



BILL CONNER . . . kachina doll maker

Hopi Dolls Spark Christmas In NE Oklahoma Workshop

By VELMA NIEBERDING

MIAMI, Okla.—Open the door of Bill Conner's workshop and all the enchantment of Christmas is there.

Enchantment because Conner and his entire family are caught up in the charisma of Indian culture. This year it is Hopi kachina dolls.

Conner, who lives southwest of Miami, is Seneca-Quapaw-Osage and Choctaw by blood. It explains his intense interest in all tribal cultures.

THE DOLLS, small representations of Hopi supernatural beings, are made in so many designs that only a student of Hopi ways can adequately explain them. They are so perfectly crafted that one imagines they just flew in from the wind-swept mesas of Arizona.

Briefly, the Pueblo Indians, particularly the Hopi and Zuni tribes, have religious ceremonies in which masked men, called kachinas, have an important role.

"A Hopi Indian," Conner explained, "will tell you that a kachina is a supernatural being

who is being impersonated by a man wearing a mask. He also will tell you that the kachinas live on the San Francisco Peaks near Flagstaff, Ariz., and on other high mountains of that region."

DURING CERTAIN ceremonial rites the kachinas appear to the Indians as masked dancers.

The dolls are something else. They are made and given to children, not as playthings but as objects to be treasured.

Prior to the kachina ceremonies, which include five major events marking the Hopi calendar seasons, the fathers and uncles of village children make kachina dolls for them.

"BASICALLY," stated Conner, "they are not idols to be worshipped, not playthings, but objects for teaching the child (this portion of his culture and religion."

The Hopi recognize over 200 kachinas, some good, some bad. Conner's collection will include representatives of all known ones when he has finished. He has spent months learning ka-

china names and history.

It takes Conner three days to make a kachina doll. Like the Hopis he prefers cottonwood. A dry root is cut and trimmed to size, then shaped with a knife and rasp, rubbed with sandstone to smooth it and then painted. The carving is delicate and traditionally correct.

HOPi CHILDREN adore the kachinas. They substitute for our Santa Claus, bringing a series of gifts from December to July — things like dolls, sweets, bows and arrows and fruit.

Conner shows his kachina dolls somewhat reluctantly because "people want to buy them and they are not for sale."

He added, "My art work is based on art with a special training and not for commercial reasons. Indians are losing their tribal arts. I want to keep what I can, understand it, and pass it on to my children."

Conner's wife, Glenna, while white, is "more Indian than most Indians" according to her proud husband. She is an expert costume maker, knowledgeable with beads and ribbon work, and good with paints.

The five Conner children are all outstanding Indian dancers. They are Delilah, Treva, Melissa and Dennis, at home, and Cletus, who is married.

The family spends much of its vacation time on the powwow circuit. Conner presently is compiling a catalog of Indian craftsmen across the United States.

And the kachina dolls? They will be given to his daughters as family heirlooms.