Episode 908, Story 2 – Drug Smuggling Doll

Gwen Wright: This case investigates this doll’s place in the American Civil War. Over 600,000 soldiers died during the Civil War – two thirds of them from disease. In the south, the situation was especially dire. Rampant infection and diseases such as typhoid, dysentery and malaria decimated the troops. On April 19, 1861, President Lincoln issued a proclamation for the Union navy to blockade Southern ports. With that blockade in place, how did the confederates get the medicines to relieve their sick and wounded? Now Catherine Wright, curator at the Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond, Virginia, has a doll that may have once held a valuable secret. Catherine has asked me to meet her and “Nina” in the museum’s collections room.

Catherine Wright: Hi, Gwen.

Gwen: Hi, Catherine. Nice to meet you. Catherine, tell me the story about this doll.

Catherine: This doll was donated to us in 1923, by the children of a Confederate General and they told us that she was purportedly used to smuggle quinine and morphine through the federal blockade to Confederate soldiers during the Civil War.

Gwen: Now, where did you get this story?

Catherine: We can see the family’s actual quote, which they gave us at the time of donation: “This doll’s head, which is tied on with tapes, was filled with quinine
and morphine. Which in that way was smuggled through to the sick soldiers.”

She was carried in the arms of general Anderson’s small niece during the war, Nina was a much loved member of the Anderson family.”

Gwen: So who was General Anderson?

Catherine: General James Patton Anderson hailed from the southeast portion of the Confederacy unfortunately, we’ve not been able to find out any more information on the identity of the niece, who’s the one who was supposed to have carried the doll during the war.

Gwen: So have you done some research on your own here at the museum?

Catherine: Absolutely, we had her x-rayed and you’re able to see the hollow head.

Gwen: So she was hollow in the head, so that does give a space where this could have been done.

Catherine: Yes.

Gwen: Well, Catherine I think I know, but tell me precisely what you’d like for me to find out.

Catherine: We would like to know if Nina was actually used to smuggle quinine or morphine during the Civil War.
Gwen: So there’s certainly some evidence of aging. The head and this chest it’s these are sometimes porcelain, but this, I think it’s lighter weight. It’s probably some papier-mâché or some composite, that goes down just to the chest level.

The doll is 28 inches from head to toe. It seems very large for a “small niece” to have carried. The note mentions Nina’s head was tied to the body with tapes and the x-ray shows holes for those ties. So, it’s possible that the original doll had the head part taken off, something put inside and then reattached with these tapes. It’s possible. Sometimes people will exaggerate what happened in the past. How much medicine could have been stowed away in her head and how could that have been done? Smuggling is not a part of Civil War history I know a lot about. Were dolls used this way? I don’t find anything online. No, there’s nothing. Nothing.

Let’s see if the other parts of this story hold up. Major General Patton Anderson. He went to law school, he was a legislator and he worked for a doctor. Interesting. He lived with his wife, Etta, their children and his aunt at a plantation named Casa Bianca, near Monticello, in North Florida. And a strong supporter of secession from the very beginning.

Anderson fought at Shiloh, Chickamauga, and Missionary Ridge. He was wounded at Jonesboro in 1864. Anderson remained committed to the Confederacy, even after the end of the war. “He had sacrificed everything for the cause. Refusing to accept the results of the conflict, he would not take the oath of allegiance, openly proclaiming any fate but submission.”
The General's letters are at the University of Florida. Here's all his correspondence. The letters back and forth, with his wife Etta. Two things strike me, in reading through this correspondence. First, almost every one of their letters mentions illness or disease. Anderson is several times mentioning the pain of the wounded soldiers. The other thing that strikes me, is that Etta Anderson travels with her children throughout 1862 and 1863 to visit her husband on the front in Tennessee. But we still don't have a connection to this niece. This may be it. At the end of a letter to Etta, he says, 'love to Moll, and her gals.' And there's a footnote saying, 'Molly was Etta's younger sister, and they also lived in Monticello' – the same town. And her "gals" were her daughters, Anderson's nieces: Netta and Adaire – they're too young – and... Lizzy, born in 1859. She could be Nina's owner. I still have to wonder, what would it take for a mother to put her young daughter in this kind of danger? Is there any truth to the Anderson family story that Nina was used to run the blockade? U.S. Coast Guard historian Robert M. Browning has written extensively on the Civil War blockade.

Robert M. Browning: Hi, I'm Bob.

Gwen: Hi, nice to meet you, Bob. Well, Bob, here is a photograph of the doll that I told you about, that was possibly used for smuggling medicines to Southern troops during the Civil War. Now, how would medicines have come into the Confederate states?

Browning: Well, let me tell you a little about the blockade. The South was an agricultural society and they had very little manufacturing. And to keep out all supplies and isolate the South President Lincoln declared his intention to blockade the Confederacy, on 19 April 1861. And, the blockade went from Capes
of Virginia, all the way to Brownsville at the Rio Grande River. Along this vast expanse of coast there were 189 inlets that the Union navy had to watch.

Gwen: Who was sending the ships that were being blockaded?

Browning: Well, you have three main groups. You have the British and foreign investors. You have Southerners that are running the blockade. And also you have states in Confederate government also owning ships and running the blockade.

Gwen: Well, what’s the range of goods that the Union was trying to prevent coming into the South?

Browning: Well, everything was being limited from the South. And that includes everything from straight pins to cannon and gun powder and saltpeter to medicines.

Gwen: Now does it make sense to you that this doll hiding medicines would have been on a blockade-runner?

Browning: No, I can’t imagine why you would use a doll in that sense, because you’re bringing in cannon and other large things, so the doll wouldn’t really be necessary to bring in through the blockade.

Gwen: Although Bob has never heard of a doll being used to smuggle drugs he believes that using a woman or a child to move small amounts of contraband on land is plausible.
Bob: I think women and children would have very much ease going through Union lines, whereas a man would not.

Gwen: George Wunderlich is the executive director of the National Museum of Civil War Medicine.

Gwen: Gwen Wright, nice to meet you.

George Wunderlich: Very nice to meet you.

Gwen: …And has encountered many stories of Civil War drug smuggling.

Gwen: The family story is that the head of the doll was hollow and it used to smuggle in morphine and/or quinine to confederate soldiers. Now if that was true, not what would it have entailed?

George: That’s a pretty risky operation, even with a child. Because this is contraband of war, at the very least, they’re going to get it confiscated if they’re caught. At the worst, they could be arrested.

Gwen: George explains how Confederate women were allowed to cross Union lines to visit loved ones or attend to business, but they were first required to obtain a pass from a Union Provost Marshal.
Gwen: Well, chart an itinerary for me. I know that Anderson and his wife and this little girl, lived in Monticello, Florida. And I know of at least one instance where his wife, taking some of the children, visited him in Tennessee.

George: And what time period might we be talking about?

Gwen: 1863. George says one scenario could entail procuring the medicines in Pensacola, Florida, which the Union controlled after 1862 and which also had an active black market for drugs. Passing through Union checkpoints to leave the city, Nina’s hollow head could certainly have come in handy. Getting the medicines to the sick soldiers would have been more difficult.

George: In 1863, this would have been an immensely complicated trip. Union armies are trying to take Chattanooga, Tennessee, the lines are constantly moving. We constantly have armies going after that railroad, or that crossroad, to protect their lines of communication. And so, you can pass through an area, and suddenly on your way home a few days later, find there’s an army in your way.

Gwen: So, if this happened, the woman was taking a great risk. Does that surprise you?

George: The women of the Civil War, on both sides, were very patriotic and medicine was badly needed, and it doesn’t surprise me a bit.

Gwen: Disease and infection killed more men during the war than battle wounds. George explains how drug smuggling was one solution, but ingenuity was another.
George: They’re also developing their own sources of – for instance, of poppies. They’re growing their own opium. And trying to manufacture the finished products themselves.

Gwen: My guess is that the hollow part of the head could have held three ounces in powder of a medicine. What would that have meant?

George: Well, let’s take quinine, you’re probably looking at getting enough doses out of that three ounces to keep about a dozen men free of malaria – or treat them for malaria they have – for about two weeks.

Gwen: That’s not much.

George: It’s not much, unless you’re one of those men.

Gwen: What about morphine? What would that have done?

George: Multiply that times ten. Now we’re not talking about 141 – we’re talking over a thousand doses. And it’s really going to be an incredible boon to these men in the hospital. We’re talking about a lot of amputations. We’re talking about gangrene and infections, without this morphine, these men are really suffering incredibly.

Gwen: George says there were between twenty and twenty five thousand amputations of confederate soldiers.
George: So, the numbers are really quite staggering.

Gwen: Okay. Given those figures, do you think this story is true?

George: You know, I have to say, I don’t have a particular experience with children’s dolls. But I can tell you from references that we read; we know that women, for instance, were smuggling things in the crinoline – the cage crinolines. When it comes to smuggling, they were incredibly ingenious.

Gwen: But George has never read about that ingenuity being applied to dolls. Robert Steiner is the principal forensic scientist at the State Crime Lab in Richmond, Virginia. Robert has agreed to test Nina for traces of drug residue. I’m curious Robert, 2011 is 150 years after the beginning of the Civil War, would these drugs still be something you can detect, that long afterwards?

Robert Steiner: Yes. That’s one of the things about these two drugs, is that the molecules actually won’t break down.

Casey Mims: We’re going to take three samples.

Gwen: First, Robert’s intern, Casey Mims, swabs the inside of Nina’s head for drug residue.

Robert: We’re going to take the samples over to the control substances sections and run them on the AccuTOF-DART, and see if we find anything.

Gwen: The “DART”- or “Direct Analysis in Real Time” instrument sends an
electrical charge into the sample. In response, any drugs that are present will create their own unique ions that can then be detected. The results take only a few minutes.

Robert: It appears that it’s negative. That we did not detect morphine or quinine on the swabs. You know, the biggest question still comes down to packaging, and if it was packaged, because of its precious nature, to prevent it from leaking out.

Gwen: But it’s not definitive.

Robert: It’s not definitive in any manner, no. We can only say that we didn’t detect it.

Gwen: The Nina story appears plausible, but neither Civil War historians, nor scientists, have any proof of dolls being used as drug smugglers. Journalist and author Sharon Scott studies all kinds of toys, including dolls, and their place in American history.

Gwen: You’ve done work on the history of toys. What do you make of this doll?

Sharon Scott: This is a Greiner doll from Philadelphia. This would have been somewhat common during the Civil War, although only for the people could afford them.

Gwen: She says that the doll was expensive, and that might be a clue.
Sharon: I would say the elite were probably more involved in carrying contrabands than the other classes. Because, one, the medicine was quite expensive. Two, the travel to get the medicine was also expensive.

Gwen: But Sharon explains women learned very quickly not to leave a paper trail of their activities, particularly after a well-publicized arrest of one of their own.

Sharon: Rose O’Neal Greenhow was found to be a Confederate spy living here in D.C.

Gwen: In 1861 Greenhow learned about Union troop locations just before the first battle of Bull Run. Allegedly, she carried this crucial intelligence when she visited confederate General P.Q.T. Beauregard – hiding the information in the ringlet curls of her little girl’s hair. But Union officials suspected her as a spy and Greenhow was jailed for nearly a year.

Sharon: When they arrested Greenhouse, they also searched her house. And, at that time they found all her correspondence.

Sharon: And it gave a lesson to the other female smugglers during the war - not to keep a paper trail.

Gwen: Sharon did some digging on our behalf, and made a discovery,

Sharon: Here’s a book written in 1889. It’s called strange true stories of Louisiana. It’s by George W. Cable. Sort of his account of what was going on during the Civil War. Here on page 313, he says…
Gwen: What Sharon says next, I know Catherine will be eager to hear. Well, Catherine this story helps us think about dimensions of the Civil War that we haven’t thought about. I tell Catherine how I was able to narrow down which child might have carried Nina. We know that she belonged to one of the nieces of General Anderson. I think that was a little girl named Lizzie Scott. The daughter of Robert and Mollie Scott. Mollie was the sister of Etta Anderson, his wife. They lived in the same small town in Florida. I explain how Civil War accounts of smuggling are scarce, and records of women’s involvement even more so. But Sharon Scott had uncovered a book from 1889, just 25 years after the end of the Civil War…

He says, “On my way hither, a lady, told me of the tricks resorted to, to get things out of New Orleans. Including this: A very large doll was emptied of its brain, filled with quinine and elaborately dressed. When the owner’s trunk was opened, she declared with tears that the doll was for a poor crippled girl and it was passed.” So that could indeed be describing something similar to this doll.

Sharon: I do believe that there were many, many other women doing this that we just have no record of.

Gwen: Well, Catherine, unfortunately, I cannot resolve your questions about whether or not Nina in fact carried contraband medicines behind the Union lines to Confederate soldiers. It’s also important to say that with extensive research, there is no evidence to contradict that. It’s entirely possible that it happened.
Catherine: Absolutely. And I think anything that can get people interested in history is terrific. But also just, just to sort of let people know that there are a lot of things about history that we’ll never quite know the whole story about. But it certainly shouldn’t stop us from asking those questions.

Gwen: I thank you for what your story revealed to me, Catherine.

Catherine: Appreciate it, Gwen.