Dy-Dee Baby Broke Her Heart

A design flaw in this 1930s creation signaled catastrophe for Dy-Dee mommies.

DY-DEE BABY took American girlhood by storm when I was a child, in the 1930s.

Little girls cuddled Dy-Dee dolls, dressed and undressed them and took them for walks in little wicker carriages.

And they fed their babies …endlessly.

For Dy-Dee was the first doll to perform what might delicately be called a bodily function.

She drank and promptly wet her diaper.

Little Dy-Dee mommies fed their Dy-Dees from little glass bottles with rubber nipples and, guess what?

Yup, right through a direct tube to the business end.

Every Dy-Dee came with her bottle, a supply of diapers and a serious admonition to “Feed only water,” and with good reason.

Woe unto the Dy-Dee’s mommy who decided that her doll would prefer milk. Those Dy-Dees developed socially unacceptable body odor in short order.

More serious maladies awaited all the other Dy-Dees, however, even the ones who drank only water.

Until the epidemic that was bound to come, my Dy-Dee led a charmed life. I loved Dy-Dee and fed and changed her religiously.

My mother supplemented Dy-Dee's layette with dozens of diapers that began life as a bedsheet.

My friend Virginia shared my devotion.

Daily Airing

Ginnie and I pushed our Dy-Dee carriages up and down our hill on Henry Street in all weather and repaired to each other's houses for Dy-Dee playtime together. And we fed our dolls to the point of bursting.

My Dy-Dee was beautiful. Of course, they all looked alike, but mine even had the lead role in the Christmas pageant that my gang of little girls put on in our basement rec room.

We played all the adult parts. My Dy-Dee starred as the Baby Jesus, surrounded by stuffed animals unknown in the Holy Land.

She was great. I loved Dy-Dee's soft, stuffed, cuddly body, her rosebud mouth and tiny lifelike hands and fat little feet.

All of Dy-Dee's outer parts, save her soft body, were made of something called composition. This, as we all know, was in the dear, dark ages before the invention of lifelike soft plastic.

Heaven alone knew what "composition" was, but I recently discovered it was a moldable combination of sawdust, paper, glue, glue paste and plaster of paris. Little wonder that it was water-soluble.

I can't think that the geniuses who designed Dy-Dee Baby could not have anticipated the countrywide epidemic of mouth rot that swept the Dy-Dee population.

Their neglect created a wave of broken hearts in the under-10 population in 48 states. It devastated the dolls and created, among Dy-Dee mommies, a crying jag such as the nation had not seen before.

The Fatal Flaw

I had stuck to the directions and fed my doll only water, but I fed her all day long, every day. She slurped up her endless feedings and seemed happy enough, but she exhibited some nasty symptoms before her first birthday.

After a steady diet of gallons of water, she began to show signs or oral disintegration. Her mouth began to dissolve. She could still close her fringed eyes when I lay her down on her back, but she couldn't pucker up for a goodnight kiss.

Her rosebud mouth had turned into a gaping hole in her pretty face.

All the Dy-Dees on Henry Street met the same fate sooner or later. Dy-Dees all over were afflicted, according to the zeal of their Dy-Dee mommies.

It was awful! No doll deserved the fate of my poor Dy-Dee. My mother made me throw the doll out. All my happy memories, however, are still intact.

—Barbara Kiffin, Tinton Falls, New Jersey

Who Put the Face on Dy-Dee?

DY-DEE BABY, the first in the generation of drink-and-wet dolls, was introduced by doll manufacturer Effanbee in 1933.

But while Effanbee made the dolls, their "father" was Bernard Lipfert, the leading doll sculptor of his day.

Lipfert designed the Patsy doll—one of the first to have a wardrobe made for her—in the late 1920s. He went on to create many other popular dolls, including Shirley Temple, Judy Garland, Sonja Henie, Betsy McCall, Toni, Ginny and the Dionne Quintuplets.

Dy-Dee Baby was soon followed by Betsy Wetsy, another drink-and-wet doll, made by the Ideal Toy Company.