

TOBY DICK ELLIS: RICHARD ELSENPETER'S CAREER IN TENT REPERTOIRE THEATRE,
TELEVISION, AND MARIONETTE PUPPETRY

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MASTER OF ARTS

By
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ABSTRACT

Richard Elsenpeter was a Midwestern actor who began his career in tent repertoire and circle stock in the mid-twentieth century. He dedicated his life to the pursuit of rural, family entertainment and took pleasure in entertaining the common people of rural communities. Elsenpeter made important contributions to the history of Midwestern entertainment through creativity and the desire to appeal to popular tastes of the time. He originated the idea of taking the Toby character from the tent rep stage to the television screen. Elsenpeter spearheaded Possum Holler Opry, a country-music television program that aired for ten years on various local television stations, where he played the host, Toby Dick Ellis. His show was given the Gibson Award, signifying that it was the number-one country-music show in the Midwest. Personal statements, which are included in the appendix, show how Elsenpeter's enthusiasm for the arts and exuberant personality left a lasting impact on those who knew him.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, have examined a thesis titled “Toby Dick Ellis: Richard Elsenpeter’s Career in Tent Repertoire Theatre, Television, and Marionette Puppetry,” presented by Jacquelyn Nicole Floyd, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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PREFACE

My journey to write this thesis began in early 2011. At the time, I was struggling to think of a subject about whom I would want to extensively research and write. In a conversation with my grandfather, Mr. Donald Crabtree, he mentioned that he used to go see “tent shows” in Queen City, Missouri. My grandpa told me all about the Toby and Susie shows that he grew up attending every summer; as a boy, he would help set up chairs for the performances of The Schaffner Players.

After talking with my grandfather, I decided to explore the realm of tent repertoire theatre, which I previously knew nothing about. A few weeks later, after expressing these ideas to Dr. Felicia Londré, my academic advisor, she handed me a piece of paper informing me of a theatre seminar to be held in Mount Pleasant, Iowa, in April of that year. Hoping to be inspired by something at the conference, I packed my suitcase and drove to Mount Pleasant to see what I could uncover.

Upon arrival at the Museum of Repertoire Americana, where the seminar is held each year, Martha Hayes and several other conference attendees greeted me. They gave me a personal tour through the museum, and I was welcomed warmly into the seminar community. During my time there, I met Richard Elsenpeter, who everyone referred to as “Dick Ellis” or “Toby.” I observed that during many group gatherings, Ellis became the center of a small crowd, as he made lively conversation and told stories about the old days in theatre. Everyone I spoke with had positive things to say about Dick, his talent, and their friendships with him. I decided that if this man had influenced the lives

of so many of the conference attendees, he must have an interesting story to tell. So I asked Dick if anyone had ever written about his life and work, and if I could be the person to do it.

Dick agreed to my proposal, and thus began a series of trips to Quincy, Illinois, for personal interviews with Mr. Ellis. My first interview with him was on June 27, 2011, and my last trip to Quincy was on January 27, 2012. During these interviews, Dick and I sat at a small table and he told me stories for an hour or two. He was always welcoming and kind, and made the interview time enjoyable with his anecdotes.

Most of the information in my thesis about Dick's personal experiences comes straight from these interviews, and is supplemented with newspaper clippings and other artifacts from the Museum of Repertoire Americana. At times, it was difficult to discern the exact years and months that Mr. Ellis worked for different companies, because documents from the museum archive contradicted the information he gave me in the interviews. I did my best to make an accurate timeline of Mr. Ellis's employment history with the information I gathered. Nevertheless, there are still small gaps in the information because, for several years, Mr. Ellis changed acting jobs every few months, and few records are available that document these changes.

My hope is that this thesis will preserve a bit of the history of Midwestern theatre and music that has not yet been written, and also be a valuable memento to Dick's family and friends of the important work he accomplished in his more than fifty-year career.

CHAPTER 1

TWENTIETH-CENTURY RURAL POPULAR ENTERTAINMENT

Richard Elsenpeter's entertainment career began with stage performing and tent rep theatre. It is difficult for twentieth-century audiences to understand what it was like to operate within show business back then, because modern technology has revolutionized the speed at which we are able to communicate with each other and move from place to place. Therefore, in order to better understand the nature of Elsenpeter's early career, a brief background in twentieth-century opera houses and tent theatre is necessary.

American rural entertainment in the early to mid twentieth century is a world away from the sounds and images that flood society today. Television, radio, and the Internet did not stream freely into every household, so people relied upon community events and amusement to escape their everyday routines. Over time, small-town America developed a particular kind of grassroots entertainment that was accepted and valued in those settings, even though it could have been viewed as less sophisticated than the novelties found in larger cities. Don Carle Gillette claimed, in the *New York Times*, "the canvas playhouses of the country [now] constitute a more extensive business than Broadway and all the rest of the legitimate theatre industry put together" (Martin 1). Regardless of its sophistication, there was something about this type of popular entertainment that appealed to the masses, and made people look forward to attending it every year.

The term “rep show,” as referred to in this paper, generally refers to a company of at least ten actors who perform full-length plays at popular prices (Martin 6). “Tent rep” and a “rep show” are the slang terms used by all of the actors, managers, and people familiar with the business. The expression “tent repertoire” is “derived from the strollers’ custom of remaining a week in each town and offering a repertoire of six comedies or dramas, ‘a change of bill every night.’ Sometimes a favorite play would be repeated at Saturday or holiday matinees. Thus a repertoire of plays given during a week stand under canvas make the players a ‘Tent Rep’ Company” (Martin 6). The tent rep shows operating in the Midwest relied heavily upon satisfying rural artistic tastes, and their collection of plays clearly reflected this relationship; the same low comedy appeared night after night on the stage, but audiences did not seem to grow weary of the uncomplicated humor.

William L. Slout describes how popular theatre began spreading across the United States in the late nineteenth century:

The last thirty years of the nineteenth century have been called the golden age of the Opera House. Rapid expansion of railroads following the Civil War furnished the means for touring companies organized in New York and other large cities to add heretofore inaccessible towns to their itineraries, breaking up long jumps, and thus making touring more profitable. Increased theatrical activity spurred small town businessmen into erecting more adequate structures to house the performances of such troupes. The methods of operation developed by these touring companies were carried over and used by repertoire organizations when they began performing in portable canvas theatres. (1)

By the early twentieth century, most small towns in the U.S. had an opera house that became a point of pride in the town. These spaces, which were designed to host theatrical entertainment, were often called Opera Houses or Academies of Music

because theatre had become an art form that people viewed as scandalous or immoral. Therefore, theatre artists changed the name of the space to put forth an “image of respectability” (2). Slout further explains that an opera house was “often a thing of beauty, designed to outdo the theatres in close-lying towns. The building was used for such functions as lectures, political rallies, home talent shows, dances, and high school graduation exercises. Frequently, it was designed to house civic facilities as well” (3).

Typically, an opera house would be stocked with a few pieces of scenery that functioned as a basic background for every play performed there. It would have a stock of painted wings and backdrops that depicted common locations, like a street, a parlor, a kitchen, a prison, and a forest (5). Companies that wanted to utilize the space would simply re-use the old scenery in every play; audience members often became tired of seeing the same set pieces used again and again. In addition to tired, lackluster scenery, the theatre itself was not overly comfortable for audience members when they came to see a show. Managers furnished the theatre with wooden chairs or wooden planks balanced between two beer kegs for benches; often the theatre was too hot in the summer and too cold in the winter (6). Regardless, people needed a break from their everyday routines, so they continued to attend live performances, even in somewhat uncomfortable conditions.

The social importance of tent rep and circle stock theatre lay in their overarching purposes: to exist as popular entertainment for the rural masses. Popular entertainment, such as these two forms, “confirms the experience of the majority, in contrast to the elite, which tends to explore the new” (Martin 1). Tent rep theatre did

not attempt to establish new theatrical styles or present controversial ideas. The plays and characters of tent rep theatre confirmed the values of its rural audience; they rarely tried to rock the boat or challenge conservative views. Consequently, popular entertainment tends to be an “accurate reflector of the attitudes and concerns of the society for which it is produced” (Martin 1). A twentieth-century tent theatre artist sought to please audiences with uncomplicated, predictable plot lines and characters, because he knew those features would draw larger crowds, which in turn would pay the bills. It was important for the shows to be predictable and to fulfill the expectations of audience members who came to see them; people wanted to experience “the pleasant shock of recognition of the known verification of an experience already familiar” (Martin 1).

Small Midwestern towns that could afford to operate an opera house had access to periodic theatrical performances. If a town was not large enough to support an opera house, its citizens could have been starved for entertainment and social interaction. In a 1915 Department of Agriculture report, one Colorado farmer expressed his longing for more interaction with his neighbors and community:

The only thing in which I see much room for improvement [in farm living] is in a social way, and just how this is to be accomplished is a question. With the disappearance of the spelling bees and literary society, I seems that all social affairs have practically ceased, and the farmers have not been together as in former years. The average farm homes in the ...valley (even granting such homes have modern conveniences, pianos, etc.) are prisons; the women, prisoners—“trusties,” of course, but nevertheless prisoners—made by such circumstances over which they have no control, or better perhaps by environment. We are starving for social conditions, pleasurable hours, which seem to the younger ones, dissatisfied. An auto helps conditions of the family who owns it, but in nine cases out of ten simply removes such family from the country pleasures and adds them to the crowd of the nearest town. The merchants...of the valley towns

have their social relations in the nearest town, to the neglect of the country hamlet and its people. Landowners do not live on [the farm]—their wives won't. Country conditions socially are disgustingly lifeless. We want entertainment and life just the same as city dwellers. Can you give it? (Martin 2-3)

Country-dwelling citizens wanted access to quality entertainment, but felt helpless to make this hope a reality. Fortunately, developments in the film industry and complications with the bookings of touring theatre companies would spur a change in opera house operations that helped resolve this problem.

The movie industry in the United States continued to grow, and small-town opera houses faced pressure to show these films more frequently in their spaces. While touring rep companies operated under ticket prices of ten, twenty, and thirty cents, many films could be viewed at the cinema for only five cents (Slout 53). Additionally, the quality of live drama had decreased over time, "consisting of tired plays, shoddy scenery, and inferior performers"; it was no wonder that opera house managers chose to increase the number of short pictures shown at the opera houses and decrease bookings of repertoire companies (53). As opera houses moved farther away from live entertainment in favor of movies, theatre artists needed a place to perform their shows. They were forced to look beyond small towns to communities that were even more remote, where people could not compare the quality of different types of shows, and obscurity would protect them from increasingly rigorous copyright laws (53-54).

The companies' solution was to put their shows under canvas. It was not the first time that theatre had been performed under a canvas, but competition from movies dramatically increased the number of shows using the canvas as their primary arena (Martin 3). This change not only allowed theatre companies to have more flexibility, but

also enabled them to travel to towns that did not have an opera house. Tents could be erected on any piece of open land, making it easy for tent shows to come into new communities. Neil Schaffner claims that his tent show's mission was to "bring laughter and forgetfulness to thousands of people whose lives were drab and unexciting, made up mostly of tragedy and care" (Martin 3). Tent repertoire theatre allowed workers like the Colorado farmer to get out and experience live entertainment with his community, which was exactly what he asked for in the above petition.

The agrarian community had a profound affect upon the development of tent repertoire theatre during the first two decades of the twentieth century. The 1890s were difficult years for farmers, because they were trying to keep up with mechanization and could no longer operate as independent entities. However, there was a boom in the agricultural economy starting in 1897 in which farm prices rose dramatically. The farmers' prosperity spilled over into other areas of the community, including the entertainment sector. Slout claims, "During two decades of farm prosperity, the repertoire tent show developed into a rural theatrical institution. Without a receptive farm market to encourage growth and development, it would have expired as a theatrical form along with the opera house and the one-night stand" (82).

Fortunately, the booming agricultural market allowed tent rep theatre to prosper, allowing many new companies to form during the first part of the twentieth century. Dr. Michael Kramme explains that the manager of a tent rep show generally filled several roles, often serving as the owner and producer as well as acting and sometimes playwriting (10). The company of actors typically consisted of six or seven

men and three or four women; all of the actors would have also been required to perform “specialty acts” or double as part of the orchestra, making their jobs quite demanding (10).

When an actor joined a tent rep company, he would be expected to perform a “line of parts” that corresponded with the age and appearance of the actor. Kramme describes the typical progression for a young male actor entering the tent rep profession:

Young men entering the business would begin their careers playing “juveniles” or the second romantic interest in the show. As the actor matured, and if he had the right looks, he would move into the “leading man” roles that provided the major love interest in the play. If the actor’s appearance was not right for leading man, he would usually graduate to the villain roles (always called “heavies”) or miscellaneous supporting roles. As the actor grew older, or if he had an unusual look or a comic talent, he would then play character roles. The two most common character roles were the “G-string” comic in the early days of the business and the “Toby” in the latter days. The G-string character was an old man with chin whiskers who spoke in a high squeaky voice like the G-string on a violin. (10)

Women had similar roles to fill that often accompanied those of their male counterparts. A young girl would start out playing an “ingénue” or a “soubrette,” the first being a sweet, young schoolgirl and the latter a flirtatious comic role. Later on, she would move to “leading lady” or “general business,” depending on her look. Too often, actresses played leading lady roles long after they should have retired them to younger women; managers’ wives seemed to be the leading perpetrators of this phenomenon (11). There were also character roles for women to play, which most often were the gossipy neighbor, society woman, or “silly kid” roles (11).

These stock characters became well known on the tent rep stage; they often took on characteristics of the people from the areas to which they played. There were a few stock character types that became more popular than the others, and were seen so frequently that they developed their own special titles. In particular, “the silly kid and his female counterpart became identified as Toby and Sis Hopkins; and the old eccentric assumed the slang name of G-string because of the customary chin whiskers used by the character actors portraying the roles” (Slout 118). Although Sis Hopkins and the G-string role were popular in many shows, the single most-recognized character in tent rep theatre was the “Toby” character. Over time, Toby became a regular sight in many plays, often making appearances onstage several nights a week. The name Toby was used to designate the young country bumpkin role; he was a boy with red hair and an innocent, playful demeanor. The character’s origins are unclear, with some people claiming he came from W.C. Herman’s *Clouds and Sunshine*, and others attributing him to Langdon McCormick’s *Out of the Fold* (Slout 122). The most accepted account of Toby’s origin comes from the research of William Slout and Jere C. Mickel, in their books on tent theatre. Both men agree that the Toby character type is as old as theatre itself; however, the conventions of calling the character Toby and the bright-red wig did not appear until around 1911 with actor Fred Wilson.

Fred Wilson was a tent rep actor who worked for Murphy’s Comedians and played the “silly kid” roles for all the shows. Wilson played a different part in each play, but he used the same mannerisms, clothing, and speech night after night. Legend has it that one of the young spectators brought it to Wilson’s attention that it was odd for

Wilson to be called “Bud” in one play and “Toby” in another, when Wilson was acting the same in both performances. After that, Wilson and his manager, Horace Murphy, talked it over and decided that all their silly kid roles would be called “Toby” (Mickel 147-148). There is debate about whether the conversation with the child ever happened, but it is accepted that Murphy and Wilson did make the decision to have Toby represent all the silly kid comic roles. Additionally, it was Wilson’s naturally red hair that developed the convention that all Toby actors should have red hair and freckles, which became more exaggerated over time as other actors mimicked it with red wigs and character makeup. This is the most accepted version of the story of Toby’s origins, though there may always be people who question its accuracy.

Regardless of the exact details, Toby became a mainstay on the tent rep stage for many years, and rural audiences loved him. He was:

A red-headed, freckle-faced, country boy, dressed in rural attire—a Huck Finn or Pecks Bad Boy, at various times brash, shy, shrewd, natively bright, stupid, industrious, lazy. He loved a prank, hated sin, supported the ideals of mother, home, and heaven. He was talkative, frequently boastful, using the unpretentious dialect of the region in which he lived. And in many of the tent show bills, he was on hand to determine the outcome of the plot. (Slout 123-124)

Once audiences latched on to the Toby character, they held on tightly. Toby appeared night after night onstage and became a central figure in many tent rep shows. Often, managers became so obsessed with giving the audience the character they wanted that Toby appeared six evenings a week on the playbill. Slout claims that “this was particularly the case when performed by comedians who were company managers as well; their Tobys were often overworked and overdone in an attempt to cater to the

whims of their audiences. To this extent, performances suffered from too-much-Toby” (124).

Toby’s identity changed depending on the region where a play was being performed. Sometimes, he was a farm boy from the Midwest, other times a hillbilly from the mountains, and still others a rugged cowhand (124). Toby may have taken on various facades, but he generally exhibited the same moral principles and grassroots humor. Toby was a fun-loving paradox, and audiences adored him.

In L. Verne Slout’s play *Toby, the Yankee Doodle Dandy!*, Toby is a country boy and a Boy Scout born in Arkansas. The play takes place in the home of Horace Mathews, government worker who is trying to develop a new chemical formula to be used in World War II. Mathews lives with his daughter, Jerry, a young and beautiful ingénue. Mathews has a butler, Hobbs, but is searching for more domestic help because his other servants have joined a citywide domestic strike. It is because of this strike that Toby and Susie enter the show, both as characters seeking employment. Although Toby and Susie have their obvious shortcomings, Mathews hires them because he is so desperate for household help. Toby does not appear to be very smart at the beginning of the play, as he mistakenly deduces that Hobbs’ name is “Flabber Gasted”; however, by the end of the play, he is the hero who has uncovered a Nazi spy ring and hands its members over to the police.

In the story of *Toby, the Yankee Doodle Dandy!*, World War II is in full motion, and there is much tension about secret information being leaked out of the Mathews household. Several characters in the play are spies; Rogers and Madam LaCoyne work

for the Nazi party, Granger works for the United States, and Hobbs allies himself with the highest bidder for his services, which was Japan. The main through-line of the play is that secret government messages are being passed using carrier pigeons that live outside the window of Mathews' apartment. All the characters are suspicious of one another, and all are trying to accomplish their own goals without the others knowing. Toby and Susie unintentionally get involved in this spy ring, and Toby becomes more aware of the spies' actions as the play progresses.

Throughout the story, Toby and Susie's humor consistently exhibits traits of low comedy rooted in country tastes. When Toby first comes onstage, he claims that he has just walked twenty miles into town to apply for a job. Hobbs asks Toby why he did not hitchhike, and Toby holds up his right hand, which is bandaged. Toby explains that his right thumb had been bitten by a calf and was bandaged, so he could not use that thumb to point. When Hobbs asks why Toby did not just use his left thumb to hitchhike, Toby claims, "Shucks—I didn't want to go that way" (Museum, Slout, Toby).

Toby also uses innocuous expressions like "by gummies" and "this is the durndest house I was ever in," which become his signature phrases in the show. These sayings reinforce his harmless, childlike persona and remind us that he is an uneducated farm-boy. When Rogers, a Nazi spy, asks Toby to feed his carrier pigeons for him, Toby does not pick up on the fact that Rogers is a Nazi. He happily agrees, saying, "By gummies, that's easy. All I got to do is feed a few birds" (Museum, Slout, Toby I-21). Even though Toby is uneducated about the larger, outside world, he is quick and knowledgeable about country affairs. For example, when Rogers tries to tell Toby

that the pigeons are simply pets, Toby replies, “Shucks, you can’t fool me. I used to raise pigeons—I didn’t come out so good though. They all died. My idea didn’t work out” (Museum, Slout, Toby I-27). He reveals that he tried to breed pigeons with woodpeckers so that the carrier pigeons would be able to “rap” when they delivered their messages (Museum, Slout, Toby I-27).

Susie, Toby’s female counterpart, is also a prime example of the low comic style. She is severely hard of hearing, which causes endless misunderstandings, and serves as her main comic platform. In one scene between Toby and Susie, Susie believes that there was supposed to be a man coming to kiss her, and mistakenly assumes that the man is Toby, so she kisses Toby before he can kiss her. Toby asks Susie, “What’s the score?” and Susie replies, “No—I can’t give you no more.” Then Toby asks her, “What’s the idea of kissing me...was that the thing to do?” and Susie replies, “Yes—that’s it—you’re on my shoe” (Museum, Slout, Toby I-14). Toby and Susie have a playful, naïve relationship throughout the play, which is riddled with misunderstandings because of Susie’s hearing.

The comic approach never changes, with all the jokes revolving around silly physical humor and uncomplicated wordplay. Susie constantly misinterprets the things people say because of her hearing, which leads to more jokes and likely more laughs from the audience. Toby uses cheesy, old-fashioned humor that would appeal to country tastes, such as the calf biting his finger and raising pigeons. Yet he still ends up as a hero smart enough to outwit several government spies, even though he is just an ordinary, down-to-earth farm boy.

There have been many Toby comedians throughout the years, including John J. Justus, L. Verne Slout, Barrett Nevius, Neil Schaffner, Donald Dixon, Boob (Lawrence) Brasfield, Harley Sadler, and Otto Imig, to name a few (Mickel 153). Neil Schaffner and his wife Caroline became recognized for having popularized the Toby and Susie combination; their tent show, the Schaffner Players, was one of the longest running tent shows in the Midwest. The Schaffners retired in 1962 and passed their tent show to James and Juanita Davis.

However, there was still one actor who continued to play the Toby character, even after all the tent shows mostly dropped out of sight. Richard Elsenpeter, known fondly as “Toby Dick Ellis,” played the Toby character on television from 1960-1970. Elsenpeter had started playing Toby parts during his tent rep days, but carried it over onto his country music television program, Possum Holler Opry. Elsenpeter was known in his day as one of the youngest Toby comedians, and is now characterized as one of the last Toby comedians, having performed the character until 1970.

The Toby character, once created, became a mainstay on the tent rep stage. Audiences’ approval of and love for Toby “created a popularity so great that he became the one outstanding character the rep shows produced and their one original contribution to the American theater” (Mickel 151). With a reputation like that, actors who played Toby characters became equally loved and appreciated.

Richard Elsenpeter is an actor who not only contributed to American popular entertainment in multiple ways, but played a special part in being one of the last actors to carry on the Toby tradition.

CHAPTER 2

CHILDHOOD AND EARLY PERFORMING CAREER

Richard William Elsenpeter was born on April 30, 1927, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. His home was in the suburb Columbia Heights, which consisted primarily of German, Polish, Czech, and Scandinavian immigrants. Part of a big family, Elsenpeter was the middle child of eight. His older brothers included Jim, Joe, and Tom, and his younger siblings were Paul, Nina, and Mary. Tom's twin sister passed away when she was only a few months old, before Elsenpeter was born.

Elsenpeter's father, Andrew, worked as a railroader and chief of police, and his mother, Verna, was a nurse. Young Elsenpeter's life began tumultuously, as he was born with a serious heart defect. He was not expected to live into his teenage years, but, determined to overcome this obstacle, his mother Verna enrolled him in dance classes and made physical activity part of his daily routine. She was convinced that exercise would help his heart condition. Although the family always joked that Elsenpeter's dance lessons would "kill him off in a hurry," the physical activity greatly improved his health. He took lessons in tap, ballet, and acrobatics (Elsenpeter, June 27). Elsenpeter was not very flexible, so he particularly excelled at tap dancing and rubber-leg comic dancing, which became his trademarks in later years.

All of the Elsenpeter siblings had close relationships and spent considerable time together growing up. Although they lived in an old country neighborhood, the atmosphere was rough, and it brimmed with social and ethnic tensions. As a teenager during World War II, Elsenpeter experienced prejudice firsthand because of his family's

German heritage. Any time the Germans advanced in their war efforts overseas, the Polish children in his neighborhood called Elsenpeter “Hitler” and a “Goddamned Nazi.” Often, he suffered physical repercussions, like being beaten up and ridiculed for being German (Elsenpeter, June 27).

In addition to effects from social turmoil surrounding the war, Elsenpeter faced significant emotional chaos in his childhood after a heartbreaking family event. Columbia Heights was a rural community at the time; woods and natural terrain surrounded people’s homes, and people often saw wolves, deer, or moose in their own backyards. Due to the high number of wild animals present and abundant hunting opportunities, every family stored guns over the front doors of their homes for hunting.

One day, when Elsenpeter’s older brother Tom was visiting his good friend Bob Strong, a tragic accident occurred. The two boys were talking and examining their hunting gear at Strong’s home, and Tom asked Strong if he could hold the family’s hunting rifle. While examining the rifle, Tom asked Strong if the gun was loaded with ammunition. Strong claimed that the chamber was not loaded, but when Tom pulled the trigger, a bullet fired toward Strong and fatally wounded him.

Back at home that evening, after the accident, Elsenpeter’s older brother Jim began yelling for their father, to inform the family of Tom’s accident. The household was gripped with fear and anticipation as they waited for the police and community to respond. Law enforcement came to their house to detain Tom, but their father Andrew would not let the police take Tom to the station for questioning. Fortunately, the small

town's neighborly code of ethics worked in their favor, and Tom never faced criminal charges.

Later, Strong's mother came to the Elsenpeter house claiming she had forgiven Tom. Mrs. Strong said that, despite her sadness, she would have rather her son died at the hands of a friend than any other way. Henceforth, Tom suffered intense nightmares, rarely having a good night's sleep. Elsenpeter, a young boy at the time, never forgot the effect the accident had on his older brother, and he vowed never to touch a gun.

However, Andrew believed that it was essential to teach his sons gun safety, since they lived in a rural environment. When Elsenpeter was about twelve years old, his father taught him how to properly clean, assemble, load, and unload a gun. He also learned how to carry a weapon securely, so that he could climb over or under fences safely while hunting. After the instruction, Andrew asked his son if he wanted to shoot the gun, and Elsenpeter said no. Elsenpeter says that his father never asked him that question again, knowing that Elsenpeter needed time to recover from the emotional distress of the accident.

Elsenpeter's father was the chief of police in Columbia Heights during the prohibition, so Andrew owned a revolver with an old-fashioned clamshell holster that he had used for his job. Many years later, after their father passed away, Elsenpeter's brothers gave him their father's revolver as an heirloom. Elsenpeter tried to refuse their offer, claiming that he would never buy a bullet for the gun, so it was useless to him. However, his brothers assured him, "That's why we brought it to you, because you will never use it." Elsenpeter later gave the heirloom to his nephew, who has all of

Elsenpeter's father's hunting guns. Although Elsenpeter never took up hunting the way others in his community had, he shot a gun for the first time in target practice years later (Elsenpeter, June 27).

Elsenpeter faced many hardships growing up during the Great Depression and World War II. Despite these pressures, he nurtured a love for the arts that pervaded his entire life. Elsenpeter began developing an artistic career at a young age. In primary school, he played the role of the baker in a theatrical adaptation of the nursery rhyme "Rub-a-Dub-Dub, Three Men in a Tub." During the performance, he got a laugh from the audience. In that moment, Elsenpeter was "filled with the fire of the whole thing," discovering that, as an actor, he could affect a crowd (Elsenpeter, June 27). From that point on, Elsenpeter knew that he wanted to be a performer.

The Elsenpeter family was filled with artists and entertainers. Luckily, Andrew and Verna Elsenpeter enthusiastically supported their children's interest in show business. Jim, Elsenpeter's eldest brother, was a dialectician who could perform any accent, including German, high Dutch, and low Dutch. He often performed voice-over work for commercials in various dialects. Tom and Paul were also dancers, and Joe played the violin. Nina, Elsenpeter's younger sister, was multi-talented, having a varied career in the performing arts. She danced ballroom and tap with dance partner Stan Crowman, then later became an opera singer. Clearly, an interest in performing permeated the family, making it easy for Elsenpeter to have the support and encouragement he needed to pursue acting.

When Elsenpeter was eight years old, his father asked him what he wanted to do for a career. Elsenpeter explained that he wanted to be an actor. His father, who Elsenpeter claims had a “way with words” and was known for his colorful expressions, replied: “Well God damn it to hell, Richard, be the best actor you can be!” Andrew vehemently supported his son’s desire to succeed in show business, and enlisted the support of the rest of the family from that point forward (Elsenpeter, June 27).

Elsenpeter excelled at tap dancing, and as he had expressed an interest in acting, his parents enrolled him in drama classes at the MacPhail School of Theatre in Minneapolis. One of the skills emphasized at MacPhail was learning to perform dialect readings; Elsenpeter remembers learning a Swedish dialect reading, which he regularly performed at many lodge and community group meetings around town. He performed at the Elks Club, Knights of Columbus, the Lions Club, and many others. Elsenpeter remembers a particularly shocking story from his younger days performing for service organizations:

One time, they had a stag night for one of the service organizations, and they had performers during the dinner, so I MC’d that and did my routine. [After I performed], the curtain closed and the strippers came on, because they had been back in the dressing room. My mother was kind of protective of me; she said, “Well, come, Richard, stay here and wait your turn.” So after we got through, and the strippers started, they danced out in front. Most of them [danced] on the banquet tables, and my mother, being inquisitive, looked through the side at the curtain. “Oh!” she said, meaning, “Oh my goodness!” So I looked out, and the girls—men would hold up dollar bills and coins! In those days, you know, eggs were two cents a dozen and bread was a dime. So the men would put coins in the nooks and crannies of the dancing girls, and my mother turned to me and said, “Now, Richard, you know why I told you not to put money in your mouth!” I’ll never forget that one, but we had a good time, mom and I! (Elsenpeter, January 22)

The Depression wore on, and arduous conditions took many people's jobs, which left them with nothing to do but kill time. Nightclubs became prevalent in Minneapolis, and many children, including Elsenpeter, performed regularly in these nightclubs. Elsenpeter worked as a master of ceremonies and a dancer from approximately ages nine to eleven. He wore blackface and performed in minstrel shows where he earned the nickname "Gufus Elasticated Stretch: The Human Snappy Rubber Band" because of his energetic rubber-leg dancing. One time, Elsenpeter was asked to call a square dance after he finished MCing, and he recalls, "I had no idea what the hell a square dance was! But anyway, the Minneapolis Star covered that event, and called me a genius" (Elsenpeter, January 22). After that, he was sometimes referred to as "Genius Richard Elsenpeter," a name he claims was quite "a stretch" (Elsenpeter, June 27). In those days, being a child performer was popular, and Elsenpeter enjoyed working at the nightclubs and lodge meetings, being bold and unafraid to perform in front of a large crowd.

At age thirteen, Elsenpeter began performing a tap-dancing duo with Don Roy. Together they were the "Two Aces" who performed tap routines for a vaudeville act. The Two Aces performed in Minneapolis, and also had an opportunity to perform at the Beacon Theatre in Canada for approximately four weeks. Later on, Roy went to Hollywood and performed as a featured dancer and aerialist (Elsenpeter, November 23).

Elsenpeter's middle school and high school were accommodating with his performance schedule, which made it easy for him to continue his artistic training. In 7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th, grades, he attended the University of Minnesota Children's Theatre

during the school year, which he claims was a “really wonderful” experience (Elsenpeter, June 27). Elsenpeter left school and took the streetcar three afternoons a week, often on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, to attend classes at Minnesota Children’s Theatre. There was an arrangement between Minneapolis public schools, the Children’s Theatre, and the University of Minnesota that gave college credit to high school students. The students took scenic construction, makeup, lighting, costuming, acting, mime, and other craft classes at the Children’s Theatre (Elsenpeter, June 27). Elsenpeter participated in that program, which was an immense part of his theatre training. He recalls that sitting in the light booth and making the colors change onstage was “just a kid’s dream [...] I was really bitten! I thought that was wonderful!” (Elsenpeter, January 22). He recalls they did plays such as *Aladdin* and *Tom Sawyer*. One time, when they were performing *Peter Pan*, one of the actors was attached to a belt and a wire, in order to look like he was flying. As the child was being raised into the air, his safety belt broke, and he fell to the stage floor. Elsenpeter remembers it being a very scary experience, but luckily, the child only suffered a broken arm from the incident (Elsenpeter, January 22).

During the same time he was taking drama lessons at MacPhail and other local theatres, Elsenpeter landed his first professional tent show audition. His drama instructor called him with news that the Christy Obrecht Show was auditioning young people for their company, so Elsenpeter set up an audition time and traveled to the Obrecht’s apartment in Minneapolis. Upon his arrival, a beautiful woman wearing an elegant dressing gown greeted him. Mrs. Obrecht introduced Elsenpeter to her husband,

Christy Obrecht, who was also extravagantly dressed in a smoking jacket. Immediately impressed by their appearances, Elsenpeter thought he had stepped in to a Hollywood movie-star environment. Mr. Obrecht read scenes with Elsenpeter while Mrs. Obrecht watched and applauded enthusiastically after each reading. Elsenpeter was asked to read the scene in many styles. Afterward, the couple informed him that he would be notified if they wished to hire him for the season.

Unfortunately, Elsenpeter never heard from the Obrechts again, but instead was hired to work on the Harry Brown Show, a traveling tent repertoire company. When he discussed the Obrecht audition with fellow members of Harry Brown, Elsenpeter discovered that the whole audition for Obrecht's show had been contrived. Every winter, the Obrechts held mock auditions as entertainment for themselves in the off-season. Elsenpeter was surprised by this news, but viewed the stunt good-naturedly, taking it as a lesson learned about the unpredictability of a performing career. Fortunately, he had still acquired the job with the Harry Brown Show for the summer of 1943, which served as a bridge to a career in tent repertoire theatre.



Figure 1: Dick Ellis when he was part of the Minneapolis Players. Photo courtesy of the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.

CHAPTER 3

FROM HARRY BROWN TO HOLLYWOOD: 1943-1947

The United States' involvement in World War II took many men out of the country, their careers, and their homes. While businesses across the United States felt the loss, theatres faced a unique challenge. Hiring the male actors needed to produce a season was increasingly difficult, and women could not fill male roles in a play as they could at factories or other labor-intensive tasks. In 1943 at age sixteen, Elsenpeter was offered his first job with a professional touring theatre company. He changed his last name to "Ellis," because he was told that Elsenpeter was way too long for print. Dick Ellis became his name onstage, offstage, and in print. Henceforth, I will refer to Elsenpeter by the last name Ellis, in keeping with the progression of his real life events.

The Harry Brown Show was a troupe of comedians that traveled to various towns across western Wisconsin. The route they visited while Elsenpeter worked for them included Cushing, Balsam Lake, Amery, Clayton, New Richmond, Glenwood City, Boyceville, Ellsworth, Elmwood, Menomonie, Pepin, Durand, Downsville, Wheeler, Prairie Farm, Cumberland, Chetek, Rice Lake, Baron, and Luck (Elsenpeter, June 27). All of these towns are located within an approximately two hours' drive, which made the route contained and economically efficient.

Harry and Bessie Brown owned the Harry Brown Show, but their daughter, Goldene Kleber, and her husband, George Kleber, often managed it on the road. George directed for the Harry Brown Show and was Ellis's first professional director

(Elsenpeter, June 27). As former members of the Minnesota Bainbridge Players, the Klebers had performed with Ralph Bellamy, Gladys George, and Victor Jory. Ellis remembers them as a tightly knit group of actors during their Minnesota days, before Bellamy, Jory, and George went to Hollywood. The Klebers were the only members of the group who stayed in the Midwest and joined Goldene's parents on the Harry Brown Show (Elsenpeter, June 27).

George Kleber's professional experiences shaped him into a very strict director. He required the actors to closely follow his rehearsal procedures and etiquette. Kleber initially blocked all of his shows with the entire cast sitting at a table. He told the actors, "Don't act. Just read the lines and mark your part in pencil" (Elsenpeter, June 27). Actors wrote the specified blocking in their "sides," which were partial scripts containing only the lines for a specific role. Only the director kept a copy of the full script for each show to save money on paper costs.

After the actors recorded the stage directions in their sides, Kleber conducted staging rehearsals to walk through the blocking he had dictated. During one of these rehearsals, Ellis accidentally upset Kleber. When Kleber asked him to cross stage right, Ellis corrected Kleber from the stage. He told Kleber that during the blocking rehearsal, he had been instructed to move stage left. Kleber did not receive this correction favorably. After rehearsal, he approached Ellis and reprimanded him for having contested the director from the stage. Kleber told Ellis: "If I tell you to stand on your so-and-so head, you'll do it. You never talk back to the director. If he says to do something, you do it" (Elsenpeter, June 27). Ellis, a teenager still new to the profession, was deeply

hurt by such harsh words coming from a respected director. He quickly learned the importance of following Kleber's directions, even if they differed from ones given in previous rehearsals.

Kleber also required everyone to use professional language during rehearsal; he called the actors by their last names, and expected them to address him as "Mr. Kleber" during rehearsal. Only off the stage, the company members could use their first names to address each other. This valuable practice kept work and personal time separate in a setting where company members spent considerable time together. Despite the embarrassing moment Ellis experienced early in his career with the Harry Brown Show, he recognizes the lasting influence Kleber had on his overall professional mindset. Ellis, like Kleber, believes that actors and directors should still demonstrate the mutual respect that he learned during his time under Kleber's direction (Elsenpeter, June 27). He credits Kleber with teaching him the basics of projection, breathing, and many other crucial acting skills, along with preparing him to enter the professional trouping world.

The cast and crew of the Harry Brown show were small, so everyone was required to help with everything. Consequently, Ellis learned valuable skills about putting up a tent. Putting up a tent was a long and tedious process, requiring many well-planned steps for successful execution. The first step for putting up the canvas tent was finding a suitable lot, or piece of land. It worked best if the lot had lots of open space and was relatively flat. Once the lot was chosen, the company manager or canvas crew would look for high and low spots on the lot, as this affected the placement of the tent. If

there was a low end, which they tried to avoid, they put the stage at that end and the audience on the high end. This created a raked seating area.

The next step was unloading the large bags that held the separate canvas pieces. A trailer or semi truck carrying the tent would pull onto the lot, and then the bags were rolled off the truck in sequence: front end, middle piece (or pieces), and stage end. Poles were placed on the ground to mark where the front, middle, and back supporting beams would be. Then, they took the canvas pieces out of the bags and unrolled them. Those canvas pieces would be placed over the poles that were lying on the ground, and the edges of the canvas were pulled tight. Then they pulled out the ropes on the canvas and placed stakes at the end of the ropes, all the way around the tent. Once the stakes were positioned, men would drive the stakes into the ground. Ellis recalls, "The sidewall of the tent had a pole every eight to ten feet. The stake was driven into the ground one pole length from the tent, so it formed a triangle. Tent people had to really know their business! Then, with a push pole tent, you would crawl under... and put the poles in the holes before lacing it up" (Elsenpeter, January 27). Each pole had a hole in it so that a metal rod could be placed in the hole and used for leverage when raising the tent off the ground. Three or four men would take hold of one metal rod and lift that portion of the tent up; the last step was lacing it all together. It took a lot of stamina, precision, and manpower to erect a canvas tent.

The sets were another element of a tent production that had to be quickly constructed and easily stored away after a performance. Consequently, some companies used "rag sets," which consisted of hanging fabric material on a frame, rather

than a painted flat, for a background. Ellis recalls one time when George Kleber used a rag set on his show and he made a sarcastic remark about it. Kleber replied, "Dick, if you are onstage and the audience is looking at the set instead of you, you don't belong on this show" (Elsenpeter, January 27). Ellis learned a lot from that conversation: if an actor is not the center of attention, then the scenery becomes the focus, and that should never happen. He decided that rag sets were an acceptable way to adorn the stage, because the scenery becomes irrelevant in light of good acting. Ellis also recalled that some of the Broadway shows did not have full sets, just small set pieces that suggested a location or mood. He was beginning to understand what was really necessary to make good theatre; it depended more on solid performances than fancy sets or costume pieces.

While on the Harry Brown show, Ellis and the other male company members did not stay in luxurious accommodations. They slept in tents on the lot, so they could keep an eye on the tent and keep hotel costs down. Ellis recalls one of his memorable experiences sleeping in the tent:

Don and I (the first year it was Ward Tatman and I) I slept in an army tent. We had two cots, and that way it saved room rent. Also, you were on hand if anything happened. Don Weage was quite a guy; again, nothing much bothered him. One night we had an awful rainstorm and it flooded the tent, and I woke him up and said, "Don, water is running through the middle of the tent!" He said, "Well, Richie, I can deal with this better tomorrow at eight o'clock than I can tonight, so go to bed." So that was that. Anyway, that rainstorm loosened the stakes around the tent and the next morning the tent laid down. It didn't blow down or anything, it just, the stakes started to pull and just laid down. Of course that was a "bail" rain, too, so it wasn't all that bad, you know, not like a "blow down" with a push pull tent. (Elsenpeter, January 22)

Although the Klebers were serious and frugal about their tent business, there were

always humorous, improvisational moments in the shows that kept the experience fresh. During Ellis's first season, both Harry and Bessie Brown performed in the shows. The plays were typically two or three acts, and the candy sale typically happened after the second act. The candy sale was a time between acts where an actor or manager would give a sales pitch for candy, and then would walk up and down the isles of the tent selling it to eager customers. Often, there was a chance to win a prize from the tent rep company if the winning token was found in a box of candy. Tent rep shows conducted candy sales because they earned a percentage of the profits on all candy they sold.

In one play, Bessie Kleber was supposed to get stabbed in a knife fight. When the scene came, she thought it was time for the candy sale instead, so she went to her motor home to wait out the candy sale. When she did not arrive for the entrance to her scene, her son, Jack, who was in the cast, improvised to cover her absence. He found a canvas bag that was usually used for tent storage, dragged the bag across the stage, and proclaimed, "I shot her out back of the barn!" The audience was oblivious to the flub, but the company members laughed about the incident for years afterward (Elsenpeter, November 23).

His first season with the Harry Brown Show ended, and Ellis returned home to pack for Hollywood. He was still young, somewhat inexperienced, and unsure of what the future held for his acting career. However, Ellis possessed an enthusiasm that could not be squelched by mere apprehension. In the fall of 1943, he traveled to Hollywood to try to forge connections with various television studios. Upon arrival, Ellis moved into a

private home where he rented a room. Soon, however, his colleague Einar Markussen, an Icelandic pianist that was playing for Ellis' dance review, invited Ellis to stay at the same place he was staying with some other performers. Ellis moved into another temporary residence: a room in the house of silent film screen actress Evangeline Russell (Elsenpeter, June 27).

Russell's late husband, Commodore J. Stuart Blackton, founded Vitagraph Studios in New York 1897. Russell still had an archive of old films from Blackton's career in her home, which Ellis was allowed to watch. The American Vitagraph Company was one of the first film companies to work with stop-motion and drawn animation. Blackton helped develop the techniques of animation, and one of his first silent films was *The Enchanted Drawing* in 1900 (Popova). Blackton also directed, produced, and even starred in some of his own movies. He bought equipment from Thomas Edison and worked with many revolutionaries in the field of American filmmaking. Several years later, in 1925, Warner Brothers purchased his Vitagraph Studios ("Vitagraph"). Consequently, the film archive at Russell's home contained important artifacts like Walt Disney's first cartoon and Victor McLaughlin's first movies (Elsenpeter, June 27). Russell's connection with Warner Brothers remained strong, which also benefited Ellis in his acting career.

Ellis stayed at Russell's home for approximately one year while he worked for Warner Brothers. He enjoyed his time living there with so many other talented artists, and remembers Russell always looking after them, herding them like a mother hen. Ellis also recalls being friends with Russell's son, who was Orson Welles's cameraman, and

who had a big house with a swimming pool. Ellis recalls that all the performers used to go out to his house in the valley to have fun, relax, and get away from the pressures of work (Elsenpeter, January 22).

After that, Ellis mostly worked with R.K.O. Pictures. Altogether, he had two stints in Hollywood, between summer tours with tent repertoire shows. In 1944 during his second trip, Ellis appeared as an extra in R.K.O.'s film *Over 21*, starring Charles Coburn and Irene Dunne. He also worked on a movie with Cary Grant and Shirley Temple. *The Bachelor and the Bobby-Soxer*, produced in 1947, is a romantic comedy featuring Temple as a seventeen-year-old schoolgirl in love with a much older man. Ellis describes his interactions with Temple fondly, saying she was "so wonderful...just as sweet and nice...just like one of everybody" (Elsenpeter, June 27). He also recounts an embarrassing moment with Cary Grant during a rehearsal. One day at lunch, while Ellis was holding a tray of food, Commodore Blackton's son called, "Hey Rich!" to Ellis. When Ellis turned around to say hello, he ran straight into Cary Grant, knocking Grant to the floor. Food was strewn everywhere and Ellis began apologizing profusely while brushing the food off of Grant's clothing. In his mind, Ellis told himself he would never work again because of this clumsy mistake. Fortunately, Grant reacted graciously to the accident. He reassured Ellis that he was not upset, and Ellis remembers Grant being "so very kind" throughout their brief interaction (Elsenpeter, June 27).

During one of his stints in Hollywood, Ellis received a call from Lawrence Welk asking him to join Welk's radio show in North Dakota. Typically, radio shows were sponsored by a seed or farm store and operated similar to a circle stock theatre

company. The performers would act, sing, dance, or any combination of the three, then move to a few other towns before coming back to the first. Despite the appeal of working with Lawrence Welk, Ellis turned down the offer in order to avoid the harsh North Dakota winter. "I thought, 'I'm not going to Dakota in the middle of winter to do a show and dance thing,'" he says, "so I stayed there" (Elsenpeter, June 27).

Ellis's second summer with the Harry Brown Show was 1945 (Museum, Honor Award). During that tour, he bought a drum set from a young man who was going into the Navy. It was a complete set of Slingerland drums with all the accessories. Ellis tried mastering the drums, but did not get very far in his musical pursuits. That fall, after finishing his tour with the Harry Brown show, Ellis went to Memphis, Tennessee, to work for Kleber's Gay Nineties Review. He left the drum set at a music store in his hometown. Tragically, the music store burned down and his drum set was destroyed; the snare drum was the only piece that was saved from the fire. He never pursued learning to play the drums after that.

Goldene Kleber took good care of Ellis, especially because he was so young when he joined up with their tent show. Goldene would keep a few dollars a week of Ellis's salary out of his paycheck. When Ellis asked why, she told him that he would find out at the end of the season. The summer season ended, and Goldene gave Ellis a lump of cash to take with him on his next venture. "This is enough now to get you home and through something," she said (Elsenpeter, January 22). The money served as Ellis's savings account, and he was grateful for her caring gesture.

In the fall of 1945, Ellis joined Kleber's Gay Nineties Review, which played at a downtown country club in Memphis, Tennessee. The company built the set and started rehearsing the popular 19th-century temperance melodrama *Ten Nights in a Bar Room*. After a few weeks of rehearsal, they opened their first performance, but it did not go over well. The country club where they were performing was a membership establishment, so they had the same crowd night after night. Therefore, performing the same play five or six nights in a row did not work, because the patrons had already seen the show. They closed almost immediately, because the show was not sustainable in that setting. Ellis claims he and the company were in Memphis less than six weeks for all the rehearsals and performances (Elsenpeter, November 23). However, the company wanted to stay together, so they moved to Biloxi, Mississippi, for the winter.

The company consisted of Ellis, Weage, and George and Goldene Kleber. They needed an ingénue to fill additional parts, so they hired a girl named Forn O'Neill from Biloxi. The company played in town halls, schools, churches, and other small venues. Mississippi was a conservative place to perform in the 1940s, and Ellis recalls interactions between the church and theatre community being tense at times:

I remember one night, in one of those little churches, the preacher came and asked George if he could say a few words before the show, and George said "certainly, Reverend." And so the guy stood there and said, "So, this is where you are instead of in church?! Don't you know that you will see something here that will drive you to Hell?" He stormed off, and George stepped up and said, "I assure all of you, you'll see nothing here tonight that will keep you out of heaven." So it was really a silent evening—not much reaction. (Elsenpeter, January 22)

There was a local grocery store in Biloxi, and Ellis formed a relationship with the store's owners. Their daughter, Alice May, wanted to take tap dance lessons from

Ellis, so he agreed to give the lessons. Don Weage played piano for them, and the two men earned fifty cents per lesson teaching Alice May. When it came time to be paid, Ellis and Weage always denied payment, saying they would just take fifty cents worth of products from the grocery store instead, which they did. Even with this connection to the grocery store, there was still never quite enough to eat.

The company operated under the commonwealth system of payment. Ellis claims, "We played the town and then divided the money between the cast. It's just not very good. When they ask if you want to join a commonwealth, you say no, because it's just so unsure" (Elsenpeter, November 23). Each day, the manager would take the day's earnings, subtract any expenses, and then divide the rest of the profit between cast members. One day, they had some extra automobile expenses, and at the end of the day, there was only five cents left. Kleber divided it out and gave each person a penny in an envelope for the day. Ellis never opened the envelope, and it is still preserved in the Museum of Repertoire Americana in Mount Pleasant, Iowa (Elsenpeter, January 22). Under the commonwealth system, Ellis lost a lot of weight because he did not have much money for food. When he went home to Minnesota, his mother cried over his half-starved appearance, but Ellis still claims the experience was worth it.

Life in the theatre was often difficult, but Ellis felt that the positive experience always outweighed any financial difficulties that he faced. He claims that one of the greatest aspects of performing in tent repertoire theatre was the amount of improvisation the actors were allowed to do. It was expected that the actors would continue working on their characterizations throughout the season, rather than finding

one way to play a character and holding tightly to those choices. About improvisation, Ellis explains, “No one cared, unless you got way off base” (Elsenpeter, November 23). One incident he remembers where acting choices got out of hand was with an actor named Wally Lucas. Lucas was a method actor, and was trying to find a realistic way of being breathless onstage. So, when he was offstage, Lucas ran back and forth in order to become truly breathless. Unfortunately, he was so exhausted when he came onstage that he could not successfully deliver his lines, and the audience did not understand them. The company was upset with Lucas’s choice that ruined the play that evening. After the show, they scolded him, saying that he was an actor, and that he needed to just act like he was out of breath from that point forward (Elsenpeter, November 23).

In the winter of 1947 to 1948, Ellis joined a radio show and dance with Bernie Collier Town Hall Players in Wisconsin Rapids. Collier’s Town Hall Players did a radio show in the morning, which was usually sponsored by a farm store or seed. A band played some music, and then Bernie Collier, who played the Toby character for them, would do some acting. A play always came first, and then a dance would follow. Often, the play they performed would be cut down significantly from the original script. Instead of a two-hour play, it would only be one hour.

Ellis mostly took this job for the income, and remembers improvisation being a major part of it. They often performed on bandstands, which significantly limited their movement. The actors rehearsed on a stage that was much bigger, and then had to adjust their blocking on the spot for each performance. In one hall they played, Ellis had to exit behind the piano and stand there as if it were offstage. Another time, the play

was supposed to be set in a wealthy home, and the lines their characters said referred to beautiful paintings and tapestries hung on the walls. In reality, Blatz beer signs and crepe paper streamers adorned the room (Elsenpeter, November 23). The most entertaining part of the job was that imagination and flexibility were so frequently part of the experience.

During his time with Collier's Town Hall Players, Ellis remembers popular acting duo Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne coming to some of their performances. Lunt and Fontanne were highly-acclaimed stage actors and members of The Theatre Guild; at the time, they lived just a few hours away from Wisconsin Rapids at their home in Genesee Depot, Wisconsin. Ellis never had many personal interactions with them, but was delighted that they came to support local theatre. Once, in an act of generosity, Lunt's manservant took Ellis and some of the other company members out to dinner. Aside from that, Ellis's interactions with Lunt and Fontanne were brief.

Ellis enjoyed working for the small tent rep and local companies, but had hopes of joining a larger tent show. He decided to focus his efforts on obtaining work with some of these larger companies because they would provide better weekly pay and lead to an even more promising future in show business. Thus began the search for an agent to help Ellis obtain the work he needed to make it through another season.



Figure 2: Dick Ellis in the tent he shared with Don Weage on the Harry Brown show. Photo courtesy of the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.



Figure 3: Publicity photo of Dick Ellis for R.K.O. studios in Hollywood, California. Photo courtesy of the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.



Figure 4: Dick Ellis (center) acting at the Mae West Theatre in Hollywood, California in the mid-1940s. Photo courtesy of The Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.



Figure 5: Dick Ellis, Hollywood, California, mid-1940s. Photo courtesy of The Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.

CHAPTER 4

THE LARGER TENT REP SHOWS: 1948-1959

While searching for his next round of employment, Ellis decided to use an agent. He chose Florence Benn Theatrical Enterprises, a company out of Chicago that scheduled actors for many touring theatre companies in the country. Florence Benn herself, who personally corresponded with actors and managers, ran the agency. Many of the actors Benn sent out were from an acting school in Chicago, but Ellis had heard about her from a friend and started correspondence with her (Elsenpeter, January 27).

On March 31, 1948, Ellis received a letter from Benn offering him a job with Schaffner Players. The letter indicated that Ellis was wanted for General Business, one of the typical roles in a repertoire company's cast, and also to perform specialty pieces at a salary of fifty dollars per week. Even though Ellis only used Florence Benn Theatrical Enterprises one time, he continued to correspond with Benn for many years. Benn wrote letters to Ellis expressing interest in seeing some of his shows, but was rarely able to make this hope a reality. Ellis recalls, "I asked her to come and visit. A lot of people, I think, resented her, because she charged ten percent. I didn't object to that at all, because she did the work" (Elsenpeter, January 27).

Nevertheless, Ellis's correspondence with Benn had paid off, and he accepted the offer to work with Schaffner Players; he started rehearsals in Wapello, Iowa, on May 10, 1948 (Museum, Florence Benn). He remained a dancer and leading man for the Schaffner Players for the entire time he trouped with them, which was three summers (Kramme 50).

The Schaffner Players was a touring tent repertoire company owned by Neil and Caroline Schaffner. They opened the company in 1925, during the “last of the golden years of the repertoire business” and “continued as the business declined” during and after World War II (Kramme 2). The Schaffner Players performed in opera houses and under the tent canvas in Missouri, Iowa, and Illinois for approximately thirty-five years after their company was founded (Kramme 2). Their repertoire included a wide variety of shows, but eventually the “Toby and Susie” characters became a staple on their stage. However, by 1940, only two of the eight plays performed each week featured Toby and Susie (Kramme 43).

Neil Schaffner felt strongly about the talent an actor should possess in order to succeed in the trouping business. He did not support the Stanislavski acting method, nor did he appreciate excessive lewdness on the stage because he valued entertaining an audience over depicting “real life” events (Kramme 47-48). Schaffner believed that acting could not be taught, but must be learned by observing people and how they react to various circumstances. When World War II took many of his experienced actors and he began using novice university actors, Schaffner told them: “You’ve got to learn to troupe a part, and there is a great deal of difference between acting a part and trouping a part. Here you will get no theory. But if you have what it takes, I will make a trouper out of you” (Kramme 47).

Evening performances generally followed a specific lineup. First, the orchestra played an opening concert, and then Schaffner would make a welcome speech to the audience. After that, the first act of the evening’s main play was performed. Between the

first and second acts, members of the company performed one or two vaudeville bits. After the second act was over, Schaffner gave a short pitch for candy sales and audience members purchased snacks. Another vaudeville act finished up the intermission, followed by a farewell speech to the audience, given by Schaffner, before the third act (Kramme 43-45). Ellis acted in the main productions as well as dancing for the vaudeville sketches between acts. One of the intermission sketches he performed for the Schaffner players was a stair dance in which he carried a cane and wore a white hat while he danced.

The Schaffner Players generally employed anywhere from ten to twenty cast members per season. The 1948 season lineup included *Bewildered Boyfriend (Junior is a Jerk and Is Junior a Jerk?)*, *Cheating Wives*, *The Girl Next Door*, *Her Unwelcome Relative*, *Hoodlum*, *Hopalong Toby*, *Once in a Blue Moon*, *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, and *Silk Nightgowns and Long Underwear*. The company toured Wapello, Burlington, Mount Pleasant, Delta, New Sharon, Centerville, Ottumwa, Russell, and Fairfield, Iowa; Kahoka, Hannibal, Palmyra, Lewistown, Edina, Unionville, and Queen City, Missouri; Camp Point and Quincy, Illinois (Kramme 112-113). The 1949 season lineup included *Behind the Country Schoolhouse*, *Hesitating Cowboy*, *How Funny Are People?*, *In Bed with Grandpa*, *The Return of Aunt Susan*, *Sputters*, *Sweethearts Again*, *Too Bashful for Betty*, *Tumbleweed*, and *Who Stole Sally's Slacks*. They toured through Wapello, Burlington, Mount Pleasant, Delta, New Sharon, Fairfield, Centerville, and Ottumwa, Iowa; Memphis, Knox City, Palmyra, Oakwood, Monroe City, Shelbyna, Queen City, and Unionville, Missouri; Quincy and Camp Point, Illinois (Kramme 113).

Ellis only used an agency to obtain an acting job once, because once a person gained a reputation, word traveled quickly through the small tent rep community. Ellis remembers, “In tent rep and some of the other theatre things, you had a reputation. A lot of times they looked for actors and actresses who were ‘up’ in a certain play. They would advertise for ‘Wanted: leading man who is up in.’ Up means you knew the play—you’d been in it before” (Elsenpeter, January 27). Ellis became fairly well known in the 1940s and 1950s, because only a few tent rep theatre companies still existed. The frequency with which companies performed the same plays also allowed Ellis, along with most actors, to develop a repertoire of roles they were “up” in and get jobs more easily in the future.

One of Ellis’s best friends on the Schaffner show was Bob Brewer, a fellow actor in the company. Brewer was a character actor, and was fun to be around both onstage and off. Ellis remembers Brewer always telling the most entertaining stories, because Brewer had worked with several larger theatre companies that could afford extravagant set, lighting, and other spectacular elements, which he would talk about to Ellis. Brewer was also fairly successful scenic designer and carpenter. But Brewer’s most impressive quality was his superior acting ability, even when he did not practice his full part in rehearsals. During one show, Brewer played Ellis’s father, and there was a scene where Brewer was supposed to get angry at Ellis. When the time came for the heated conversation, Brewer would start out his monologue, and then he would skip parts of it, saying, “So and so, and so so so—cue,” at which point Ellis was supposed to pick up with his lines. This rehearsal technique frustrated Ellis, who told director Neil

Schaffner that his character could not be afraid until Brewer's character had actually played out all of the lines; Ellis doubted that the actual performance would work if they had not fully rehearsed the emotions. However, Schaffner just looked at Ellis and said, "Don't worry. Opening night, you're going to be afraid. You have to know Bob Brewer" (Elsenpeter, January 22). Ellis recalls, "Well, opening night, I was afraid; I mean, he just spit those words out at me, and what an actor he was—just a really super, super actor!" (Elsenpeter, January 22). Ellis does not remember any other actor who could get away with skipping lines in rehearsal the way Bob Brewer did, but he has excellent memories of working with Brewer, and of Brewer's talent.

After his first summer with the Schaffner Players, which was the fall and winter of 1948-1949, Ellis and a few colleagues started their own theatre company called the California Comedy Company. Ellis recalls that when he was trying to round up the cast, he cabled Don Weage in New York to offer him the job. Ellis says, "I asked him to join the show, and he said he went down to telegraph me, 'Thanks but no thanks.' Instead, Weage said, 'I'll be there!'" (Elsenpeter, November 23). The company traveled to Minneapolis with the intention of playing a circle rep to Minnesota towns. Bob Brewer, an actor Ellis had been working with in the Schaffner Players, was going to be the director. Unfortunately, Brewer fell ill and their plan to reside in the Minneapolis area collapsed. As an alternative plan, Ellis contacted George and Goldene Kleber, whom he had worked with on the Harry Brown show, and they agreed to join the troupe.

The California Comedy Company played towns in Wisconsin. The company consisted of George and Goldene Kleber, Edith Brown, Don Weage, Ellis's sister Nina,

and Ellis. Their main repertoire was folk plays. Ellis claims that theatre companies at the time changed the name of the plays so often that one never knew the original title of any play, but just chose popular titles for their programs. Ellis recalls, "Tilton always followed popular tunes with his plays, like *On Top of Old Smokey* or *Don't Cry Joe*. Brown's just called it whatever they wanted to call it" (Elsenpeter, November 23).

One of the towns the California Comedy Company played in was Deer Park, Wisconsin. They stayed in the town from May 2-4, 1949, and performed three plays: *Honest Thieves*, *Toby Scares the Spooks*, and *The Stork Layed an Egg*, which they claimed on the ticket was a "big surprise show" (Museum). It was fun for the whole family, because each show was considered "good, clean entertainment" that people of all ages could come to the opera house and enjoy (Museum).

The California Comedy Company only lasted for one winter season, but was very successful playing town halls across Wisconsin. Although their bookings varied, they could have stayed in one town as long as six to eight weeks, to fill time and give the town some much-needed entertainment. "You could book these really small towns, and there were no motels, especially in little tiny crossroad towns," Ellis recalls. "You had to find somewhere to stay, but just to sleep, because you spent all your time at the theatre" (Elsenpeter, November 23). During one of their tours, Louis Stehler, a German comedian, went out in search of rooms for the company. Stehler found a room, but it was in the home of a minister, and the minister's wife said they "would not rent a room to actors because of the reputation" (Elsenpeter, November 23). Stehler, appalled by

this refusal, told her that there were more ministers in the prison system than actors. Needless to say, that did not go over well with her, and they had to find other lodgings.

When a traveling company hopped from town to town, one of their main priorities was finding lodging right away. They always tried to find a room immediately when they got to a new town because the rest of the evening, they would be at the theatre, and it would be too late. Ellis remembers, "In all of those rep days, people had signs in their homes that said 'Room to Rent,' because there were no hotels" (Elsenpeter, November 23). One summer when he was working for the Schaffner Players, he was out looking for two rooms together. One room was for him and the other was for Lowell Catch and Margaret Peachey, a married couple in the company. When he found two rooms in a house that were connected by a bathroom, he was ecstatic, because indoor bathrooms were rare at the time. Ellis secured the room and reported back to his colleagues where they would stay for the evening. Unfortunately, the nice bathroom turned out to be more of a display than a functioning operation. "The lady's husband had passed away, and they had always wanted an indoor bathroom," Ellis explains, "but she had built the bathroom and there was no running water. You had to haul water and put it in the bathtub, and flush the toilet using a five-gallon bucket. It didn't turn out to be the best room, but it was a brand new bathroom!" (Elsenpeter, November 23).

During the summer of 1949, after completing his winter tour with the California Comedy Company, Ellis joined the Schaffner Players for a second season. He took on some additional responsibilities with the company, which was a good opportunity for him to make more money. Ellis asked Neil Schaffner if he could be the show's stage

manager, which would pay extra each week. In response to his inquiry, Ellis received a letter from Neil Schaffner on March 22, 1949:

Your letter came to me the other day and have been doing some thinking on the whole proposition.

If you will handle the stage, scenery, props, lights etc and double canvas, (Which means canvas from setup to loading) and your line of parts will pay you sixty dollars and an extra five for driving a truck. You, of course, would also sell candy.

Now Dick, as you know, handling the stage on this show is a very important job. When you are in charge of it, you will have to THINK FOR YOURSELF AT ALL TIMES. There will have to be a regular hour for putting up the set each day and it will have to be handled efficiently. Of course, you will have an assistant who will be to you as you were to Brewer last summer. I do not want the stage handled in such a slipshod manner as it was last year. The back end must be kept clean, the stage uncluttered, and all used props loaded and packed away. As stage manager you will have to learn how to load the trucks which haul the stage equipment. As I told you last summer, I am looking for a young man who will actually put forth as much effort as I put forth when I got myself started in the tent show business. You have the ability to do this, if you will hit the ball and take full responsibility so I will not have to give the stage a thought.

It will also be necessary for you to get up in some new specialties as we cannot USE REPEATS. Would suggest that you work on your tap dancing as that is the best thing you do and the thing our audiences enjoy the most. Of course your parts will be "as cast" as I do not have all my plays lined up, nor have I signed anyone else, so I do not know where you will fit in. However, you will have a good line of parts. (Museum, Schaffner)

Ellis happily accepted the role of stage manager for the Schaffner Players. He was glad to have the extra money, and did not find the work too strenuous to manage in addition to his performance responsibilities. Ellis drove a truck, put up posters, helped assemble scenery, and dressed the stage for each show, in addition to some other small responsibilities. He made at least ten dollars a week more than he had the previous summer. The extra money helped him to be able to save more for the future, and made life on the road a little easier.

Ellis joined the Gifford-Roberson stock company after his second summer with Schaffner Players. He does not remember how he acquired that job, but he joined them in Girard, Illinois, a town just south of Springfield. The Gifford-Roberson Company was a circle stock company that toured strictly in central Illinois, from Springfield south. Wayne Huff and Mason Wilkes were co-directors who represented the Gifford-Roberson Players, but their individual branch was the Gifford Stock Company. It was on this circle stock that Ellis met actor Wendell Poe for the first time. Poe had performed with the Gifford-Roberson tent show in a previous summer. Other members of the Gifford Stock Company that Ellis recalls were Dorthea Wilkes, wife to Mason Wilkes, and Bert Dexter. Ellis claims, "We did some really great plays. Mason Wilkes was not a big Toby fan, but he loved theatre. He did some wonderful shows! The audience supported it; we had packed houses. Mason was not anti-Toby, but he thought it was too much fluff" (Elsenpeter, November 23). There were numerous shows that Ellis enjoyed performing with this company. *January Thaw* was one of his personal favorites. It is a play about two families, the Gages and the Rockwoods, who are fighting for possession of an old farmhouse. When they all get trapped together inside the house during a blizzard, the stark differences between modern and old-fashioned customs are brought to light in a charming, humorous way ("January Thaw," Play Database). According to the Broadway database, *January Thaw* had forty-eight Broadway performances in the spring of 1946 ("January Thaw," IBDB.com). The first time Ellis performed in the show was with the Gifford Stock Company and Mason Wilkes directed (Elsenpeter, November 23).

During the third summer with the Schaffner Players in 1950, Ellis took a romantic interest in a girl he met on the road. He became acquainted with Delores “Lee” Baird during one of his tours on the Gifford-Roberson Circle Stock, and Ellis knew Baird wanted to break into show business. Consequently, when an ingénue actress left the Schaffner Players in 1950 and the company needed to replace the actress, Ellis immediately thought of Baird. He recommended both Dorothy Eddy, from Chicago, and Baird, from Quincy, for the vacancy. The Schaffner Players operated out of Springfield, Illinois, two hours from Quincy and almost four hours from Chicago.

The company manager selected Baird for the acting job because Baird’s home was closer to Schaffner’s headquarters. Ellis and Baird developed a relationship quickly, and he proposed to her that same summer. Unfortunately, the marriage cost Ellis and Baird their jobs. Schaffner informed Ellis that he had hired “two single people, not a married couple” (Elsenpeter, June 27). Later, Schaffner came back and asked Ellis to stay with the company. He claimed that he wanted Ellis, but he did not need Baird for any of the parts. Ellis simply replied, “A king gave up his throne for a woman, can’t I give up a tent show?” (Elsenpeter, November 23). Later on, Caroline told Ellis that Schaffner had cried over the incident, because he hated to do it, but felt he had to. Although it was a difficult time, Ellis never regretted his choice to stay with Baird.

Even though his departure was a bit tumultuous, Ellis retains a positive impression of his time with the Schaffner Players, and of Neil and Caroline Schaffner. He acknowledges that Neil Schaffner produced quality work and was very supportive of his cast. Ellis explains:

Let me talk about Neil Schaffner. He directed these plays. I have heard criticisms over the years that he was jealous if you got a laugh and then would quote, "Well, damn, if I knew you were going to get a laugh, I would have saved that line for myself." He probably did say that, but kidding, because Neil wrote the dang things, directed them, and when you got a laugh, he was very pleased! I know that personally. So the criticism about his being jealous or getting laughter: no! He was very pleased about that because it was his play and he directed it! He was a different director because he would direct [shows] with his face right in yours! Caroline, Mrs. Schaffner, was very, very kind to me and she was criticized a lot too, for being who she was. She was particular about things, but I can say that I got along real well with them until the third year when they fired me for wanting to get married. (Elsenpeter, January 22)

After Ellis and Baird received their notice of dismissal from Schaffner Players, Ellis wired Don Weage, who worked for Tilton's Players, with the news. In a short time, the couple received another letter offering them employment with Tilton's; Ellis and Baird were both hired to work for the circle stock company. On August 27, 1950, they got married in Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin.

Tilton's players had formerly been called the Tilton-Guthrie Players up until World War II (Elsenpeter, June 27). However, the war had so many restrictions on the purchase of tires, gas, and other supplies, that traveling so frequently became difficult. Tilton-Guthrie closed down their tent show, and Guthrie opened up a movie theatre somewhere in Iowa. That is when Mid Tilton formed Tilton's Players, which was the company's title when Ellis joined them. It was a circle stock company that performed primarily in opera houses around the Midwest.

Ellis and Baird's first tour with Tilton's Players was through Wisconsin. Members of the 1950 company included Dick Ellis, Lee Baird, Turner and Maureen Deppenbrink, and Don Weage. Don Weage's name is pronounced "Wedge," and one of

the jokes they had was that Weage got hired onto the Schaffner Players so they could ask him how to pronounce his strange last name.

Tilton's long-running "Toby" comedian was Turner Deppenbrink, but Deppenbrink was an alcoholic. It had become difficult for Tilton to manage Deppenbrink's drinking problem, so Deppenbrink and his wife decided to leave the show before the problem escalated (Elsenpeter, November 23). When Deppenbrink and his wife left the show, Ellis was asked to take his place as the Toby character. Ellis was happy to have been asked to play the Toby parts because it paid five dollars more per week, which significantly helped his salary.

Once Ellis agreed to fill the role, he was given the old costumes and props for the character. Tilton, who owned a red Toby wig, cleaned it with kerosene to remove old, excess spirit gum and let Ellis use it for the first season (Elsenpeter, June 27). The next year, Ellis got his own Toby wig. He chose the most realistic looking wig he could find, and used subtle makeup choices when he played Toby. Typically, Toby had thirteen freckles: five on each cheek and three on the nose. Actors would apply the freckles and other features with makeup when they played the part. Over time, some actors who played Toby began to use such heavy makeup that their Toby characters ended up looking like clowns. However, Ellis chose to keep his choices subtle, so that Toby would always appear to be a real person.

Ellis enjoyed acting in Toby comedies, but the character only appeared in shows about once or twice a week on the Tilton show. In other performances, Ellis played

various comedic parts and continued to use his dance skills to perform specialty numbers.

Tilton's Players operated year-round. In addition to the summer, they had a circle from September to Christmas and another circle from January to spring. During each of the seasons, the company moved to a different location as their home base. In the fall, they operated out of Mason City, Iowa, and in the spring they moved to Fort Dodge, Iowa. After Ellis' first year with them, Mid Tilton decided to recreate the tent show he had formerly operated, before the war shut it down. Tilton believed he had a strong cast, and that it was time to start performing under the canvas again (Elsenpeter, June 27 and November 23). So he re-worked some of the old material and that summer they performed in the tent.

Many great actors worked alongside Ellis in Tilton's Players. Don Weage and Wendell Poe were two notable names among a "dream cast" (Elsenpeter, June 27). Wendell Poe was a "wonderful actor and a manager's dream," according to Ellis (November 23). Poe had blonde hair, big brown eyes, a cleft chin, and dimples that melted the hearts of women in the audience. He was known for playing the "blue-shirt leads," which were the workingman characters. Because of Poe's good looks and superior acting skills, he was valuable in the tent repertoire business and managers wanted to keep him in their companies. Therefore, Poe was able to get away with some antics that others would not try. One evening, when Poe was onstage with Maude Nevins, he got bored with the blocking they had been doing for a scene. From offstage, Poe knocked on the door, as he was supposed to do before his entrance. Nevins

answered the door onstage, but instead of coming through the door, Poe moved a piece of scenery and walked right through the wall. Both the audience and Nevins immediately roared with laughter at Poe's stunt, and it was a moment the company did not soon forget. After the performance, Tilton, the show's manager, came backstage shaking his head in annoyance, but could only say three words: "Damn curbstone comics!" (Elsenpeter, November 23). Poe was so popular with the audience that it was difficult to reprimand him, and Tilton wanted to keep him happily employed.

The performers loved to joke with one another, but nevertheless, the atmosphere of tent repertoire theatre required excellence from all its members because of the large number of performances executed each week. The energy level required to keep audiences laughing made it a demanding job. It was an unspoken expectation that each actor was consistently strong in his or her respective talents—no one ever felt it was necessary to discuss this expectation. However, one time, Ellis and Poe had a conversation in which Poe commented that nobody ever told him he was talented. Ellis agreed with Poe's statement, claiming, "Nobody ever told me I was either; you just knew it or you wouldn't be there" (Elsenpeter, June 27).

The actors played their characters so often in tent repertoire that they had to become fully invested in the roles to make them believable. Ellis recalls, "When you go into the character, in our time, you really became that character. It was like a light switch. You're doing seven plays on circle, so you have to become that character—like a light switch" (Elsenpeter, November 23). Many of the actors had habits or rituals they would perform to get into their characters before going onstage. One of his colleagues

on the Tilton Show, Maude Nevins, had a habit of humming to herself right before each onstage entrance. When Ellis saw her doing it one day, he asked Nevins why she always hummed before her entrances. Nevins, who was shocked by his accusation, claimed it was not true. Ellis argued that it was, and told Nevins to wait and see. Later on, Nevins caught herself in the midst of humming and laughed with Ellis about the discovery. It had become such a seamless part of getting into her character that she had never realized she did it before every entrance. Ellis believes it was Nevins's way of saying: "Now I am this character" (Elsenpeter, November 23). Ellis says he never had a physical or vocal ritual for getting into character, but he always took a pause before he made his entrances, which helped him become focused and ready (Elsenpeter, November 23).

Ellis's first two children were born while he traveled with the Tilton show. His eldest daughter, Anna Maria, was born while the company was in Mason City, Iowa. When the big day arrived, Baird told Ellis that she needed to get to the hospital quickly, so Ellis hurried around to get everything packed into the car. In order pull out, Ellis had to stick his head out the window and look back down the driveway. In his haste, he mistakenly rolled his head up in the window. His wife simply laughed at him and asked Ellis if he wanted her to drive, but Ellis said no. His ego was slightly damaged, but Ellis managed to get Baird to the hospital safely. Ellis and his wife named their new daughter Anna Maria after Mary, the mother of Jesus. The three of them spent those days in the hospital alone, because no other family was able to come visit them. Once Baird recovered from the delivery, they all went back on the road together, which was customary for tent performers at the time.

One year later, their second daughter, Dulce Lee, was born in the same hospital and with the same doctor as Anna Maria. They named her Dulce because she was so sweet (Elsenpeter, November 23). This time, Baird's mother was able to come to the hospital to take care of Anna Maria while Ellis stayed with Baird. During their time at the hospital, one of the nurses came by to inquire about the names of Ellis's children. After hearing them, the nurse commented that they were strange names. Ellis simply looked the nurse straight in the eyes and said, "Why do you think they are strange? Your name is Willadean Trebulcock! Now you tell me my names are funny!" The nurse laughed and agreed that Ellis was right; they had a cordial relationship that Ellis remembers fondly. After a few days, Ellis and his family said goodbye to the hospital staff they had become so familiar with and returned to touring with Tilton's.

Ellis and Baird eventually left Tilton's Players due to a conflict of personality. He and Mid Tilton, the company owner, frequently argued over small matters. Ellis admits, "We never argued over pay or shows, just personality" (Elsenpeter, June 27). Tilton was skilled at picking good scripts that would succeed with a wide variety of audiences, but Ellis frequently disagreed with Tilton's choices. When Tilton picked *Little Brown Church in the Veil*, Ellis claimed the script was awful and would not succeed with audiences. However, the show ended up being a success, with one couple even reporting that it moved them to tears. These small differences of opinion built up between Ellis and Tilton to the point where Ellis felt he could not continue working with the company. Other than that conflict, the entire company got along seamlessly, like a family (Elsenpeter, June 27). However, Ellis had two children, and felt he should move on for

their overall well being. It was a distressing departure that brought many people to tears, and Ellis claims that leaving Tilton's may have been a mistake in retrospect (Elsenpeter, June 27).

On December 17, 1953, Ellis received a letter from L. Verne Slout, owner of the Slout Players Tent Show. Slout had heard a rumor that Ellis and Baird were leaving Tilton's Players, and wanted them to come work for his show. Slout offered Ellis and Baird a generous portion of the tent's earnings, and promising prospects for the future:

I don't know whether this is in or out of order. I do not wish to be unethical and offer a man a job when he is working for another man. However, we heard a rumor (and that's probably just what it was) that you were leaving. If and when you do leave and you would be interested in another job, we would like to have you on the tent and are prepared to make you a generous offer. Either a flat salary or percentage. In fact, we'd be willing to do the following: give you two a 1/3 cut on summer's profits and if at end of season you wished to continue longer, we would give you a 1/3 interest outright for past seasons bonus and allow you to buy the other interest or run as before, whichever you decide. If interested, let me know and we can follow this up. If not, and you are already committed, forget the whole matter. For all our sakes, it's probably best to keep this confidential. (Museum, Slout, December 17)

Although the offer was generous, Ellis politely declined because he had already received an offer from another company. Slout wrote a reply letter to Ellis on December 31, expressing his regret at not being able to make the connection with Ellis sooner. Slout admitted he and his wife were trying to pass their tent show to younger ownership, so they could have more time devoted to their antique shows. Slout also urged Ellis not to be discouraged by his incident with Tilton's, because a young person who is "not afraid of getting in there and working and giving out" will be successful (Museum, Slout, December 31).

For the summers of 1954 and 1955, Ellis and his family moved to Memphis, Tennessee, and he worked as a comedian for Bisbee's Comedians. Bisbee's was a large and successful tent show that had a canvas crew of eight to ten men that traveled with them just to put up the tent and all of the set pieces. In the past, Ellis had worked with Schaffner Players, who also had a canvas crew, but often worked with companies where the actors helped put up the tent along with the crew. He soon learned that Bisbee's did not want their actors on the lot during setup. Ellis recalls, "One time, during a storm, I went over to the lot. They asked me what the hell I was doing there, and I said, since there was a storm, I had come to help. They said, 'Get off the lot!' and I was really surprised! They didn't want any actor on the lot getting hurt or in harm's way; they had a crew for that. I went back in a big hurry!" (Elsenepter, January 27)

Laurence "Boob" Brasfield was Bisbee's comic actor for many years and had developed a large fan base. When Brasfield left and Ellis replaced him, Jess Bisbee was worried about whether or not Ellis was the right fit for the comic role. Bisbee gave Ellis a whole list of signature remarks that Brasfield used to make, like "You'll find it's too wet to plough" (Elsenpeter, June 27). The list was very long, but Bisbee wanted Ellis to adopt the exact same character because he feared the risk of going in a new direction. Ellis, however, told Bisbee that his style differed too greatly from Brasfield's to duplicate the same mannerisms and speech. He and Bisbee agreed that Ellis would try his own comic style, and if it failed, Ellis would try the list that Bisbee had given him (Elsenpeter, June 27). Fortunately, Ellis's slant pleased audiences and he created a

comic character of his own, entirely different from Brasfield's character. He never had to use old tactics to win the hearts of the seasoned tent theatergoers.

All the time that Ellis continued performing with tent shows, his family kept growing. By the time he left Bisbee's Comedians at the end of the summer of 1955, another girl, Lisa, had been added to the family. Baird had also performed off and on as her pregnancies would allow. She would work up until she was showing, and then they would find a replacement for her parts to finish the season (Elsenpeter, June 27). With a wife and three kids, Ellis decided to leave theatre and go into the landscaping business. Meanwhile, he also began booking school assembly programs. One of the most famous actors he booked for a school assembly was Hal Holbrook as Mark Twain. Holbrook later became famous for his role as Mark Twain on *Mark Twain Tonight*, but had performed school assemblies before that.

During his time booking school assemblies, Ellis came across posters advertising the Oberammergau Passion Play with Val Balfour. Balfour and his wife, Anne, had a reputation as "good stock people" (Elsenpeter, June 27). Ellis met with the Balfours to discuss their show. When Balfour asked Ellis about his current career, Ellis explained he had been booking school assemblies. Balfour then invited Ellis to join the Oberammergau tour, saying Ellis could come on any time. Ellis and his family packed up once again to join the Oberammergau Passion Play in 1956 and 1957 (Museum, Honor Award). The show toured around the United States and required each actor to play multiple roles. Two of the roles he filled for the passion play were the "high priest" and

the “good thief on the cross.” He also worked as a stage manager getting the set and props ready for each show (Museum).

In 1958, Ellis joined Brunk’s Comedians for the company’s final season on the road. He worked as both an actor and director for the company. Brunk’s Comedians was a leading tent theatre troupe that operated in the Southwestern United States: Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Colorado. Seven Brunk brothers founded the company and opened their first road tour in 1916 (Martin 6). The troupe eventually expanded and split into six different touring companies all bearing “the Brunk banner” during the 1920s when tent repertoire theatre was at its peak in popularity (Martin 6). The Great Depression and World War II caused a decline in the success of the tent theatre shows, and all of the Brunk shows closed down during the war. Henry Brunk, the youngest brother, re-opened one show after WWII ended and it operated until 1958 (Martin 6).

Henry Brunk traditionally played the role of the Toby comedian in his post-war touring shows. In 1958, Brunk became “physically unable to fill the demanding duties of show manager and also play the Toby roles,” so he began searching for a replacement (Martin 104). As a result of his search, Ellis was hired to fill the role of the Toby comedian. He also directed a few plays that season. His first show with Brunk’s Comedians was in Boise City, Oklahoma (Martin 104). The company also played in a Colorado mining town where a critic from the New York Times wrote an article about the show. The reporter called the show “a must see,” a compliment of which all the company members were very proud (Elsenpeter, November 4).

On his tour with Brunk's Comedians in the summer of 1958, Ellis's fourth child was born under unusual circumstances. Baird's due date was approaching and the company happened to be near the Great Divide in Colorado. The company's next performance was over the divide, to the east, and Ellis feared Baird going into labor while they were crossing the divide. So, when they were in Dove Creek, Colorado, Ellis decided that they needed to go to the next town they were playing and get Baird to the hospital early. He drove Baird across the divide and left her at the hospital. Then, Ellis returned to the company so he could travel with them and help them set up at the next location. Once the company crossed the divide and got settled into their performance space, Ellis told his colleagues that he needed to go to the hospital to check on Baird. When he arrived at the hospital, Ellis found that he had missed the delivery, and his son Richard had already been born (Elsenpeter, November 23).

The Ellis children always traveled with their parents when Ellis and Baird performed with tent companies. They took their schoolwork with them and studied on the road. Ellis wanted to make the best decision possible about his children's education, so he consulted a professor at Indiana University about the best option for them. Ellis considered sending them to boarding school, leaving the children with their grandparents, or taking them on the road with him and Baird. The professor told him that taking them on the road would be best, because the frequent change would cause them to be disciplined and concentrate on their schoolwork, instead of focusing on socializing and peer interactions. Ellis took this advice and he brought the children with them on tour, even during the school year.

Due to limited space, the children carried only the necessary school supplies with them on the road. They had only two sets of books, because many schools around the country used the same textbooks; this proved to be financially convenient for the family. Although their school routine varied depending on the tour, Ellis remembers that the children attended about two schools per week during the Oberammergau Passion Play, because that show usually played two towns per week. Only once, a principal strongly reprimanded Ellis for making his children change schools so often, and claimed it was cruel treatment. Later, she apologized to him because she saw how cooperative and successful his children were in class (Elsenpeter, November 23). Although the children occasionally appeared onstage, as they did in the Oberammergau Passion Play, they were never as interested in performing as their parents.

Brunk's Comedians traveled to Delta, Colorado, on July 28, 1958. That Monday evening, Ellis appeared in the opening show, *The Baby Cyclone*, and also appeared in vaudeville acts every night. The Delta County Independent newspaper reported that Brunk's Comedians appeared in conjunction with the Deltarado days, and this was Ellis's first onstage appearance in Colorado (Museum, Delta County Independent). A newspaper clipping with no title or date also reports that the company traveled to a town called Lamar, in either Colorado or Oklahoma. In Lamar, Ellis appeared in *Toby and the She-Devil* and *Rock and Roll Grandpa*; in the latter play, Ellis played the role of the "foxy grandpa" (Museum).

The following summer of 1959, Ellis traveled to Cripple Creek, Colorado, to work on the Grubstake Review for the "Rush to the Rockies Centennial" (Elsenpeter; Museum,

Honor Award). The centennial celebration commemorated the discovery of gold in 1859 and the first mass settlement in Colorado. A pioneer village in Denver was the main attraction, but over one hundred and fifty towns across Colorado hosted smaller events and celebrations (Hoffman). Hard work kept Ellis busy and fit; his company performed two shows a day: one matinee and one evening show. He worked alongside Margaret Peachy Ketch, a comic stock actress with whom he had worked on the 1948 tour with Schaffner Players. Also in the company were comic Henry Wideman and dancers Preston Porter, Lee Eberhardt, Glenda Martin, Rhe Nell Sowell, Sue Barnette, Tony Mensing, Mary Temple, and Shannon and Ricky Darling. The Grubstake singers were Caroline Cline, Deen Gettis, Beverley Dent, and Chuck Harbison. Ricky "Dick" Darling also served as the producer-director of the theatre, and his wife Shannon was a choreographer (Museum, "Toby Dick Ellis Performer").

The Grubstake Review produced *Funzapoppin* at the new Grubstake Theatre in Cripple Creek. They also traveled to Denver for a series of guest appearances. On Monday, July 27, 1959, they appeared on the Pete Smythe "Tin Cup" program on KOA-TV. The performers represented Cripple Creek "as part of the station's 'Cripple Creek Day' celebration" (Museum, Grubstake Players). According to a newspaper clipping, they also went to Henritze's Restaurant on South Colorado Boulevard that evening as guests of the Windsor Players. On Tuesday the 28th, they appeared on the Kay Howe show on KHOW radio station. Ellis and the cast carried such a rigorous workload that he lost about twenty pounds doing at least two shows a day (Elsenpeter, June 27).



Figure 6: Dorothy Eddy and Dick Ellis with the Schaffner Players. Photo courtesy of the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.



Figure 7: Dick Ellis performing a stair dance during his time with Schaffner Players. Photo courtesy of the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.



Figure 8: Dick Ellis performing a stair dance during his time with Schaffner Players.
Photo courtesy of the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa



Figure 9: Dick Ellis with Tilton's Comedians in the early 1950s. Photo courtesy of the
Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.



Figure 10: Tilton's Comedians road truck. Photo courtesy of the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.



Figure 11: Dick Ellis with Bisbee's Comedians in 1954. Photo courtesy of the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.



Figure 12: George Row and Dick Ellis with Bisbee's Comedians. Photo courtesy of the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.



Figure 13: Dick Ellis in Hutchison, Kansas, on Don Weage's TV Show. Photo courtesy of the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.



Figure 14: Dick Ellis on Don Weage's television show. Photo courtesy of the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.



Figure 15: Dick Ellis at KTVH Television station in Hutchinson, Kansas. Photo courtesy of the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.

CHAPTER 5

THE CREATION OF POSSUM HOLLER OPRY

As mentioned previously, Ellis worked for Brunk's Comedians during the summer of 1958. That fall and winter, he went to work with WDAF Radio and TV in Kansas City, Missouri. Ellis appeared on the Jimmy Dallas Show, a country music program sponsored by Van Chevrolet. Everyone who worked on the program was required to drive a Van Chevrolet vehicle, so Ellis got his own company-sponsored car. Ellis also worked with WREX TV in Rockford, Illinois (Museum, Honor Award). In Rockford, he appeared on the Wes Holly show, a country music television program. For both shows, Ellis took the Toby character into sketch comedy. He performed short bits and interacted with the country music singers who came on the shows. The station's region expanded while Ellis was in Rockford, and they began doing shows in Peoria along with the Rockford program (Elsenpeter, June 27).

During the summer of 1959, Ellis worked for the Grubstake review in Colorado. Once he finished that, he accepted a contract with Ken Hodge Marionettes for a puppet tour. Ellis had been introduced to puppetry when he was a child, but his involvement in tent rep theatre had taken precedence for many years. Ellis was excited about the opportunity to travel with his wife and do marionette puppetry, one of his life-long passions. In December of 1959, Ellis returned to Quincy, Illinois, with his wife for Christmas. Their tour with Ken Hodge Marionettes had taken them through Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky. While in Florida, the couple had encountered a hurricane; to escape the perilous weather, they had returned to the

Midwest. Baird's parents resided in Quincy, so they decided to visit Quincy for the holidays.

When Ellis arrived in town, still driving his Chevy given to him by Van Chevrolet for the WDAF-TV program, he went to get the vehicle inspected. While at the auto shop, Ellis ran into some men from Kansas City who worked for Chevrolet. Chevrolet was considering expanding their sponsorship to a television program in Quincy, and asked Ellis what type of show he would recommend. Ellis suggested that they sponsor a country music program, because of the large fan base already established in the Midwest. "There's only one thing to do, and that's country music," Ellis claimed. "If you do jazz or folk, you have a limited audience. If you go country music, you've got a big audience almost immediately" (Elsenpeter, June 27).

Later on that same holiday, Ellis was in a local appliance store in Quincy to edit some of his personal videotapes from previous performances. A representative from Borg-Warner overheard the tapes and told Ellis he was thinking of starting up a television program to "bolster business in the tri-state area" (Museum, Hoerner 2). Once again, Ellis's thoughts turned toward the country music program he envisioned becoming a success in the rural communities of Illinois, Missouri, and Iowa.

Various TV personnel and business owners conferred for a few weeks about Ellis's suggestion; afterward, they asked if Ellis would be the show's creator and put together an audition tape for them. Ellis informed them that he would have to finish a marionette tour, but that he would return to Illinois in the spring ready to begin the new project. They agreed that this arrangement would work, so Ellis began looking

forward to this exciting opportunity to create a brand new show. He created Ellis Productions, with himself as the head of the company (Museum, Hoerner 2).

When Ellis returned to Quincy in the spring of 1960, he talked to the station manager at WGEM about their previous agreement. The manager told him that if he still wanted the show, he could have it. Ellis accepted the offer and began brainstorming about the new show.

Much deliberation and ingenuity went into the creation of Possum Holler Opry. First, Ellis chose a name for the show that would stand out and leave a long-lasting impression. As he tried to come up with a name, he remembered the time a few years before when his wife had told him she was born in a town called Possum Holler. Ellis had doubled over in laughter at the ridiculous name because it sounded so backwards compared to his own home city, Minneapolis. However, the name Possum Holler had stuck with him, and seemed to fit for a country music show. Ellis decided to name his new program the Possum Holler Opry as a kind of inside joke between himself and his wife (Elsenpeter, June 27).

Ellis built a small set out of *papier mâché* that included a barn with doors that opened, a country road with telephone polls and wire, and a billboard along the road that said “Possum Holler Opry” (Elsenpeter, November 23). He also prepared the country music audition tape using clips from some of the other shows on which he had worked. After listening to the tape, the regional V.I.P.s met with Elsenpeter in the WGEM conference room. They looked at Ellis, a “tall, lanky young man” standing in front of them, and announced that if the show went on at all, it would only last three weeks

(Museum, Hoerner 1). At the time, WGEM was a big-band era station, and was popular for the big-band sound. Ellis's idea for a country music program was completely different, so many people doubted that it would succeed on WGEM. Despite negativity from the management, Ellis forged ahead with confidence: "Let me say this, if I may. I know you're wrong, and I'll prove it!" (Museum, Hoerner 2). Fortunately, the station managers gave him a chance, and the show far exceeded their expectations.

Once the station agreed to the idea, Ellis began thinking about the best time for the program to air on the local television station. The station manager asked Ellis what time slot he recommended, and Ellis said he wanted it around noon on Sunday. He explained his reasoning with convincing logic: "People go to church on Sunday, and they come home after church and the kids turn on cartoons. When cartoons are over, following that is sports. I would like to fit in between cartoons and sports. Kids will turn on the cartoons and dad will leave it on for sports, and we'll be in the middle" (Elsenpeter, June 27). WGEM agreed that the reasoning made sense, and decided to air the program on Sunday at noon.

The program's original name, Possum Holler Opry, created some controversy when it first showed up on the air. Nashville's Grand Ole Opry did not like WGEM using some of the same terminology for their program title, so a representative from the Grand Ole Opry sent a letter to WGEM telling them they had to take the word "opry" out of their title because it was infringing on a copyrighted name. However, lawyers for WGEM claimed that the Grand Ole Opry did not have the power to force a terminology change, so the Possum Holler Opry got to keep its original name (Elsenpeter, June 27).

On Mother's Day of 1960, Possum Holler Opry made its debut on WGEM television (Tri-State Original). Ellis, playing Toby, was the show's host. They used the small set Ellis had built to film the show's first opening. The program began with the camera coming down the road as the announcer read the actors' and singers' names. Then the camera headed for the barn door, the door opened to show the square dancers dancing inside the barn. Later, they filmed two more openings that Ellis describes as follows:

We scouted Adams and Pike County for fallen down farmhouses and chicken yards. We said, "It's Possum Holler Opry time!" and it started in an antique store. There was an old-time kitchen and the mother yells; it was all in fast motion. Then I come down the stairs with a suitcase and out the door, where they had the wood stove and all that. Then it switched to another house in the country where, coming out, I hit the post that holds up the roof of the porch and the post falls down, so I pick it up, and stick it back up, and run. Then it switches to an old, old abandoned house where all you can see is the camera coming along the field, and you see the house out in the field. There is someone up in the window of that house as I'm running by. It was really fun! They should have it there at WGEM. Then we did another one where everyone came in to town. Al Harvey came in on ARC airlines; Jim Moore, the steel player, got off the engine of a freight train; another guy was hitchhiking and they would pick him up. Some came in on the bus. Then I had a girlfriend (fake girlfriend) on the show called Flaxie Frizzel, who weighed in the neighborhood of 400 pounds, and I only weighed 145 pounds, so that made us a team. She came in on the back of a pickup truck; it was all this fast motion stuff. Everyone was coming in through the door of WGEM studios to Possum Holler Opry, in to the square dancers. (Elsenpeter, November 23)

Once the show began, Ellis greeted the audience with lines like, "It's Possum Holler Opry time! Howdy neighbor!" and "Hi-ho!" (Elsenpeter, November 23). After that, Toby Dick Ellis would introduce the bandleader, who for many years was Al Harvey, and Harvey would sing the first song. Announcements followed, and after that one of the women in the band would sing a number. All of those activities took up the first half of

the show, and they closed the first half with the square dancers. The atmosphere of the show was supposed to be casual and fun, as if the characters were right there in the audiences' living rooms having a good time. The actors used a presentational style, addressing the audience directly; they alternated between that and talking to each other onstage while in character.

The show was an immediate hit, and after a few weeks, it was briefly cancelled in order for WGEM to re-sell the time for a more permanent slot. Once Possum Holler Opry began airing again, the show stayed on Sunday afternoons for the next ten consecutive years.

Possum Holler Opry operated under modest conditions. The stage for the show was small: approximately fifteen by fifteen feet square. To create the set, Ellis asked the owner of a local opera house if he could buy some scenery from them, and the owner agreed. Ellis used painted trees for the wings of the set, and used a backdrop as an ad curtain, which was similar to the ad billboards used in tent repertoire theatre. The banner above their stage had a picture of a possum and read "Possum Holler Opry," with the possum's tail making the P, a logo that Ellis created himself. Against another wall was a curtain, where small sets were constructed for specialty numbers (Elsenpeter, November 23).

The floor director, Ted Hoge, arranged many of the show's props and technical effects. Hoge looked at the lyrics of songs the artists would perform on the show, and then constructed small sets specific to the songs. During the show, the cameramen used these sets to create additional visual effects and images. For the song "Two Cigarettes

and an Ashtray,” Hoge arranged an ashtray and small table, and the camera zoomed in on those objects while the artists were singing. Another onscreen effect Hoge used was to zoom in on the circular opening of a guitar, and overlay the image of the singer in the opening, so it appeared that the singer was inside the guitar. Ellis recalls everyone at WGEM being very creative but down-to earth; he believes they created a program that the general public considered “their show” (Elsenpeter, November 23).

The original band members on the first episode of Possum Holler Opry were “Jack Bryerton, Gene Price, and somebody Woods—it was three guitarists; then my wife, Lee, and Ron Peterson, piano and guitar; Ray Tyson and his dancers and the fiddle player from Center, Missouri, were there too” (Elsenpeter, November 23). Jimmy Waller was on one the first episodes of Possum Holler; Waller was only a teenager, but he had a big personality, which made him popular with audiences. He played both the guitar and 5-string banjo very proficiently. Ellis recalls, “When he played banjo with Flatt and Scruggs, they gave him a banjo and told us he was going to be one of the best ever. He could play classics on the five-string banjo; Brahms, Beethoven, and things like that. He was a good-looking kid” (Elsenpeter, November 23).

Al Harvey, who later became the lead singer of the show’s band, was not part of the first episode. Harvey was working in Rockford, Illinois, when Ellis called him and asked Harvey to join the show. Harvey told Ellis he was interested, but needed to finish a few prior engagements first. A few weeks later, when Harvey was in Wyoming singing, he called Ellis again, asking if Ellis still wanted him on the show. Ellis replied that he did. A few months later still, Harvey was in California “singing somewhere with a well-

known West-coast group” (Elsenpeter, November 23). Ellis told Harvey to come whenever he could, and a year after the first call, Harvey was able to join full-time. Once Harvey came to Illinois, he became the lead singer of the show’s band, Al Harvey and the Possums. Other members of the band were two steel guitar players, Jimmy Moore and Mike Jones, Freddy Nuul, the lead guitar player, Sonny Bennett, the bass player, and Don Andrews, the drummer (Elsenpeter, June 27). The show had many musicians throughout its time on the air; when one musician left, Ellis was always able to find a replacement quickly and easily because there was so much talent in the area.

Another staple of the show was Toby’s “girlfriend,” Flaxie Frizzel. Flaxie came onto the show as a main character about one or two years after the show started in 1960. Ellis recalls, “Somebody told me, ‘You’ve got to go out to this nightclub and hear this girl sing!’ I said, ‘Oh, that’s quite a ways out there.’ But they said, “You’ve got to hear her; she weighs about four hundred pounds!” (Elsenpeter, January 27). At the prompting of a friend, Ellis made a long trip out to the nightclub to judge the talent for himself. When he sat down to listen, he was stunned at the heart with which Flaxie sang her songs; he recalls that she sang with some of the most passion he’d ever seen or heard. After Flaxie’s performance, Ellis invited her to join him at a booth and talk. His conversation with her was short, but it forged a partnership that would last for many years:

The first thing I asked her was, I said, “Are you sensitive about your weight?” She said, “No! Doesn’t bother me at all.” I only weighed about one hundred and forty, forty-five pounds. I said, “Well, I’m sensitive about mine. You know, for every fat joke, there’s a skinny joke, and I’ve heard them all, and some of them don’t make me too happy.” She said, “Well, yeah, it does hurt sometimes.” I said, “Well, I

want you to come on the TV show and do fair dates and stuff with us, but I promise you, never will you be the butt of a joke. Ever. (Elsenpeter, January 27)

They became like a family, both onscreen and off-screen. Toby and Flaxie became closely associated with each other, and on the show, Flaxie became Toby's girlfriend. The duo regularly performed routines together, and one of the popular routines they did revolved around the country song "He'll Have to Go" by Jim Reeves. The first line of the song starts out "Put your sweet lips a little closer to the phone; let's pretend we're together, all alone." Ellis recalls the routine going like this:

We did a thing where Flaxie is on the wall telephone and she calls the operator in a small town and says, "Ring me Toby's house," and the operator says, "No, he's down at the soda bar drinking with the girl singer." So she says, "Ring me that sodi bar!" Then it switched to a split screen where I was sitting at a soda fountain with the girl singer; we had two straws and all that. Then Flaxie sings, "Toby, put your sweet lips a little closer to the phone," and I get all teary-eyed and tell the gorgeous girl singer that I have to give her up! (Elsenpeter, January 27)

While Toby was strictly an actor, Flaxie Frizzel was both an actor and singer on the show. She sang solos regularly, and her voice had a unique sound. Ellis describes it as "pure country" (Elsenpeter, January 27). He also claims that she did not try to imitate anyone, she just sang in her own style. Flaxie had a rich, low voice, and she could do a deep "growl" similar to comedian and musician Billy Bailey. Ellis guesses that she could possibly even sing in baritone range, but the most important part of her singing was that "she sang with such heart!" (Elsenpeter, January 27).

Flaxie Frizzel stayed on the cast of Possum Holler Opry until its end in 1970. She became a regional favorite and was frequently mentioned by fans all around the tri-state area. Although Flaxie Frizzel was an outrageous stage name, the singer went by

that name in all areas of her life. Ellis recalls, "People talked about her! She went by Flaxie Frizzel in real life after she started the TV thing. Everyone in three states knew her as Flaxie Frizzel! They also called her 'Sis,' but I can't remember her real name offhand, because she was just 'Flaxie'" (Elsenpeter, January 27).

The structure of Possum Holler Opry typically included two feature artists per show. One artist would appear in the first half hour, and the other in the second half. However, if the artist were a big enough name, they would do the entire hour. Ellis believed that it was important to have a local guest artist on each show, because Possum Holler itself was a local TV program, so the local artists performed one or two songs throughout the hour. In order to ensure the quality of local artists before they appeared on Possum Holler, they would audition for Phyllis Snyder Bush, the show's floor director. Bush had many responsibilities, from auditioning people to writing checks and managing the budget. Ellis trusted Bush's judgment for choosing local guests artists, saying, "If she thought they were good enough to be on, they were on, because I couldn't do that. I couldn't say, 'I'm sorry.' I wanted everyone to feel good" (Elsenpeter, November 23). There was no particular order in the show where guests would perform; they could go anywhere in the lineup, and Bush arranged each show differently according to how she thought it would run most smoothly.

A typical week for Ellis included a variety of tasks requiring long hours. Possum Holler Opry was not just a job, but became a way of life for Ellis. First, he lined up all the talent for each show, and then he decided upon the format of a show. Ellis decided they would not do "turn-arounds," where the singer and music alternated throughout the

program (Elsenpeter, June 27). He wanted a more concise lineup, so the vocalist would sing the song straight through, and then there would be an entire specialty number for the band with no vocals. Possum Holler Opry was set in a barn; all of the action happened within the barn area. He played the Toby character, the host of the show.

In the Possum Holler RFD episode that was filmed in 1970, Ellis was a general store clerk and the show was set inside a general store, instead of a barn. Ellis says the lineup in the pilot video was similar to the Possum Holler Opry live show. A pilot, or trial, video was made of the show when Possum Holler Opry wanted to transition into national broadcasting, instead of airing on local stations. The name for the proposed national show was going to be Possum Holler RFD. Unfortunately, the show never made it to national television. The original Possum Holler Opry aired live, so few recordings exist. However, the Possum Holler RFD pilot is a valuable artifact because it serves as a fairly accurate illustration of what the live show was like.

The RFD pilot opens with Toby tinkering around the store, getting things ready for customers, making small talk, and joking with the audience. Then, one of the featured country artists for the show that day walks into the store, and Toby greets and interacts with the guest artist. After a short conversation, in which Toby introduces the song, the focus moves over to the stage area of the store, where the band is set up. The featured artist sings a number, accompanied by Al Harvey and the Possums. After that, the band plays an instrumental number. One big difference between the live show and the RFD pilot is that the square dancers are not present in the RFD show, but they were often included in the original show.

Possum Holler Opry hosted many prominent artists in country music. Some notable Nashville stars that appeared on the show were Minnie Pearl, Faron Young, Ferlin Husky, Jimmy Dean, Patsy Cline, Johnny Cash, and Tex Ritter (Elsenpeter, June 27). The country music circle was so small that building relationships with well-known artists was not only essential, but also easier than it might appear to an outsider of the business.

John Hartford, a well-known country artist, was a friend of Ellis and Sonny Bennett during the Possum Holler days. Hartford would come up to Barry, Illinois, and sleep on the couch at Ellis's house during his visits to do some musical collaboration. Ellis remembers that Hartford had a habit of simply storing his belongings behind the couch where he slept. Hartford spent considerable time writing songs with Sonny Bennett, who had an apartment in Ellis's house. One of the songs that Bennett and Hartford wrote together was "Gentle on My Mind," which became one of the most-recorded songs in history. Hartford frequently appeared on The Glen Campbell Good-Time Hour TV program, and Glen Campbell later covered the song as well. In 1968, Hartford won a Grammy Award for Best Country & Western song for "Gentle on My Mind" ("Grammy Awards"). Ellis feels fortunate to have been friends with a talented, dedicated artist like Hartford, who was able to find even more success as his career progressed.

On December 3, 1961, the Quincy Herald-Whig newspaper reported that Dick Ellis and the Possum Holler Opry Boys were going to perform alongside Minnie Pearl on Sunday, December 10. Pearl was an actress and country music singer for the Grand Ole

Opry in Nashville for more than fifty years, and Ellis loved her vibrant personality. He claims that she was his all-time favorite singer to work with. Ellis recalls, "She was just a wonderful lady and very approachable and sweet. She was my favorite of them all. She would sit on the tailgate of the pick-up and just swing her legs and talk about things" (Elsenpeter, June 27).

The duo performed separate acts in the Adams County Cerebral Palsy Benefit Performance sponsored by Jerg TV and Appliance Center (Museum, Jerg TV). Also performing that day were Lee Ellys; comedians Luther and Goofer; and king of rock and roll Jimmy Waller. Admission prices were two dollars for adults and seventy-five cents for children under twelve. However, many local businesses gave out a "discount coupon," which made the adult admission price only one dollar and fifty-one cents. Along with the 7pm and 9pm performances, the entertainers also gave a children's matinee at 2pm.

Ellis strove to make Possum Holler Opry a family-friendly program. He did not allow his cast members to smoke cigarettes at any time. In club settings where they played, they were not allowed to drink alcohol. Ellis told them, "I don't care if you drink, but you will not drink in the town we play, because there is too much talk" (Elsenpeter, June 27). Family-friendliness remained a top priority for Ellis throughout the time Possum Holler Opry aired on television. One way he forged connections with the community was by inviting 4-H dancers to perform with them. There were seven 4-H groups in the Quincy area that worked with Possum Holler Opry. Ellis enjoyed having young students around because "they were so fresh and they were so controlled by Ray

Thyson. He made sure they were all together, dressed nice, and with scrubbed faces” (Elsenpeter, June 27). Mostly, the 4-H square dancers performed with Possum Holler county fairs during the summertime. The various groups alternated performance weeks, and seemed to thoroughly enjoy playing fair dates. They traveled with Possum Holler Opry and received many positive comments from loyal fans of the show (Elsenpeter, June 27).

Possum Holler Opry performed yearly at the Illinois and Missouri State Fairs. Particularly, the show often teamed up with Tex Ritter as “Tex Ritter and Possum Holler Opry.” Wherever Ritter performed in the Tri-states, the Possum Holler “gang” was with him (Elsenpeter, June 27). Ritter was not required to bring a band from Nashville because Al Harvey and the Possums had excellent musicians that played for all their guest artists. When people used to ask Ellis where he found all the talented musicians for his show, he would say, “They’re right here. You don’t go looking for them, they’re right here. You just don’t hear of them because there is no place to shine” (Elsenpeter, June 27). Possum Holler Opry had a deal with a musician’s union that musicians could appear on his show twice without becoming union; after that, they were required to join the musician’s union.

Possum Holler Opry was filmed at WGEM studios, but twice a month, Ellis traveled to Cincinnati, Ohio, for filming. In Ohio, he played the Toby character on the Wes Holly show in Cincinnati that aired on seven television stations. In addition, Possum Holler Opry also filmed a show in Springfield, Illinois, each week. It was the Cal Schrum show with Possum Holler Opry (Elsenpeter, June 27).

In the summer of 1963, Ellis branched out to a slightly different venue with his Toby character. He began hosting Mickey Mouse club cartoon parties as the Chief Mouseketeer. The Quincy Herald-Whig newspaper reported that the premiere party would take place on Wednesday, June 19, from 10:30 am to 12:30 pm, hosted by the Washington Theatre. A newspaper claims that this event would be a “giant 2 hour show” and boasts about the air conditioning in the Washington Theatre (Museum). Admission prices were thirty-five cents per child, and snacks were provided from local businesses for free. Participating local businesses were Quincy Potato Chip Co (potato chips), Hey Brothers (ice cream bars), and Go-Mel Korn Krib (Pepsi). The program also included door prizes such as toys from Bean Hobby and Toy Shop, radios from Home Service Stores, and Mickey Mouse watches from Krogers (Museum). Each child in attendance received a free pass to Kiddieland and a membership card for the Mickey Mouse Club. The show was a two-hour weekly feature for the remainder of the summer (Museum, Chief Mouseketeer).

Possum Holler Opry was often invited to other communities to perform their musical and comic acts for various events. On Saturday, October 5, 1963, they traveled about an hour to Vandalia, Missouri, for Merchants Appreciation Day and Sidewalk Bazaar. In the afternoon, they performed at the southeast railroad park, and in the evening, at the R-I High School auditorium. Perky Peaches Bennett, a new member of the group from Davenport, Iowa, sang at the engagements. Bennett had previously performed alongside Minnie Pearl, LeRoy Van Dyke, Faron Young, and had been asked to sing with Bill Black’s Combo (Museum, The Vandalia Leader). The newest member of

Possum Holler Opry was Johnny Bush, a recording star for Columbia Records in Hollywood. Also joining them was accordion player John Spurrier, who owned H & H Music Studio in Quincy (Museum, The Vandalia Leader).

It was always very important to Ellis that everyone in the Possum Holler cast and crew remain humble about their jobs. He claims, “There was no ego on that show at all. If there started to be, I reminded everybody, ‘Go fifty miles away from here and nobody will know who the hell you are’” (Elsenpeter, November 23). With this mindset, they also understood the importance of keeping integrity at the forefront of their work. Their program came into people’s homes the same way that any Hollywood star was seen: on the television screen in a family home. Ellis believes that their cast did not have an ego problem or issues with drugs and alcohol. He maintains, “it was just family and good values” (Elsenpeter, November 23).

Sometime around 1964, after President Kennedy’s death, members of the Possum Holler cast undertook a physical fitness venture in honor of the late President’s focus on fitness. They decided, “as a joke, to take the 50-mile hike to prove that musicians aren’t really soft” (Museum, Hoerner 4). At 2:30 pm, Al Harvey, Sonny Bennett, and Jim Moore left Quincy with the temperature around forty-two degrees Fahrenheit. The three men packed food and coffee to keep them alert on their all-night hike down the road. The arduous journey quickly turned unpleasant when temperatures dropped to below zero. Ralph Emery, an all-night DJ for radio station WSM, offered them encouragement throughout the journey; they also received full television coverage, presumably from WGEM (Museum, Hoerner 4). The next morning,

spent from exhaustion and bitter cold temperatures, the trio was forced to stop their hike. They completed thirty-four of the projected fifty miles, but it was not without some severe physical consequences. Hoerner reports that “Jim’s foot and shoe was covered with blood, thanks to a nail working through his heel,” and “Sonny had frost-bitten eye lids and blurred vision” (Museum, 4). Harvey had trouble walking without pain for several days after the hike; his knees became stiff and it was months before he fully recovered. When asked about their experience on the fifty-mile hike, the three vehemently replied, “Never again!!!” (Museum, Hoerner 4).

Possum Holler Opry began performing at “Smiles Day” in Rushville, Illinois, in 1961. They also performed a full-length show there on September 15, 1965. Smiles Day activities included two parades, a carnival on the square, the Possum Holler Opry performance, and a big band dance at nine o’clock in the evening (Museum). Typically, Ellis and his colleagues would get to the location early to set up their stage and get everything ready. After they performed their show, they would wait around to sign autographs, which they were expected to do. Once autographs were signed and they had chatted with the locals, they headed back to their hotels or trailers to rest and recuperate.

In 1970, Possum Holler recorded a pilot episode of Possum Holler RFD. Ellis wanted to take the show from the regional level to national television, and Possum Holler RFD was the name of this proposed show. The built a new set for the pilot, which was similar to the original Possum Holler set. The main difference was the setting was a general store instead of a barn. The RFD pilot video was supposed to “capture the

sounds of the Mississippi; not the sounds of bluegrass or Nashville,” according to Ellis (November 23).

The Possum Holler RFD pilot was sent to Baskin Robbins for sponsorship, but they rejected the offer, and claimed that they wanted to be associated with a more upscale product (Elsenpeter, November 23). The pilot video made appearances at a few other studios and finally ended up at Bing Crosby Studios. Although Bing Crosby also rejected it, they later ended up producing the show Hee-Haw. Ellis and his colleagues noticed striking similarities between Possum Holler and Hee-Haw. Possum Holler always had dancing possums, and Hee-Haw came out with dancing pigs. Hee-Haw also had a general store as their set, which was the same as the Possum Holler RFD pilot episode. Ellis’s producers asserted that Hee-Haw had stolen their idea (Elsenpeter, November 23).

Possum Holler Opry received many awards during its years on television. They earned the Gibson award from Gibson guitars for Number One Country Music Show in the Midwest (Museum, “To Entertain”). Possum Holler Opry is also in the Illinois Country Music Hall of Fame and the Colorado Country Music Hall of Fame.

During the ten years Ellis did Possum Holler Opry, he lived in Barry, Illinois, which was an approximately thirty-minute drive from WGEM studios. In 1962, Ellis and his wife parted ways, so Ellis continued his work on Possum Holler without Baird.

Many of the artists who appeared on Possum Holler later became famous recording artists, and are still well known. Guitar player Jimmy Moore moved to Texas and became a recording artist in Houston, while guitarist Mike Jones later joined

Barbara Mandrell, and is still playing for the Mandrell sisters. Freddy Newell, the lead guitar player from Illinois, became a famous Nashville musician, and Sunny Bennett, the bass player, is a songwriter in Nashville. Don Andrews, the drummer, became Junior Sample's drummer (Elsenpeter, June 27).

Flaxie Frizzel passed away several years after the show closed. She had suffered multiple strokes, which began severely affecting her health. The last time Ellis remembers seeing her was at a Possum Holler reunion where they sang some of the old songs and shared stories. At the time, Flaxie's health had declined so much that she could not climb the stairs to get onstage. "So she stood in front of the stage and sang 'Jambalaya.' That was her signature song. The audience just stood up and cheered and asked for more; she started singing 'Jambalaya' again, and the bandleader had to say, 'Sis, you already sang that.' So you knew the strokes had gotten to her" (Elsenpeter, January 27).

Possum Holler Opry aired for the last time on Mother's Day of 1970, exactly ten years from when the show started. The closing of Possum Holler was a mutual decision, and Ellis believes it was the right time for the show to end. At that time in his life, demand for his puppet tours had increased, and Ellis was making more money with his puppet tours than he was with Possum Holler. Also, there was concern for how the show would be received if its main host, Toby Dick Ellis, were to ever retire. Ellis recalls the way they decided to end the show:

The manager of the TV station said, "Possum could go on forever," cause you had new talent all the time. But he said, "Dick, the audience connects you with Possum Holler, and when you're gone, the substitute that I would have take over just isn't pulling in the numbers." So I said, "We've been on for going on ten

years; let's make it ten years to the day and then just quit." I think I told you, I met him not too many years ago and he said, "Please go back on the air. We need that now more than ever." Because it was just family fun, you know, music and good fun, that's all. But I didn't.

Ellis decided he was ready to close this chapter in his life and begin a new one, where he could fully concentrate on puppetry, an art form he had loved since he was a small child. The transition from ending Possum Holler to full-time puppetry was smooth, and Ellis was excited to invest even more time in his puppetry career.



Figure 16: Publicity photo for Possum Holler Opry. Photo courtesy of the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.



Figure 17: Publicity photo for Possum Holler Opry. Photo courtesy of the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.



Figure 18: Dick Ellis as the Toby character. Photo courtesy of the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.



Figure 19: Promotional Poster for Possum Holler RFD. Photo courtesy of the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.



Figure 20: Dick Ellis and Flaxie Frizzel on an episode of Possum Holler Opry. Photo courtesy of the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.



Figure 21: Cal Schrum and Toby Dick Ellis. Photo courtesy of the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.



Figure 22: Bob Richardson, Gene Price, Toby Dick Ellis, and Al Harvey with Canadian record distributor Tom Dunbar. Photo courtesy of the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.



Figure 23: Kroger's 1963 telecast of the Mickey Mouse Club. Toby Dick Ellis and Al Harvey (right) appear with the Mousketeers. Photo courtesy of the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.



Figure 24: An episode of the Possum Holler Opry in 1965. Photo courtesy of the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.



Figure 25: Patsy Cline with the cast of Possum Holler Opry. Photo courtesy of the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.

CHAPTER 6

1970 TO PRESENT

After the closing of Possum Holler Opry, Ellis was able to focus on his career in marionette puppetry. Puppets had always been part of his life, because it was a family trade passed down through several generations. Ellis's grandparents taught him how to make his own puppets; he started building puppets with *papier mâché*, and then moved on to making wooden puppets once he became more skilled.

Ellis had his own workshop where he hand-carved all of his wooden puppets.

Puppetry was always an invaluable part of Ellis's life. He explains:

You've got to have a corner. Everybody needs a corner. You have to have that place where you can go and be by yourself. The puppetry, for me, was that. I could go and sit and carve, sculpt, and I was in that world. Everything else was away. My kids all chose reading as a corner. If you play music, you have a corner. Reading, that's a corner. You can be you. I think everybody needs that or should have it. Puppets were mine. (Elsenpeter, June 27)

Ellis and his wife had been touring with Ken Hodge Marionettes in the southern states when Ellis had the opportunity to start Possum Holler Opry. They finished the marionette tour, and then went back to Illinois to work on the new country-music show. However, Ellis' time away from puppets never lasted long. He trained Al Harvey, the lead singer of Possum Holler Opry, in puppetry, so that Al could accompany him on puppet tours.

Ellis and Harvey began working for the Bureau of Lecture and Concert Artists at the University of Kansas in 1969; they also toured with a few other agencies, including the National School Assemblies Agency out of Northridge, Los Angeles, California (Elsenpeter, June 27). Ellis worked for the Bureau of Lecture and Concert Artists for

more than twenty years. When he first started, the program was run through the University of Kansas, which limited their playing area to the state of Kansas. Later, the program moved off-campus, which allowed them to expand their territory to other states like Oklahoma, Illinois, and Iowa (Elsenpeter, January 27). Today, the Bureau of Lecture and Concert Artists is a large and successful program that sends their performers all around the United States and Canada.

When Ellis and Harvey worked for the University of Kansas, they performed storybook shows like *Don Quixote*, *Tom Sawyer*, *Huck Finn*, *Rip Van Winkle*, and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. Ellis used only public-domain books that did not require him to pay royalties for copyrighted material. He adapted the stories into workable plays, and made sure there were only a few characters in each scene, so he (or he and a partner) could handle all the puppets.

Ellis strongly believed that his puppet shows should have a family-oriented message. If a fairy-tale was popular but did not promote the values he wished to instill, then Ellis would re-write the stories to fit a particular message. One example of this occurred when Ellis was asked repeatedly to perform the story *Hansel and Gretel* by the University of Kansas. His supervisor told Ellis that schools kept requesting this show, but Ellis did not believe he could justify performing it. First, the stepmother was cruel, wanting to abandon her stepchildren in the woods. Ellis did not want to make any commentary about stepparents, since so many children had them. Additionally, the father and stepmother have selfish values, scheming to abandon their children in the woods so they will have more food. Then there was the witch, also a character Ellis

wanted to avoid. Lastly, the children disobey their father. At the end of the story when the he is about to take the children home, the children say no, they want to go find the witch's treasure, which they do. Considering all of these controversial elements, Ellis refused to perform *Hansel and Gretel* in its traditional form. However, his boss pleaded with him to find a way to do it, and Ellis agreed to re-write the story.

The new version of *Hansel and Gretel* that Ellis wrote had a mother and father as the parents, instead of a stepmother. In this story, the parents needed to do something in town, so they left the children at home and asked them not to go out. Then, Hansel, an obedient and youthful boy who wanted to please his parents, planned to surprise them with a treat when they returned. Hansel asks Gretel to help him pick berries in the woods to bring back to their parents. While picking berries, the children get lost and find themselves at the house of an old crone, instead of a witch. The rest of the story plays out in a similar manner, except the ending, which is dramatically different. When the children tell their father they want to go find the treasure, he replies, "We've already found the treasure. We're a family again" (Elsenpeter, January 27). Ellis believed that this version of the story allowed teachers to facilitate better discussions with their students. They could highlight that family was the most important thing, and that children should listen to the counsel of their parents, and that going into the woods alone was dangerous. All of Ellis's shows contained similar values (Elsenpeter, January 27).

The show for which Ellis created the most elaborate puppets was *Don Quixote*. Ellis put considerable time and effort into making these puppets the finest he had ever

created, because he loved the story of Don Quixote. However, the show was not well received in schools. Principals told Ellis that the story was over the heads of the youngsters. To that, Ellis replies, "Everything better be over their heads when they come in every day; that's how they learn!" He believes that school administrators did not give the story a chance, because it is something that children can understand. When Ellis was in seventh grade, his teachers used to call him a dreamer; the character Don Quixote is clearly the dreamer in this story. On the other hand, Sancho is the story's realist, and a pair of unlikely friends who set out to accomplish something together is the story of life. Ellis says, "How they get along and grow to love each other is such a strong message to me. Every classroom would have a Don Quixote and a Sancho, you know" (Elsenpeter, January 27).

A typical puppet show for a school assembly lasted forty-five minutes, in order to fit neatly into a school class period and also hold the kids' attention. Ellis decided that all of his puppet shows would have recorded sound, from music to dialogue. Ellis and a few other actors and actresses would go into a studio to record the initial vocal track. They only recorded the characters' dialogue—not music. After that, Ellis would send the dialogue tape to his old friend Don Weage, with whom he worked numerous times in the tent rep days. Weage worked for a music studio in Los Angeles that recorded music for various special projects. Consequently, he composed and recorded all the music for Ellis's puppet shows. Weage also had a habit of correcting things he did not think were up to his standard. He would listen to the tape Ellis had sent, and if he did not like one of the voices, he would record over it with a voice of his own. Ellis recalls that Weage

would say, “Who the hell is that you got?’ And he’d do it himself! It was just wonderful! In other words, the first performance was exactly the same as the last” (Elsenpeter, January 27). The reason Ellis had decided to make all his puppet shows recorded was to make each performance the same quality. In the past, he had some performances that lasted the right amount of time, and others that he sped through, which ended up being too short. Moreover, having a cold or laryngitis could affect the performance quality. Therefore, recorded voices and music were the best because they still allowed Ellis to be creative, since he was the one recording the voices, but also have consistent quality for each performance.

As Don Weage composed the music for each puppet show, he incorporated musical motifs to increase the children’s connections to the characters. Each character had a musical motif that would play just before that puppet came onstage. It was a very effective way to enhance the show and increase identification with the show’s themes through music. Ellis describes a humorous moment that demonstrates how the music heavily impacted one child’s emotional investment in the story:

Just say Hansel and Gretel had a little “dum de dum de dum” theme, and the father had a “boop boom boop boom.” Everybody had a little thing before they came on. The witch was like “Boom! Boom! Boom!” You didn’t pay attention to that. But one time, we were in the middle of this play, and the witch music came on. This is like K-4 grade level, and this little voice out there said, “Uh-oh! Here comes that goddamn witch again!” I about fell over! (Elsenpeter, January 27)

Children often became emotionally connected to the puppets during Ellis’s shows. Often, children would come up on stage so that they could sit close to the puppets. On one occasion, a kindergarten girl came up after the performance and grabbed hold of a puppet, hugging it tightly to her chest. When her teacher came up to pull the little girl

away, Ellis said, “No, no! Don’t! Leave her alone!” Ellis was worried that the puppet would be damaged if the little girl continued holding on to the puppet while the teacher was pulling her in the other direction. But more importantly, Ellis took the girl’s gesture as a complement to his storytelling; he exclaims, “What greater compliment could you have than somebody wanting to hug a puppet?! That’s a dream!” (Elsenpeter, January 27).

The artistry of being a puppeteer took considerable skill and preparation. Ellis firmly believes that for children to have a complete theatrical experience, a puppeteer should carry all the proper equipment to create an appealing environment. Ellis always used what he called the old-world puppet stage, which included a full stage with curtains, footlights, and backdrops. The borders he used to create the proscenium stage were approximately fourteen feet wide and ten feet high. The stage itself was eight feet wide and two and a half feet deep. Each puppet show generally included four or five different scenes, and he had a different set of scenery for each scene. He also use footlights and border lights to enhance the mood of each show.

Setup for this type of puppet stage took about one hour. Ellis would enlist help from school employees to set up the stage; if he was working with someone who had never helped him before, the set up time could take much longer than one hour. All of the scenery and equipment was quite heavy, so Ellis put wheels on it for easier loading and unloading. He drove a truck in order to carry all of his supplies in the truck’s bed. Ellis was proud of all the hard work he put into creating a complete, attractive stage for his puppet shows. He says, “We had the velvet curtains and all of that. I wanted a

theatre experience for the children. Several of the puppeteers said I was crazy for carrying all of that. They just did [their shows] standing there, and would just put a little piece of scenery there and do the puppets. I said, 'You're taking away the mystery. [With my stage], the dolls come alive!'" (Elsenpeter, January 27).

Ellis also developed a new way of controlling the marionette puppets that allowed him to handle more than one puppet at a time. Traditionally, a T-bar controlled a marionette puppet, but Ellis felt this type of controller was limiting. He explains what kind of control it took to manipulate the marionettes:

We had our own set of controls. There's the T-bar, which is that stick with the cross on it; the little toy ones work that way, but they get kind of complicated. We put a different one in called a paddle control, where your hand fit in and your thumb made them walk. With the T-bar, you had to use two hands, but this way, you could use just one hand. You could handle two puppets at the same time!

It's like playing a harp. [When controlling a puppet], you know where the strings are. The marionette has to have balance. [A puppeteer keeps the marionette so steady] that you could put a nail on your controller and it would stay there; it had to be balanced to make the puppet work right. We had them geared so their feet would move, and their ankles, and knees, and even the hands. They could pick things up and talk. They were animated—the eyes could move and the mouths moved. (Elsenpeter, January 27).

Because of his attention to detail and high-quality performance values, Ellis was one of the most sought-after marionette puppeteers in the country. Ellis claims that he did more puppet shows in a year than some puppeteers do in a lifetime. There were a few years where Ellis put on three to five hundred shows in an eight-month period. He would do at least three shows a day; sometimes, he did four shows a day, with two in the morning and two in the afternoon. It was a strenuous amount of work, especially for one person, but Ellis never grew weary of it. The only part he did not like was being

away from home for eight months at a time. He missed his children, and always looked forward to being back in Illinois with them at the end of a puppet tour.

Ellis finally had to retire from puppetry a few years ago when he developed kinetic tremors in his hands. The physical impairment, which was beyond his control, made it impossible for Ellis to effectively manipulate the puppets any longer.

Ellis retired to Quincy, Illinois, where he now resides. He misses performing, but his son carries on the tradition. Ellis claims, “The puppets were a wonderful time! I loved doing that! I just loved it—getting on the bridge and working the puppets” (Elsenpeter, January 27).

He still attends the Theatre Seminar at the Museum of Repertoire Americana in Mount Pleasant, Iowa, every spring. He also participates in the informal Possum Holler Opry reunion “jam sessions” that take place at his home in Quincy each year.

Ellis was a skilled artist who dedicated his life to spreading the magic of theatre, through summer tent repertoire shows, television, and marionette puppetry. He will be remembered, both literally and figuratively, in the recollections of all those eager audience members who came to the theatre in hopes of experiencing something more extraordinary than their everyday lives.



Figure 26: Promotional photo of Dick Ellis and Al Harvey with the marionette puppets. Courtesy of Dick Ellis.



Figure 27: Jacquelyn Floyd and Dick Ellis at the Theatre Seminar in Mount Pleasant, Iowa, on April 16, 2011. Photo courtesy of Jacquelyn Floyd.

APPENDIX A
PERSONAL STATEMENTS FROM FRIENDS OF MR. ELLIS

Statement from Linda Cassidy Tankersley
February 2, 2012

When I first started singing in public, Toby invited me to make an appearance on the Possum Holler Opry. He made me feel so welcome and part of the "gang." After I was on the show awhile, Toby introduced me to "Buster Doss" (a record producer) who was going to be in Quincy and on the Opry. Toby recommended Buster to record a session with me. It was Toby who was responsible for me being in the recording business.

Toby is such a talented artist. I (and the people who worked with Toby) saw a side of him I don't think some people ever got to see. I am sure you, having talked with Toby, have learned about his early life in theater. He has told some of the funniest stories about his travels with his marionette puppet show.

On my son's 8th birthday, Toby came to our home in Rushville, Illinois, and did marionette show for my son and his classmates. He is one of the kindest people I will have the great privilege of knowing. I traveled with Toby to some of the Possum Holler Opry road shows and he would keep me thoroughly entertained all the way with funny stories about past events and situations that were "classic stories."

In my opinion, Toby has contributed so much to the entertainment business (theater and television). His talents and history in the entertainment business far exceeds anything I could put into words. He is a wonderful, warm, talented human being. When I come home, I always look forward to spending time with Toby. We (some of the Possum Holler Gang) meet at the Lincoln Douglas Hotel in Quincy, Illinois, and have a little jam session. We always close it with the song that was the closing theme at the Possum Holler Opry TV Show: "Y'all Come." When I was there in January, Toby gave me a Possum Holler RFD sweatshirt. I dearly love that man and all the contributions he has so generously made to the entertainment world.

Statement from Roberta L. Wilkes

February 15, 2012

I am the daughter of Mason Wilkes and Dortha Mae Roberts, who trouped with several different tent theatre companies. My father was in show business for over 60 years, beginning in stock companies and dance bands prior to 1920 and continuing through his career in the Black Hills Passion Play. My mother died at an early age – when she was thirty-one years old; however, she trouped in tent theatre from the late 1930s until her death in 1951. I was born in 1942, while they were trouping and trouped until 1953 – then again in 1960.

My parents travelled with tent companies in the summer; then worked in circle stock in the winter. While I was a child trouper, we travelled with several shows. During this time it was our good fortune to meet Dick Ellis, who was then a young actor, singer and dancer. He travelled with the Gifford Circle out of Girard, the winter of 1950, as well as with the Schaffner Players under tent. My sister and I thought he was quite a good-looking man. He became friends with my mother and father. He played parts opposite my mother, who usually played ingénue (young lady) parts and did specialty acts with her as well. They did a Mexican Hat Dance, for example. My father was usually the piano player on shows, so he rehearsed his specialty acts with my father. As he told me, when you added up rehearsal time, performance time and travel time, the actors on a show spent most of the day together. You get to know each other as family during the run of a show.

I met up again with Dick several years ago when I started coming back to Trouper Reunions at The Theatre Museum in Mount Pleasant, Iowa. This has been one of the greatest blessings of my life. Dick has been able to remind me of my early upbringing and what it was like to live life as a trouper. There really is nothing like it in the way of normal work. Dick has told me stories about my parents and filled in some gaps about my own childhood. He loved my parents and thought they were both “clever” actors and performers. We have become great friends. It is truly an honor to count him as my friend.

Statement from Dawn Larsen

February 6, 2012

I met Dick in about 2001 maybe. He is such a wonderful, gentle soul. I directed him in *The Return of Aunt Susan* for the 2006 Theatre History Seminar at the Theatre of Repertoire Americana in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa. I was delighted (but not surprised) that he retained his ability to perform comic timing so well. Unfortunately, he got food poisoning and could not do the performance. His comedy is so genuine. When he is on stage, the audience adores him.

I performed a one-woman show for the state of Kentucky for five years. I portrayed a tent show actress that had been with the Bisbee Comedians, the largest tent show company in Tennessee and Kentucky. During the second year, an older woman came to me with a set of photo albums. Her husband had followed the Bisbee Comedians for years, sort of as a groupie, and taken many pictures. I was thrilled when she gave the photo albums to me. Dick was in some of the pictures and helped me to identify many people.

He also helped me with primary research on a book that my colleague, Richard Poole, and I have just completed, *Traveling Tent Theatricals*. He helped me understand what types of plays were routinely done during a typical week's stand with a tent show.

I think more than anything, Dick has shown me by example that age doesn't matter... He continues to entertain people and live as if he is an energetic young man. I haven't seen him for a couple of years, but last time we talked, he was planning a new venture in Paducah. I count myself very lucky that Dick is my friend.

APPENDIX B

ARTIFACT DOCUMENTS

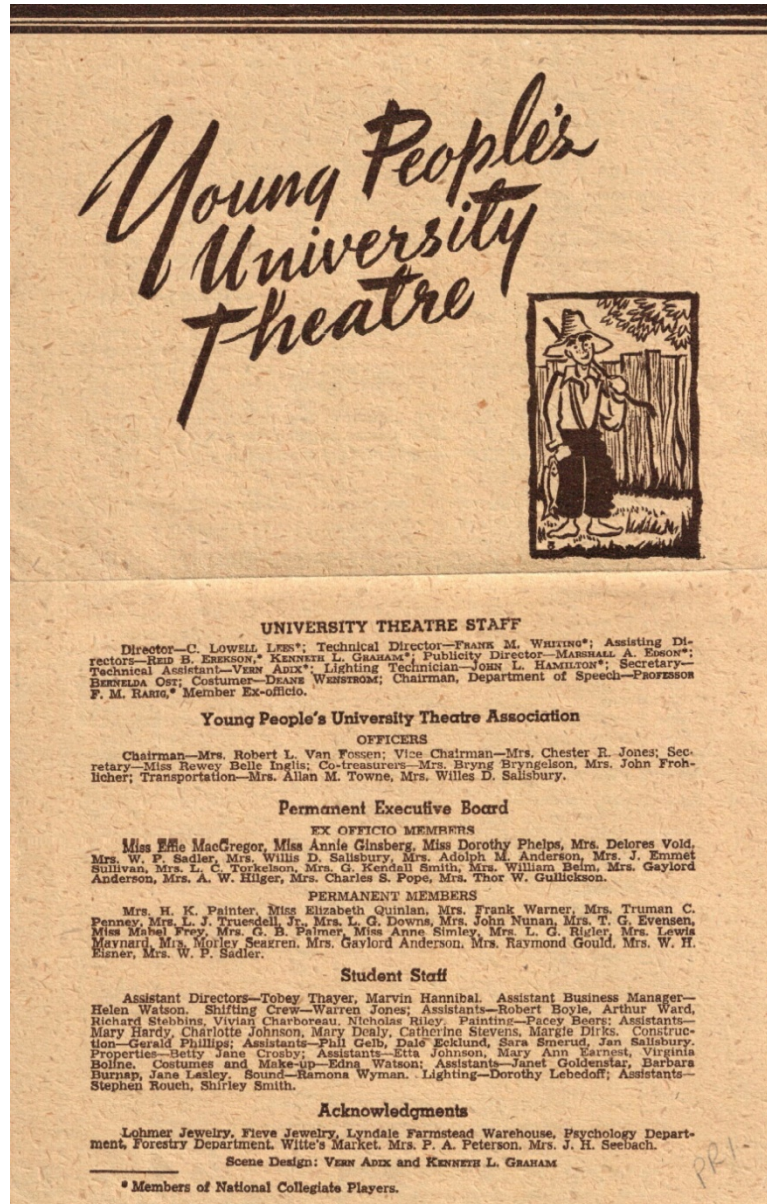


Figure 28: Program from Young People's University Theatre in Minneapolis, 1936. Courtesy of the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.

TOM SAWYER

Adapted by CHARLOTTE CHORPENNING

Directed by KENNETH L. GRAHAM

CHARACTERS AS THEY SPEAK

Tom Sawyer.....	EUGENE PODANY
Matinee October 27, 28, November 1, 5--Evening October 30	
Tom Sawyer.....	WYNN FOSTER
Matinee October 31, November 3, 7, 10--Evening October 29	
Aunt Polly Sawyer.....	ANN MAKER
Sid Sawyer.....	SIDNEY LEVISOHN
Ben Rogers.....	STANFORD KROMAN
Huckleberry Finn.....	PETE LOURICAS
Joe Harper.....	MARCUS BERGLIN
Matinee October 27, 28, November 1, 3, 10--Evening October 30	
Joe Harper.....	RICHARD VESSELS
Matinee October 31, November 5, 7--Evening October 29	
Becky Thatcher.....	HELEN CRAMER
Matinee October 29, November 5--Evening October 30	
Becky Thatcher.....	VIRGINIA ESTES
Matinee October 27, November 1, 3--Evening October 29	
Becky Thatcher.....	MARIEN RUDIE
Matinee October 31, November 7, 10	
Muff Potter.....	DALE ECKLUND
Reverend Sprague.....	DEANE WENSTROM
Injun Joe.....	JOHN BYSTROM
Dr. Robinson.....	ARLEY HEGNE
Sheriff.....	ROBERT BOYLE
Bub Riverson.....	DAVE SHEPARD
Hooper.....	ROBERT SLOMSKE
Judge.....	ARTHUR WARD
Mrs. Sprague.....	LOIS GRAPP
Widow Douglas.....	MAY FALK
Mrs. Thatcher.....	NANCY LEE BEHLKE
Mrs. Harper.....	EILEEN BACH
Children of St. Petersburg: TED ANDERSON, CORNELIA DOWNS, <u>DUCK EISENBERGER</u> , BOD JONES, PATRICIA MATNARD, MARY MARGARET MAYNARD, DONALD MEYERS, RALPH TURNER, LEROY TORKELSON, VAL RAY KOHNER.	
Citizens of St. Petersburg: PACEY BEERS, WILLIAM WENSTRIM, NICHOLAS RILEY, RAMONA WYMAN, SUE JAMES.	

Place: The action takes place in and around St. Petersburg, Missouri.
 Time: About one hundred years ago.
 Act. I. A street running in front of the Sawyer and Thatcher homes, Saturday afternoon.
 Act. II. Just outside the graveyard. Midnight.
 Act. III. Same as Act II. Late morning one week later.
 Act. IV. Jackson's Island. Early the next morning.
 Act. V. Same as Act I. The next morning.

Do You Know That--

1. Mark Twain's real name was Samuel Clemens?
2. Mark Twain was born in 1835 and that he died in 1910?
3. He also wrote *Huckleberry Finn*, *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court*, *The Prince and the Pauper*, *Life on the Mississippi*, and *The Mark Twain Omnibus* (containing the Pudd'nhead Wilson stories)?
4. Mrs. Charlotte Chorpennning, who dramatized our play, also dramatized *The Emperor's New Clothes* (that was given here last year), and also *Aladdin* (that is to be given here during the last week of April)?
5. Mrs. Chorpennning has also written *Radio Rescue*, and dramatized *The Prince and the Pauper*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Hans Brinker* and *the Silver Skates*, and many other popular young people's stories?
6. Mark Twain wrote in the Preface to *Tom Sawyer*?
 "Although my book is intended for the entertainment of boys and girls, I hope it will not be shunned by men and women on that account, for part of my plan has been to try to pleasantly remind adults of what they once were themselves, and how they felt and thought and talked, and what queer enterprises they sometimes engaged in."

Dick Ellis 1936-

Figure 29: Program from Young People's University Theatre in Minneapolis, 1936. Courtesy of the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.

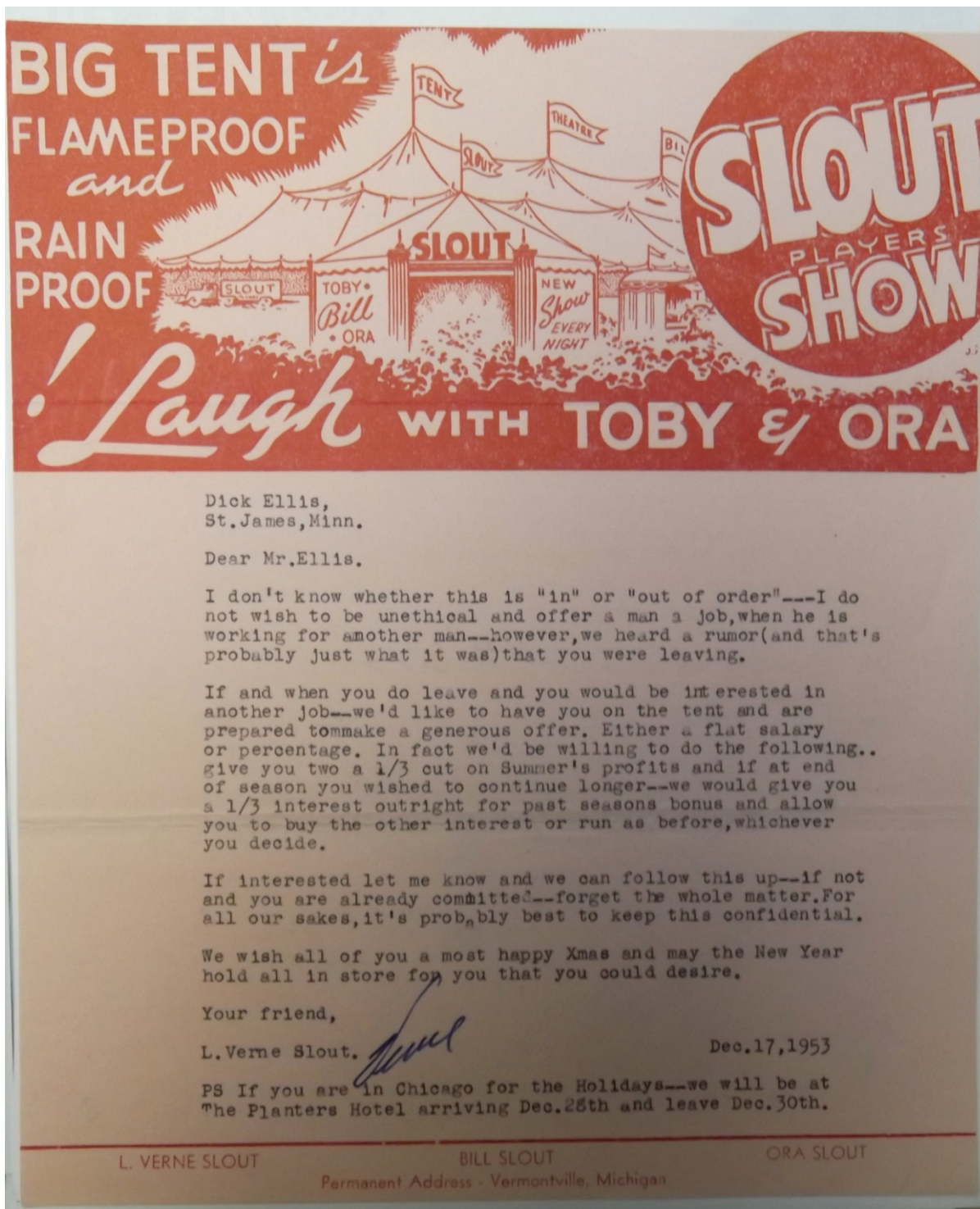


Figure 30: Letter from L. Verne Slout to Dick Ellis. Courtesy of The Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.

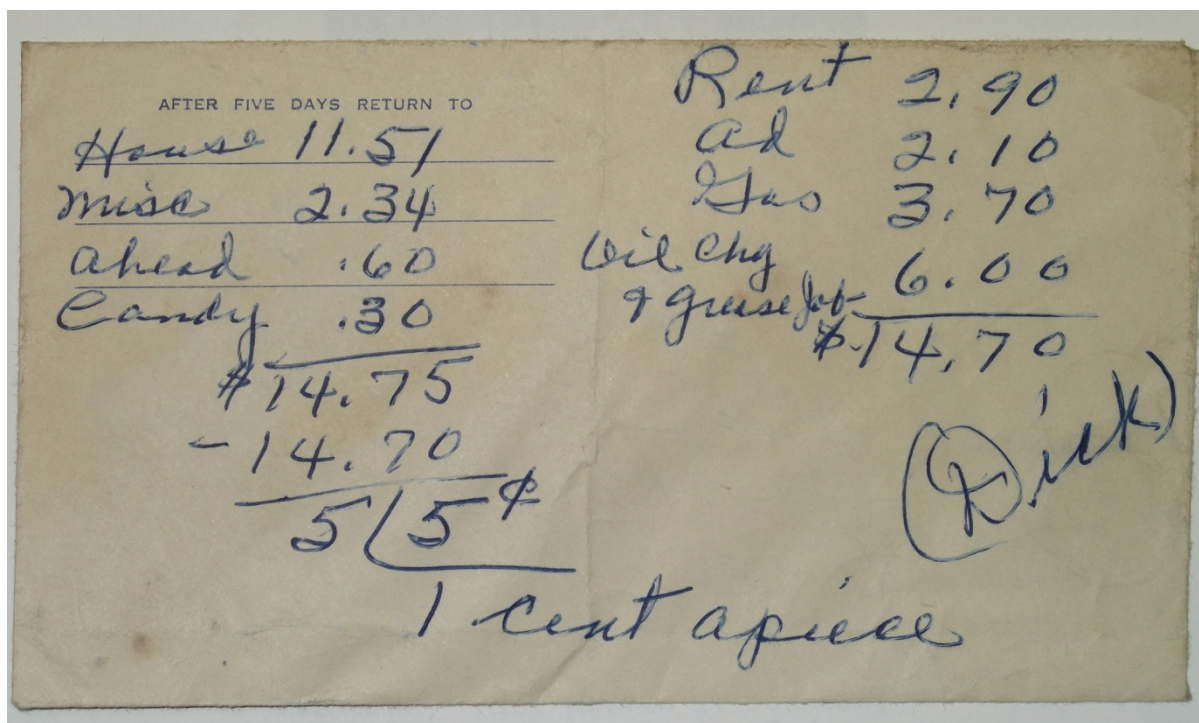


Figure 31: Envelope containing the one cent payment that Ellis received from George Kleber for a day's work in Biloxi, Mississippi, 1945. Courtesy of The Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.

BIG FREE FISH FRY

AND CHICKEN TOO!

Sunday, Sept. 16

AT THE FAIRGROUNDS IN RUSHVILLE, ILL.

Start Serving 12:30 p.m. Until ?

EVERYBODY WELCOME

All You Have To Bring Is An Appetite
ABSOLUTELY NO CHARGE

**Come and Meet Old Friends in
An Afternoon of Pleasure**

ENTERTAINMENT BY
**Toby Dick Ellis And His
Possum Hollow Opry**

RAIN OR SHINE - UNDER A BIG TOP

PLENTY OF ROOM FOR ALL TO PARK

Don't Miss This Big Free Feed And The Opportunity To
Visit Old Friends And Neighbors

COME ONE!

COME ALL!

Sponsored by Schuyler County Republican Central Committee

Figure 32: Advertisement for one of Possum Holler Opry's shows in Schuyler County, Illinois. Courtesy of The Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.

SATURDAY NIGHT - JULY 20TH - 8:30 P. M.

Flatt and Scruggs with their band (direct from the Beverly Hillbillies)

AND

THE POSSUM HOLLER OPRY SHOW

THE BIGGEST COUNTRY WESTERN SHOW OF THE SEASON



TOBY DICK ELLIS
Comedian



FLATT & SCRUGGS FROM THE "BEVERLY HILLBILLIES"



PEACHES BENNETT
Sensational Singer

FLATT AND SCRUGGS AND THE FOGGY MOUNTAIN BOYS WILL HEADLINE A CAST OF 13 RADIO AND TV STARS

SEE AND HEAR

FLATT & SCRUGGS - GRAND OLE OPRY & BEVERLY HILLBILLIES STARS

TOBY DICK ELLIS - COMEDIAN - TV STATION W. G. E. M., CHANNEL 10

MISS PEACHES BENNETT, AL HARVEY, JOHN BUSH - ALL FROM TV STATION W. G. E. M.

AND

THE FAMOUS COUNTRY WESTERN MUSIC BAND - FOGGY MOUNTAIN BOYS

SCRUGGS wins National acclaim as the PAGANINI of the Banjo from the NEW YORK TIMES

Scruggs & Flatt make over 200 personal appearances besides their TV and radio programs.

DON'T MISS THE BIG COUNTRY WESTERN SHOW OF THE SEASON. MEET THE STARS IN PERSON AND GET THEIR AUTOGRAPHS.

THERE WILL BE 500 CHAIR SEATS ON THE TRACK

Come early and get one of these chair seats

After the show - visit one of the twenty rides of the Monarch Shows on the midway.

Figure 33: Advertisement for the Jersey County Fair in Illinois. Courtesy of The Museum of Repertoire Americana, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.



Figure 34: Advertisement poster for Elsenpeter Marionettes. Courtesy of Dick Ellis.

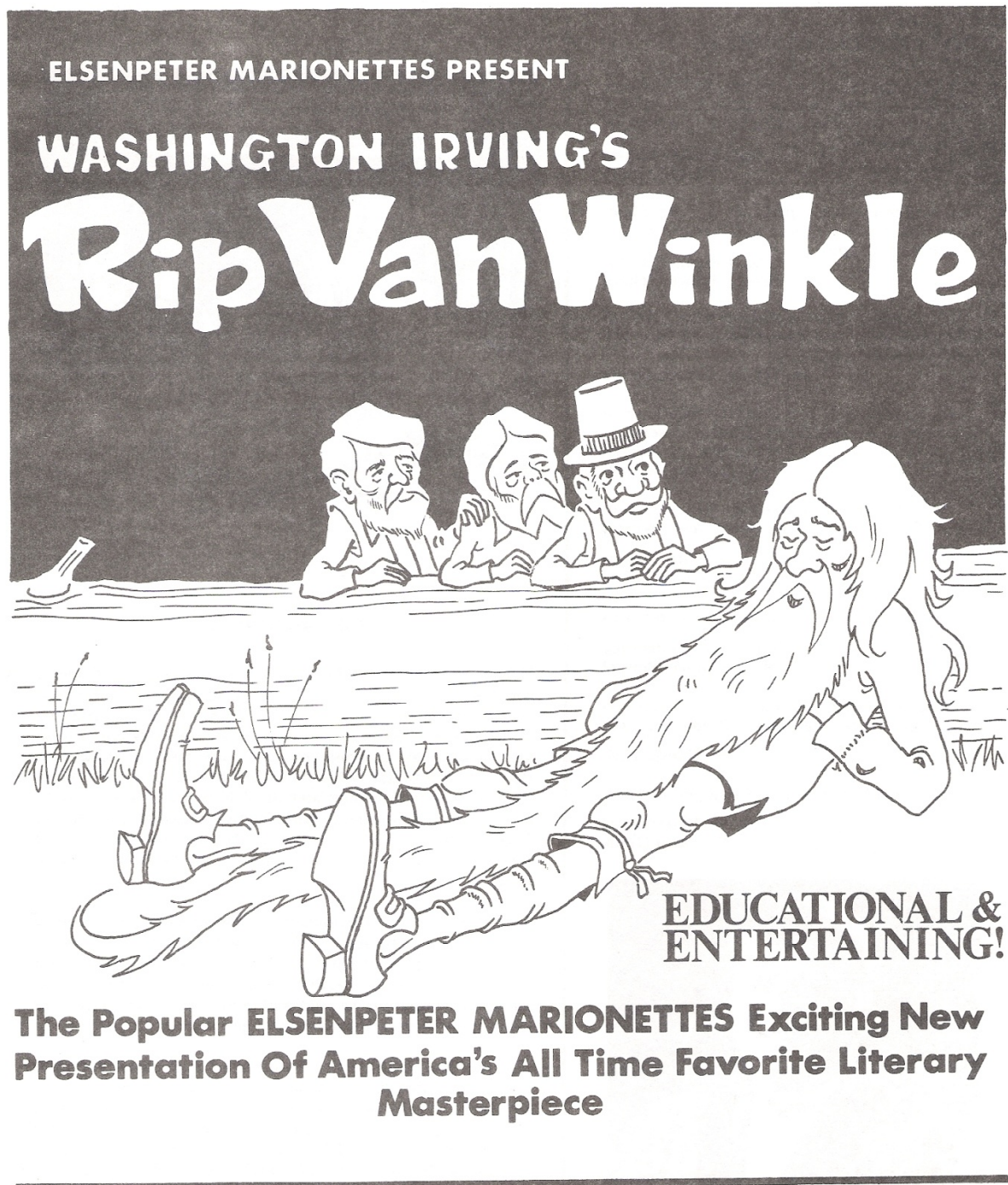


Figure 35: Advertisement poster for Elsenpeter Marionettes. Courtesy of Dick Ellis.

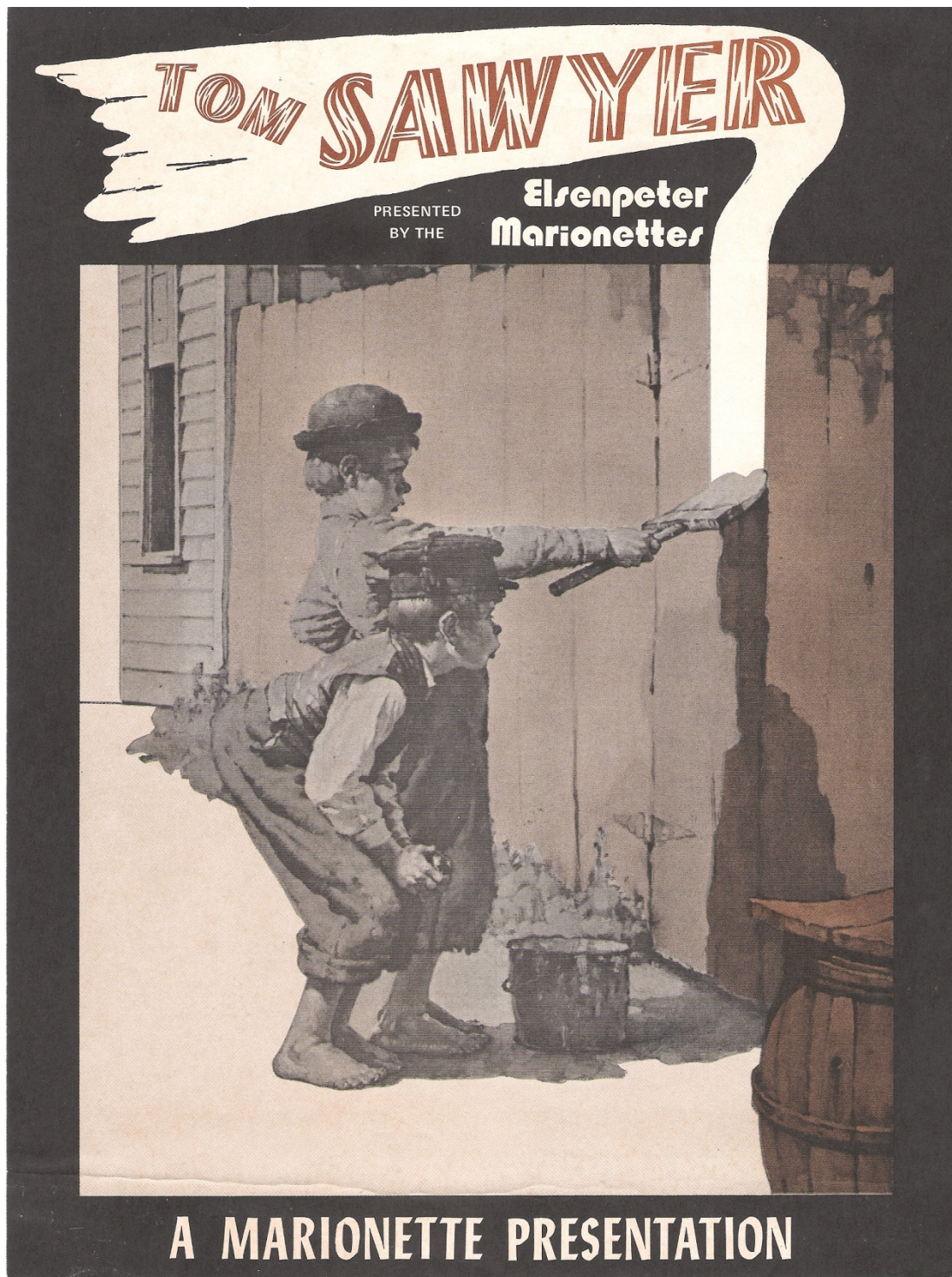


Figure 36: Advertisement poster for Elsenpeter Marionettes' production of Tom Sawyer, produced through the Minnesota Program Service. Courtesy of Dick Ellis.

TOM SAWYER

Mark Twain

Tom gets the fence whitewashed

“ ALL UNCONCIOUSLY HE HAD DISCOVERED
A GREAT LAW OF HUMAN ACTION – NAMELY
THAT TO MAKE A MAN OR A BOY COVET A
THING IT IS ONLY NECESSARY TO MAKE IT
APPEAR DIFFICULT TO OBTAIN”



“...He meowed with caution once or twice...”



“...she calculated his capacity as she would a jugs...
and filled him every day with quack cure-alls....”

TOM SAWYER

HUCK FINN

AUNT POLLY

INJUN JOE

BECKY THACHER



MINNESOTA PROGRAM SERVICE, INC.

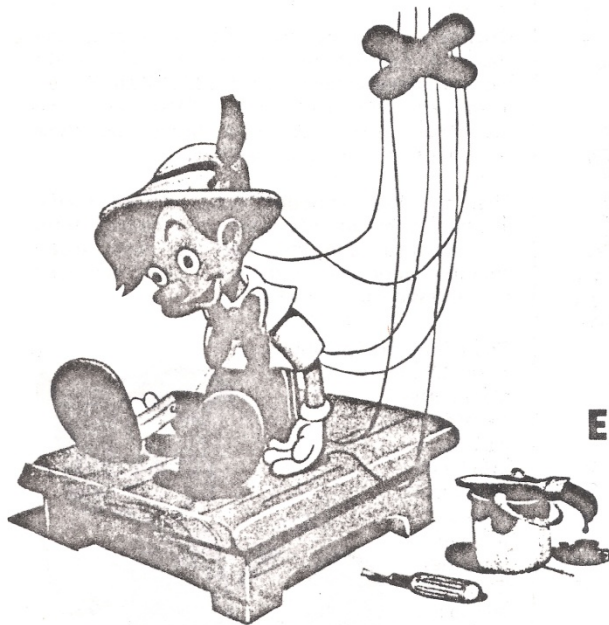
—SERVING THE MIDWEST—

Crestland Building Suite 207 Minnetonka, Minnesota 55343 (612) 938-3898

Figure 37: Back of the advertisement poster for Elsenpeter Marionettes' production of Tom Sawyer, produced through the Minnesota Program Service. Courtesy of Dick Ellis.

The
ELSENPETER MARIONETTES
Present
Pinocchio

**All Time Favorite
Literary Masterpiece**



**Exciting New
Presentation
by
The Popular
ELSENPETER MARIONETTES**

**EDUCATIONAL &
ENTERTAINING!**

Figure 38: Advertisement poster for Elsenpeter Marionettes. Courtesy of Dick Ellis.



Figure 39: Advertisement Poster for Ken Hodge Productions. Courtesy of Dick Ellis.

**St. Jude's
Puppet Theater**
presents

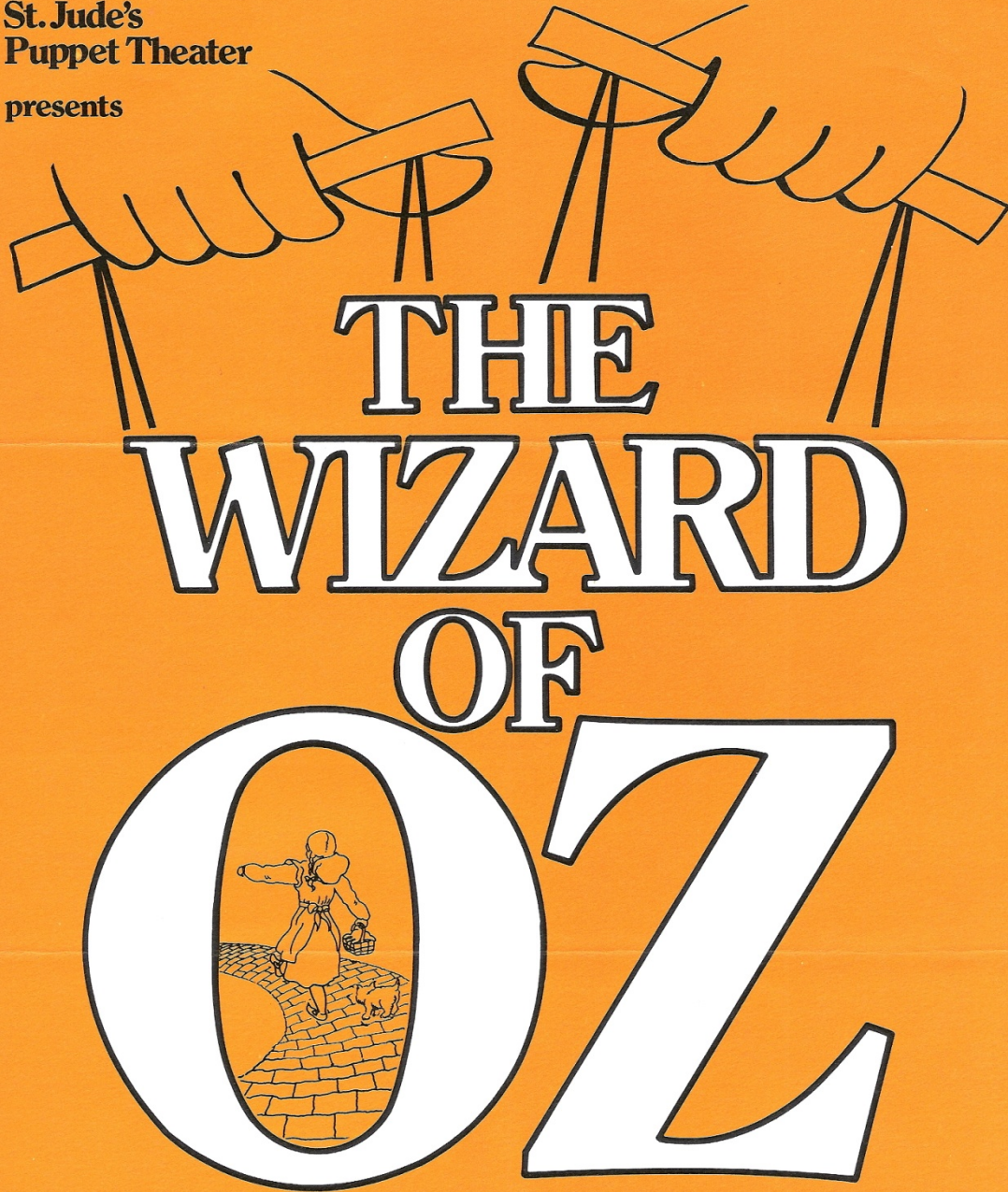


Figure 40: Advertisement poster for St. Jude's Puppet Theatre, part of the Minnesota Program Service. Courtesy of Dick Ellis.

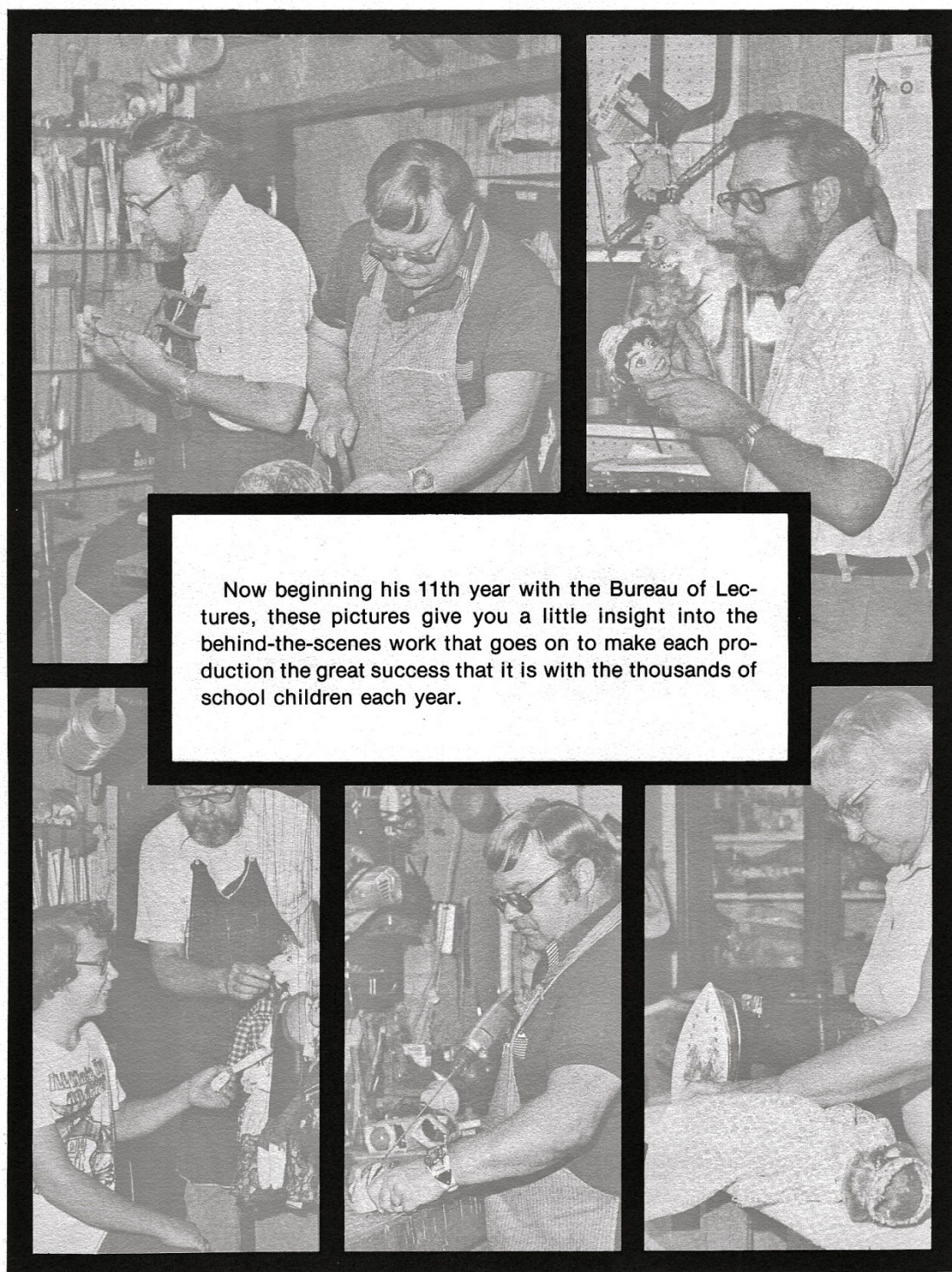


Figure 41: Behind the scenes photos of Dick Ellis and colleagues making marionette puppets. Courtesy of Dick Ellis.

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5

November 2007.

VITA

Jacquelyn Nicole Floyd was born on January 23, 1985, in Kirksville, Missouri. She was educated in local public schools and graduated from Kirksville High School in 2003. Ms. Floyd attended Truman State University in Kirksville, Missouri, where she studied both theatre and English. She was a member of Alpha Psi Omega, the national theatre honors society, and The Honors Society of Phi Kappa Phi. Ms. Floyd graduated summa cum laude in 2007 with Bachelor of Arts degrees in theatre and English.

From 2008-2009, Ms. Floyd worked for Youth Encounter as a member of the New Dawn team, which traveled in the United States and Southeast Asia presenting faith-based music and educational programs.

In 2010, Ms. Floyd began the Master of Arts program in theatre at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. She has worked as a dramaturg for the Coterie Theatre and as an actor for Shawnee Mission's Theatre in the Park. She is also pursuing a degree in secondary English and theatre education from Avila University.

Ms. Floyd currently works on the professional staff at Rockhurst University as a Resident Director, where she enjoys helping students transition into a successful college career. She is an adjunct lecturer for the department of theatre at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.