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TOY STORIES

While the staff at the state Museum of History creates a new exhibit about our childhood obsessions, North Carolinians reflect on the kids they were, the adults they've become, and the toys that shaped them.

written by JEREMY MARKOVICH / photography by CHARLES HARRIS



BEFORE THE MEETING started, Katie Edwards stood up and asked for some ideas. The North Carolina Museum of History was creating an exhibit about toys, and it was originally supposed to be small — just one display case in the lobby. But when the museum asked the public to send in their vintage toys, a nostalgic levee broke. Katie, a museum curator, and her colleagues were now awash in old toys. Dolls. Plastic soldiers. Easy-Bake ovens. The response was so overwhelming, in fact, that the exhibit would now get a space the size of a small house on the third floor. Katie and her team had been given an extra year to put it all

together, but they wondered what else they were missing.

Lynda Edwards, a consultant for the museum, was listening and nodding along when suddenly, something clicked into place. It was as if a home movie had whirred to life in her head, and she was watching herself as an inquisitive little girl. Young Lynda had asked her parents for something they could not find in Durham. Something that reflected her neighborhood. Her friends and family. And then, little Lynda found a simple fix. A solution that only a young mind, unencumbered by the weariness of the wider world, could imagine.

Lynda looked up to get Katie's attention. *I have a story for you*, she said.



IT'S HARD TO CONDENSE THE ENTIRE HISTORY OF modern toy-playing in this country into a few paragraphs, but here goes: Back in the late 1800s, many kids were working on farms and in factories, but that was slowly starting to change. Miniature kitchens and toy fire engines became popular, because “toys became a substitute for on-the-job training,” says Gary Cross, distinguished professor of modern history at Pennsylvania State University and an expert on the evolution of play. Around the turn of the 20th century, the view of childhood started to change. Kids weren’t seen as future adults so much as little people with what Cross calls “wondrous innocence.” Meaning, he says, “You began to look at kids as cute in the modern sense.” That led to cute toys, like the brand-new Teddy Bear.

Advertisers increasingly targeted kids, who in turn started to demand specific toys from their parents. After World War II, the economic boom led many parents to give their children the material things that they themselves never had growing up. Big stores caught on to this trend, and companies that once filled their catalogs primarily

with practical merchandise began updating their toy selections more frequently. They added new collections and series of toys, all marketed as ways for parents to connect with their children. But as anyone who’s ever been a kid with a new toy knows, those kids would scurry off to play with their toys alone, and the parents would try again. With another toy.

In the ’70s came video games. In the ’80s, fueled by *Star Wars* and its universe of playthings, toys veered further into the realm of fantasy: Think He-Man and Care Bears. And in the ’90s, baby boomers morphed from lapsed players into collectors. Now there’s a theory, trumpeted by marketers, that we never really grow up. We’re still playing with toys, even as adults.

But the biggest changes in how we play began in the ’50s. “It’s the last period when toys are as much about adults as they are about children,” Cross says. Then, toys reflected an image of adulthood: Dolls with cars and modern houses, or BB guns. Kids and adults loved westerns, and there were plenty of cowboy-related toys. “Play becomes more of a reflection of what is seen on TV,” Cross adds. “Toys become miniature props, really.” The perfect storm of television and toys created an increasingly commercialized childhood. As adults, we’re now teeming with memories of the things our parents bought for us. Our memories of growing up are often connected to “the highly ephemeral objects of childhood,” Cross says. Simply put: We never outgrow our toys.

Katie Edwards, the curator of popular culture at the North Carolina Museum of History, is in charge of creating the toys exhibit, featuring vintage items from dolls to Dick Tracy.



GEORGE GILLENWATER GOT A G.I. JOE AS A present. For his 40th birthday.

George, now 61, lives in an airy, century-old home on busy Hillsborough Street in Raleigh. He’s retired after 37 years at IBM, but his wife, Patti, still works as an executive coach. The two met at clown school. (“We don’t do much clownin’ anymore,” George says.) A few years ago, when they were moving, George was going through stuff in their attic, sorting through the kinds of things we save in the hope that someday we’ll find a use for them, though we rarely do. That’s when he found his stash of toys.

The emotions came flooding back. George grew up in Havelock, right next to Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point. So close, in fact, that he’d look up and see Marines in helicopters waving down at him. His father had been a sergeant in the Army Air Corps, and for Christmas one year — 1964, he thinks — George unwrapped a brand-new G.I. Joe. It was an infantryman, with customizable rank. George put the sergeant’s chevron on its shoulder.

Even now, George talks mostly about the playability of his G.I. Joes, not their collectibility. He places them on the table in front of him, like he did

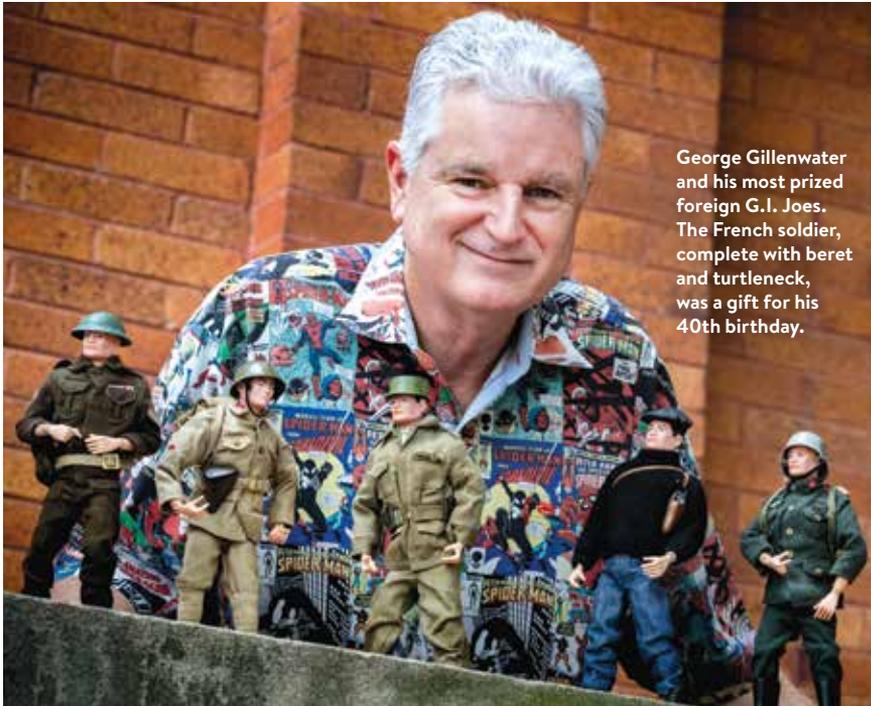
as a kid, and mashes a plastic missile into a tiny, spring-loaded bazooka. “Wonder if it shoots,” he says. He pushes the trigger, and the missile pops out. It doesn’t go as far as it used to, but the delight on his face is pretty much the same.

As a kid, when the bazooka worked perfectly, George and his buddies would dig foxholes outside because that’s what they’d seen the guys on *Combat!* do on TV. During campouts, the Joes would guard George’s tent. Friends would come over with different Joes, the soldiers’ branch of service usually corresponding with their fathers’. Sometimes, they’d participate in the now time-honored tradition of blowing up a demo Joe with firecrackers. A girl from the neighborhood would play nurse, and they’d take the wounded figurines to her Barbie for emergency surgery.

George had his everyday G.I. Joes — the grunts, you could call them — and those were the ones that he’d take outside. He also had a few international soldiers, and those were for display only. One time, to get George mad, a cousin stripped their uniforms off and swapped them, so that the German one was wearing the Japanese fatigues.



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**Simply put:
 We never
 outgrow
 our toys.**



George Gillenwater and his most prized foreign G.I. Joes. The French soldier, complete with beret and turtleneck, was a gift for his 40th birthday.

Soon after, George and the rest of the country outgrew G.I. Joes. By the late 1960s, the Vietnam War had soured in the public consciousness, and realistic figurines of soldiers fell out of fashion. In the 1980s, G.I. Joes made a comeback, but as 3.75-inch-tall plastic figurines that were less realistic and more idealistic (they solved world problems and fired lasers, not guns). By 1997, when George turned 40, the foot-tall Joes had been memory-holed to everyone except for the baby boomers, who were now starting to feel the tug of nostalgia for their childhood. And that's when, for his birthday, George got the G.I. Joe French Resistance Fighter, complete with black turtleneck and beret, that he'd pined for as a kid. It now stands on a shelf in his office.

When the North Carolina Museum of History began asking people to donate their old toys for an upcoming exhibit, George thought about it. He has an impressive collection of G.I. Joes, some of them in excellent condition, with their rucksacks, guns, tents, mess kits, and fatigues all preserved immaculately, some in their original boxes. He thought long and hard about it, and then decided to donate his Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robots instead. They were easier to part with.

DOWN IN THE BASEMENT OF THE MUSEUM, A STAFF discussion about how the exhibit should come together has veered into a discussion about how one should properly design a Slinky racetrack. What

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if, posits Community Engagement Manager Kerry Burns, you had two sets of stairs? But then, how would you keep the Slinky from running off the side? Is that even practical? A few minutes later, Don Pendergraft, the section chief for design, asks whether Milton Bradley still exists or if it's been subsumed into a corporate conglomerate. "Remember back in the day when Mr. Potato Head was made with an actual potato?" Don asks. Those who are Don's age or older sure do. The younger people (like Kerry) don't. Someone brings up the recent demise of Toys "R" Us at the hands of venture capitalists, which draws a loud sigh from the group.

The Slinky problem is not solved.

Katie Edwards, who is the museum's curator of popular culture, is in charge of pulling this whole exhibit together. In a few months, she and her team will decide exactly what to do with the 3,400-square-foot space they've been given on the museum's third floor. For now, they're still trying to figure out a plan for all of the toys and games that people have mailed to the museum, and how to present both the objects and the personal stories that come with them.

In a side room, Katie shows off a smattering of what's come in: Next





Lynda Edwards serves in an advisory role to help make sure that all of the museum's exhibits represent a diversity of views. Growing up, most all of the toys from her era reflected white culture.

to George's Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robots, there's a Cape Canaveral Missile Base, a Roy Rogers camera, a board game for girls called "Mystery Date," and electronic football ("I don't understand how people played it," Katie, 37, admits). There's also a Chatty Cathy doll. It talks, probably. "I can't pull her string," Katie says. "The conservators won't let me."

The exhibit, slated to open in fall of 2019, will focus on the Cold War era. Yes, there will likely be Hula Hoops and other retro things for modern kids to play with, but the exhibit will highlight some big questions. Namely: How did society affect toys? And how did toys affect the way kids played? Toys reflected the anxieties of the time, but also the changing acceptance of commercialism:

the influence of TV and advertising. The exhibit is going to deal with these factors, too.

And there's something else the exhibit is going to deal with, thanks to the story that Lynda Edwards shared with Katie at the museum meeting earlier this year. Lynda was born in April 1962 to a middle-class black family in Durham's Forestview Heights. Her neighborhood was black. Her friends were black. But her toys were white.

Around age 6 or 7, that started to feel strange to Lynda. "I started noticing the Barbies didn't look like me, or anybody I knew," she says. So she asked her parents to find one that did. They kept looking, but kept coming up empty. Lynda kept asking. And then, one day, she thought of a solution. She cracked open her art supplies, took out some tempera paint, mixed it up in pie pans, and took the clothes off of her Barbies. Then, she painted them brown. Head to toe. "At that age," Lynda says, "that solved the problem for me."

Her mom came in, aghast, at what she was doing to her expensive dolls, but her demeanor changed when Lynda explained herself. "When I told her why I did it, she seemed sad," Lynda says. Her mother had tried to shield her from some of the realities of the 1960s. It was a time when segregated schools and neighborhoods were somewhat insulating for some black kids, who hadn't been exposed to the worst of a white world slow to adapt to the changes of the civil rights era. That age of innocence, for Lynda, was coming to an end. "I guess it's time," she remembers her mom saying.

In the meantime, Lynda took her toys outside, and her friends were astonished. *Where did you get those?* they asked. When she explained what she'd done, Lynda's friends asked her to paint their dolls. And so they had an event, right there on her front porch. She mixed the paint to closely match



her friends' complexions. She used more colorful paint to re-create the kente cloths and dashikis she'd seen in her neighborhood. Her younger brothers had African-American G.I. Joes, but the dolls' features were still Caucasian. "Children notice that," she says.

Eventually, at the end of middle school, Lynda started to figure out what was going on. She'd been eavesdropping on her mother and her friends, who'd get together to talk through the stresses of the day. By 12 or 13, she started to venture out beyond her neighborhood. "I just felt it," she says of going to white parts of town. "The stares." In ninth grade, she moved to Oxford, in Granville County, where she went to an integrated school for the first time. Leaving the city was a tough transition, but by then, she at least felt some confidence in who she was. "I moved through life like I belonged there," she says. "Because I do."

By that time, she'd stopped playing with her Barbies.

Lynda grew up to become a teacher, just like her mother. When she was young, she'd given her dolls that career as well. She stayed in Oxford, where she lives today, and became an advocate for equal representation, including at the state museums. "We are decolonizing history," she says. That's what led her to serve on an advisory board for the African-American Cultural Celebration at the North Carolina Museum of History. And it was at the beginning of one of those meetings that Katie Edwards stood up and asked for help, and then Lynda told her story. "I had not thought about that until Katie came into the room and started talking about the toy exhibit," Lynda says. And then, it all started to make sense. "I can see why I'm a staunch advocate now. I've been doing this a long time and didn't even know it." Even years after we stop playing, toys remind us who we've been all along. **Os**

Jeremy Markovich is Our State's senior writer.

The museum is looking for Cold War-era toys (specifically, space-related items) and stories to go with them. Contact Katie Edwards at (919) 814-7003 or visit ncmuseumofhistory.org/tell-us-your-toy-story.