

Local businesses ride popular dolls' coattails

By Kristen A. Graham
INQUIRER SUBURBAN STAFF

She fingers the pages of the catalog gently, as if it were some holy book. It's the gospel of the American Girl, and with a faraway, dreamy look, Carole Moore is a believer.

"It's not just a doll that you're buying," said the Edgewater Park woman, skimming past pages displaying a \$90 vinyl princess and a charming, \$78 matching pioneer dress. "You're buying an education for your children. It's a lifestyle."

The American Girls Collection — targeted at girls 7 to 12 — features a flagship line of seven heroines, including Felicity, a colonial girl growing up in Williamsburg, Va., in 1774; Josefina, a Hispanic girl living in New Mexico in 1824, and Samantha, a 9-year-old orphan being raised by her wealthy grandmother in Mount Bedford, N.Y., in 1904.

But the high-end historical dolls are just the start of the lifestyle. With a flurry of creative marketing efforts, a bevy of products, and a growing crowd of related businesses, American Girls are all over the map.

In Burlington County, the enrollment at Moore's summer camp rose, hitting a peak of 15 children, when she announced activities would center on the American Girl dolls.

In Montgomery County, Debby Hicks' sewing business, Designs by Debby, took off when she started making clothes to fit the toys.

And in Delaware County, the secretary-treasurer of the United Federation of Doll Clubs, a national organization, said she's not surprised by the jump in popularity.

"It's just a fabulous concept," said Paula McEvoy, a doll enthusiast from Newtown Square, Pa. "Their marketing has been spectacular, and it's a very playable doll in a world where so many dolls have become just collector's items."

These cottage industries are spin-offs of an enormous American Girl empire. Think several different lines of books; a magazine; accessories of every stripe; a "retail and entertainment" center, American Girl Place, in Chicago; even a musical, *The American Girls Revue*. Across the country, girls — and women with or without daughters — are buying the dolls, the books, the accessories and the CDs to the tune of more than \$300 million annually, said Stephanie Spanos, spokeswoman for Pleasant Co. in Middleton, Wis., makers of the dolls.

As the empire trickles down to the masses, the United Federation of Doll Clubs is trying to



BOB WILLIAMS / Inquirer Suburban Staff
An American Girl doll wears a first Communion outfit. Prices for the dolls average \$84.

attract more young people to its organization by reaching out to lovers of the dolls.

"Most of our junior members come with American Girl dolls, and we teach them about the dolls, how to take care of them," she said.

Hicks, too, is all for furthering the cause of doll lovers. It's good for her business.

She's one of many small-business people in the area cashing in by making accessories that fit the dolls and selling them for competitive prices. She runs her e-business, Designs by Debby, from her home in Souderton, Pa.

The plaid jumper, blouse and hair ribbons that accompany Molly, a "lively, lovable schemer and dreamer" from the World War II era, cost \$22 in the catalog. But a jumper, blouse and hat sewn by Hicks and available in 27 plaid patterns at www.dolluniforms.com is \$25.

Designs by Debby began about four years ago, when parents who knew Hicks was a seamstress came to her with a request.

"Different women ... told me they needed American Girl dresses, and once I started with the uniforms, things really took off," she said.

Now, Hicks ships tiny first Communion outfits and plaid school uniforms around the country and to England.

To Moore, who owns the Whitebriar bed-and-breakfast and runs a day camp there every summer, the lure is simple: She adores the dolls on a business level, an educational level, and, most important, on a grandmotherly level.

A retired teacher, Moore is also an authorized American

Girl dealer. She sells the books in her gift shop and hosts American Girl teas throughout the year.

It's because "this toy instills in children the desire to read," she said. "They want to know a particular character."

Then, as Moore smooths the dainty dress of Kit, a Depression-era doll, the heart of the matter slips out.

Along with her daughters and granddaughters, she's just a sucker for a cute, well-made doll.

Her youngest grandchild, year-old Morgan Ramage, already owns two American Girls that her mother, Carrie, said she probably won't be allowed to play with.

"You'd think I'd get a commission, but I'm probably their biggest customer," Moore said.

The girls — and two boys — in Moore's camp practically breathe American Girls.

When they studied Josefina, campers sang "Feliz Cumpleaños" — "Happy Birthday" in Spanish. When the subject was Addy, a courageous African American girl determined to escape to freedom in 1864, they made African games and acted out a play chronicling the little girl's experience on the Underground Railroad.

According to Amanda Negron, a 10-year-old camper from Burlington Township, the dolls are hot items to own.

"We bring our American Girl dolls to school, and we always put them on top of the shelves in our rooms," said Amanda, using one hand to shield her face from the hot sun and the other to string together an Addy necklace.

Do dolls earn status for their owners?

Amanda nodded quickly — a no-brainer.

"Yeah, they're pretty cool," she said.

Cool — and profitable.

"We're definitely a household name now, and we've definitely grown as a direct-mail company," Spanos said. "About 50 million catalogs were mailed this year."

The company, which Mattel bought in 1998 for \$700 million, has sold more than 74 million books since the Pleasant Co. was founded in 1986. It also has sold seven million dolls and welcomed 2.5 million visitors to its American Girl Place; 600,000 people subscribe to its magazine.

And no, Spanos said, the dolls are not too pricey.

"We know that some people think \$84 [the standard price for a doll] is a high price to pay, but when you compare it to other high-quality toys, it really isn't," she said. "And there's a great amount of historical research that goes into these characters. We research a time period for two to three years before we introduce a doll."

But to Moore's granddaughter, 5-year-old Michaela Horner, it's not about slick marketing or grand history lessons. She begs for books, dresses in faux-1854 prairie-girl gowns, and takes her doll everywhere because it's fun.

"Me and Kirsten play," Michaela said. "We have necklaces, and sometimes we play with my mom's Samantha doll. I love Kirsten."



BOB WILLIAMS / Inquirer Suburban Staff
Debby Hicks of Souderton, Pa., who runs a sewing business, Designs by Debby, makes outfits for American Girl dolls.

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