

IROC - Honor Club Inevitable

By Lois Holman

From the first day Rose O'Neill visited Bonniebrook at about age 20, she was overjoyed with the tangled wilderness and for the rest of her life Bonniebrook was her chosen haven from the stress of life or any great disappointment. She found rest and peace among the people of the area, therefore, she spread her love and friendship everywhere she went. The natives learned from her the powerful influence of love and friendship one person can radiate through a community. Rose O'Neill traveled much, lived in homes in New York, Connecticut and Capri, yet she seemed to have an inner urge to rush to Bonniebrook at every opportunity.

Upon retirement in 1936, Rose O'Neill moved home to Bonniebrook to live out her life. Now she was free to use her time to enthrall people who had hardly known her before. There was time to attend and entertain at local ladies clubs, civic organizations and enchant college students with her art and winning personality.

Her life of compassion and generosity was well known. She made permanent friends with many people. After speaking at the School of the Ozarks, the late Dr. R.M. Good recognized the rare qualities of this artist. Rose's generosity surfaced again and she gave many pieces of art, Kewpies and rare furnishings to the School of the Ozarks College. Dr. Good, well aware of the fame this lady had known, preserved these items and as museum space was provided, they were displayed in her honor. Dr. M. Graham Clark continued this effort and assists us in many ways today.

In the year 1946, another farsighted family, Dr. and Mrs. Bruce Trimble, purchased the Shepherd of the Hills Farm. Mary Trimble recognized the value of O'Neilliana and began collecting all she could. Soon The Rose O'Neill Room became a focal point in The Shepherd of the Hills Memorial Museum.

There must be a leader in every movement toward a goal. Pearl Hodges, a native Bransonite, who moved away as a child, studied art and worked as an artist, retired with her husband Frank and moved back to Branson. To keep busy and be a part of the community, the two took special jobs at the Shepherd of the Hills Farm, Pearl becoming a tour guide in the Rose O'Neill Room. As she worked, telling and retelling the story of the fairytale life of Rose O'Neill, the leprechauns began stirring Pearl's creative nature. She began to research, finding more and more fascinating stories of the world famous Rose O'Neill.

Pearl recognized the fantasy as well as the real accomplishments of Rose O'Neill and through the Tacoma Art Club she found others who joined in holding a week long celebration honoring Rose O'Neill in 1967. It was generally hoped that this would be a yearly celebration but the art club chose not to sponsor the event the next year.

It was then that Pearl, assisted by many local enthusiasts, spearheaded the intensive organization of the National Rose O'Neill Club, all went well. The Kewpies responded as did real people from most all states. The first Kewpiesta was held in April 1968. The organization was on its way with Pearl as founder and first president, Rose Merritt was vice president and Jean Cantwell was secretary/treasurer.

Rose O'Neill was widely known as an illustrator and writer by the turn of the century, but when the tragedy of divorce brought her to Bonniebrook in deep despair, the healing of her spirit was brought about by the creation of the gentle but whimsical Kewpies.

Rose sculpted the first straight-standing Kewpie, so symbolic of the Kewpie today. The Kewpies flourished in penned pages and three dimensional objects were used in most every phase of life in some way. Rose became wealthy from this and her stories and illustrations. So great was the demand for her work that she was overwhelmed. She could not carry the load alone. She advertised for an assistant.

At this time a very talented young man, 17 year old Joseph L. Kallus, answered the ad and became an assistant to Rose, working with the Kewpie in a lifetime of compatible accomplishments. The two seemed to have the same feeling of spirit of the Kewpie. Joseph Kallus did much of the basics of sculpture, but to quote the late Mr. Kallus, "Rose always put the finishing touch to the dolls", also according to Mr. Kallus he did the sculpture of the Kewpie Thinker. In the 1920's Mr. Kallus started manufacturing dolls. Most of the Kewpies produced afterwards were made by him or licensed by him to other manufacturers. He experimented with many types of materials and doll designs. The variety of Kewpies and Scootles attests to this. This relationship of working together with Kewpies continued throughout the life of Rose O'Neill.

A life so full of accomplishments and so illustrious could never go unnoticed. So it was inevitable that an honorary club would be founded sometime. We are most grateful that it happened in Branson, Mo. the chosen home and burial place of Rose O'Neill.

Like the spirit of the Kewpie flitting about on tiny blue wings, so the spirit of the National Rose

O'Neill Club went out among O'Neill fans everywhere. Response to the movement was all but unbelievable. Credit must be given to those who up to now had kept alive the works of Rose O'Neill.

In 1968, The National Rose O'Neill Club held as its purpose, "To keep alive the memory of Rose O'Neill and inform the public about her works and to promote the cultural arts." It was to sponsor Kewpiesta each year during April in Branson, Mo. The club grew rapidly. Membership included most of the 50 states and some members abroad. The first five years the founder served as president of the club.

As briefly as possible, yet to present the fantastic growth and involvement of many famous and accomplished people, I shall attempt to give a history of the International Rose O'Neill Club by years.

With Pearl as president, Kewpiesta 1968 theme was the Kewpie. A special honorary marker was placed in front of the Chamber of Commerce and dedicated to the memory of Rose O'Neill and Branson as her chosen home. Special guests were Ralph A. McCause, author of *Titans and Kewpies*, John Neihardt, noted poet laureate of Nebraska and Paul O'Neill, nephew of Rose, who over the years has arranged many displays of his aunt's art work for Kewpiesta. The Blue Wingers, a long-time group of O'Neill collectors from California were well represented in 1968.

In 1969 the year's theme was the Orbiting Kewpie. Speaker was Paul O'Neill, special banquet at the opening of The Rose O'Neill Tea Room at the School of the Ozarks.

1970's theme was The Rose. Guest Charles Campbell of Columbia's Hickman High School whose athletes are called Hickman High Kewpies. A special tribute to the memory of Ellie Mitchell. Bob Gibbons presented a scale model of the three floors of Bonniebrook. The Blue Wingers from California gave a slide program of their adorable Kewpie collections.

Kewpiesta 1971 was lake oriented with the Merkep as the theme. Special events - to Forsyth Fish Fry by boat, Reader's Theatre group from SMSU, *Kolorful Kewpies and Their Kreator*.

1972 theme was Kewpie Gardener. Tours to special area gardens including Laura and Bethel Eiserman's who had special flowers which had come from Rose's garden at Bonniebrook. Special guests were Rowena Godding Ruggles, author of *The One Rose* and Joseph L. Kallus, lifelong co-worker and friend of Rose O'Neill. Due to Jean Cantwell's contact with Rose's friends, Berger and Matta Lie, from Norway, General Lief Sverdrup, Royal Norwegian Consulate from St. Louis presented three outstanding paintings to IROC. Also Richard Shure a representative from Strombecker Corp. was present. Norway was the first national affiliate. Installation of Lois Holman as the new president of the National Rose O'Neill Club. Though Pearl gave up the presidency she continued to charm Kewpie fans with her wit and talent on through the years.

1973 Lois chose for the Kewpiesta theme the Kewpie Traveler. Decorations featured "Around the World to Bonniebrook, the Travels of Rose O'Neill". Friday evening Susan Wilson gave a film travel show of Norway. As guest speaker, Jessie Hill McCause, wife of the late Ralph A. McCause charmed the banquet group with her Kewpie-like personality as she told events leading to the publication of the first major book on the life and works of Rose O'Neill, *Titans and Kewpies*. Visitors from California included actress Sondra Locke and her artist husband Gordon Anderson. Special gifts of the World Wide Arts Collectors Edition Plates were sent as favors to banquet guests by Joseph L. Kallus. Mr. Kallus sent favors to IROC banquet guests for many years.

During the year of 1973, Jean Cantwell appeared on the *Today Show* with Barbara Walters for an interview concerning Rose O'Neill and her varied works and earlier she had appeared on *To Tell The Truth*, a national TV show.

Alice Bumba had been in charge of a Bonniebrook play party on Friday evening for several years.

In 1974 celebration of the one hundredth birthday of Rose O'Neill dominated. The Kewpie Band was the theme. The Friday night program was the highlight of the celebration. Rose Merritt, namesake of Rose O'Neill, directed the evenings activities. The area bands participated with band music on the streets and Leon Bradley with his brass ensemble was on stage at the Jones Auditorium at the School of the Ozarks for the Friday evening activities. Two eight foot tables were beautifully decorated, one holding the huge birthday cake with one hundred lighted candles, the second table with identical tablecloth holding the punch bowl and special flower arrangements were placed on the riser of the orchestra pit floor and to the surprise and elation of the audience, the tables with Rose Merritt, Rose O'Neill's namesake and Lois Holman, IROC president standing beside a table as the whole scene was elevated from the pit to stage level presenting a spectacular picture to honor the famous lady, Rose O'Neill on her 100th birthday.

Banquet speaker was Carolyn Fay who presented the life of Rose O'Neill in a dramatic first person monologue.

This was a memorable year for IROC. During the year Lois had prepared the club's first constitution and by-laws with provisions for state affiliates. The constitution also provided for a scholarship and memorial fund. Both funds began to accumulate that year and have continued to grow. The club charter for International status was achieved that year.

The first state affiliate, Missouri (Mo-Kewps) was presented a charter. The International Rose

O'Neill Club as off to a great growth pattern which reached all states.

Pearl Hodges' new sculpture, *The Tangle*, a youthful Rose O'Neill holding a Kewpie in her arms, was unveiled at the banquet. Robert Gibbons, club researcher and historian, had two designs of first day cover envelopes prepared and many were mailed on that special day.

Governor Bond proclaimed June 25 as Rose O'Neill day statewide. Lois Holman traveled to Iowa to present IROC's second charter to the Iowa Kewpie Kernels. Jean Cantwell was installed as the new president.

Jean's theme for 1975 was the Huggers - Loving and Sharing. Jean also started new activities in the club. A scrapbook contest and other contests during the three day event to involve the members as a group.

The Ohio and Kansas affiliate charters were presented at the banquet. Robert Gibbons was the banquet speaker.

On Saturday morning a progressive breakfast was held with short informative programs at each of the three places involved with the breakfast. Another new event was the Friday night Past Presidents Program instigated by Pearl Hodges. It was carried on for a number of years as a fun time for all. Luther Gillett made the Kewpie Huggers in miniatures for banquet favors and has continued to do so each year.

1976 our national bi-centennial year brought out the Kewpie Army for a theme. Oklahoma and Ohio became state affiliates and the first yearbook was published, titled *The Kewpie Kompendium*.

Banquet speaker was Pearl Hodges. Robert Gibbons was installed as the fourth president of IROC.

In 1977 Robert Gibbons chose the Information Kewpie as the theme. Mrs. Jack Bowker from Kansas City was the banquet speaker, speaking about first-hand knowledge of Rose O'Neill. Lois Holman sent a seven doll Kewpie display to Montbrison Museum in Paris for one year's display in "A Whole World of Dolls" show. Miss Missouri was a special guest during Kewpiesta. The Oklahoma affiliate, The Kewpie Chiefs, was presented a charter.

The first Kewpiesta auction was held this year. 1978 Bob used the Thinker as a theme. After a trip to India, Bob established a National Rose O'Neill Club in India. Washington Kewpie Sailors and Illini Top Notchers both became affiliates during this year. Friday evening Mona Nevins gave a slide program on *Puck* drawings. Bob Gibbons and Susan Borneman gave a Reader's Theatre program titled "*The Rose and The Lion*" after the banquet.

In 1979 Lois Holman became president for the second time. Arkansas and Arizona became state affiliates and Japan became a national affiliate to IROC. Banquet program was a slide/tape show sent from California by Bob Gibbons and presented by his brother Jim Gibbons.

The Blunderboo Kewpie was the theme. This allowed everyone to participate with no inhibitions. The past presidents did the Friday night program, Jean Cantwell - music, Pearl Hodges - drew Kewpies, Lois Holman - poetry from *Master, Mistress*.

1980 brought the Kewpie Sweeper as the theme, sweeping up another affiliate - Tennessee was presented a charter. The ribbon winning doll contest was started this year. Jean Cantwell gave a slide and musical program about the Villa Narcissus for banquet entertainment. Canada became a national affiliate.

June Anderson became IROC president in 1981. The constitution was revised to incorporate a wider range of participation. The tourist Scootles was the theme. Everyone scooted along to learn all possible from seminars on Kewpie China, to listening to local information and knowledge from life long friend of Rose's, Bethel Eiserman. The Friday night program was a Reader's Theatre performance "*A Historic Love*" written by Bob and Sally Gibbons and read on stage by Dr. James Gibbons and Susan Borneman. The format of Kewpiesta changed from a great activity to a more doll convention type activity with Holiday Inn as convention center.

In 1981 June chose the Cuddle Kewpie as theme. Many beautiful old and new huggable Kewpies appeared to delight all. This year the Friday evening program was the world premier of "*The Loves of Rose*", a three act play written by Jean Cantwell and produced and performed at the Beacon Hill Theater and The School of the Ozarks. Michigan, Texas and New Jersey were presented charters as state affiliates to IROC. Bob Gibbons and Susan Borneman did Reader's Theatre play "*A Historic Love*" Saturday night.

1982 Connie Henning became IROC president. The convention center plan continued with headquarters at Holiday Inn. The atmosphere of Kewpiesta changed somewhat. The Friday night program was the main program on the life and works of Rose O'Neill. Bob Gibbons gave a slide show program on Rose O'Neill's scrapbook, Jean Cantwell did skits from *The Loves of Rose*, Pearl Hodges showed the new Jesco Kewpie and Lois Holman gave a brief review of her book *Rose O'Neill and Other Works*.

Saturday held visual displays by Paul O'Neill and the Joseph Kallus dolls by Nancy Villasenor, the president of Jesco Co., now producing Kewpies from the old Cameo molds. June Anderson did a seminar on Kewpie needlework. The banquet was held at Little Bavarian, a German atmosphere

prevailed in food and decor, dancing followed the dinner.

1983 with Connie as president is here. It finds us full of enthusiasm and anticipation. Format for the four days present business meetings on Thursday, affiliate dinners Thursday night. Friday brings the excitement of trade korner and an evening program by Susan Wilson with slides from Rose's *Puck* drawings and Jean Cantwell entertaining with music.

Saturday will be filled with the early breakfasts. One an Easter parade, the other an auction breakfast. The afternoon will bring a film of the very lovely and extensive Wichita Art Association showing of the Works of Rose O'Neill, promoted by Mr. & Mrs. Richard Nethaway of Salina, Kansas. This is the first major show of the works of Rose O'Neill since her New York show in 1922. It is our hope that more of these will continue.

Saturday night banquet will have a western flair in dress with square dancing to follow. Sunday morning breakfast, an event held for many years as a farewell hour will again be hosted by the Mo-Kewps and the traditional visits to the Ralph Foster Museum at Point Lookout and the Shepherd of the Hills Memorial Museum and greetings to the Old Shepherd's Book Shop.

Also on Sunday we will tour the Bonniebrook homestead as we have done each year in the past. This special feature of Kewpiesta is looked forward to by Rose O'Neill fans year after year.

In these seventeen years IROC has grown beyond belief. We have lost many of our dear friends who supported the club's beginning and have pined many new friends and attracted many young people.

This article is intended to give a very brief account of events over the past seventeen years. Much had to be omitted due to space. Much gratitude and Kewpie love is sent to all of those people whose support and labor made this possible over seventeen beautiful years, may these years be a memorial to all Kewpie friends whom we have lost during this time.

Any omission of person or event was unintended.