They had flown in the night before on his private plane with daughters Teresa, 10, and Ashle, 6. Each of the girls already owns every doll, piece of furniture and accessory carried in the Pleasant catalog. So why get more?

“I have no idea,” O’Day said with a shrug. “It’s important to them, so I stay out of the way. She likes bargains, but this is not saving us any money.”

At this year’s sale there actually was a method to the madness. Tickets stamped with an entry time were sold weeks in advance through Ticketmaster for \$5 each. All 5,650 were gone the first day.

While that meant rock-concertlike scalpers were hawking tickets outside the gate of the warehouse, it at least avoided last year’s near-riot.

For its first six years, the sale was run on a first-come, first-served basis. That was fine while it was a local event. Veteran volunteers even joked that it was “Madison’s biggest slumber party” because people would start camping out in front of the warehouse days ahead of time.

Last year it turned ugly. Because of construction on an adjacent site, campers were squeezed into the driveway and then down the sidewalk for blocks. Fearing that the traffic hazard would result in injury, the sale’s organizers let the early birds have their numbered tickets so they would clear out temporarily. That enraged people who showed up only a day or two early, as the sale announcement had instructed.

“It was complete mayhem,” said Marcia Reynolds, of Lansing, Mich. “There were a lot of irate women last year. They couldn’t get in with the ticket they had. People were practically pulling each other’s hair out.”

And when they did muscle their way into the warehouse, many people were

dismayed to find that much of the most desired merchandise already had been scooped up.

Clearly it was time for a change.

“We were out of our league,” said Jonathan Zarov, public relations staffer for the Madison Children’s Museum, the main beneficiary of the sale. “With hiring a professional agency (Ticketmaster), if there’s a problem (in distributing tickets), they know how to deal with it.”

While the sale is of donated Pleasant Co. merchandise, it is organized and run by museum volunteers. This year the sale’s receipts totaled \$800,000, of which about 60 percent benefits the museum. The balance is distributed to other children’s charities by a foundation run by Pleasant Co.

The reformed system was much appreciated by customers and volunteers alike.

Stripped of the chance to arrive a week early to be first in line, Shepherd and her cohorts still devised a successful strategy to get tickets for the 7 a.m. opening. Each called a Ticketmaster office in a different state and bought four tickets; they kept the tickets with the earliest time and sold the rest. Less aggressive shoppers expressed relief that the new system gave them a sporting chance at finding what they wanted.

The sale is hardly a one-day wonder. All year round, oversized boxes containing a jumble of miscellaneous merchandise from the company’s shipping department in Middleton, Wis., are sent to the warehouse. Some of it has been returned; some was damaged in shipping; some boxes are just leftover odd lots.

More than 300 volunteers sort through the stuff, farming some of it, especially furniture, out for repairs. Most dolls, though, are in near-perfect

condition. They only need their hair combed before they're ready for a new owner.

Madison resident Heidi Bollinger directs the effort. She organized the first sale, held in her back yard, which netted \$44,000.

Bollinger considers the project a vocation, even subscribing to the Harvard Business Review to glean tips for motivating her volunteer work force.

People, such as Gail Adams, of Milwaukee, are just glad to get a deal. Adams had the most-envied position of the day: Her ticket was No. 1.

When she realized that, she said, "I was flabbergasted. I really was."

This was the first time Adams and daughter Rachel, 9, had gone to the sale. Rachel saved her allowance for weeks in hopes of getting an Addy doll.

An hour after the doors opened, her wish was fulfilled. While her mom sorted through their treasures - a straw hat, tin lunch bucket, bed and an ice cream maker - Rachel sat on the concrete floor holding her new doll. All she wanted to do was play out the stories she had read in the Pleasant Co.'s Addy books.

And, according to Bollinger and her volunteers, that's what the sale is all about.

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