



**The National Society for  
the Preservation of Tent,  
Folk & Repertoire  
Theatre**

Officers:  
President  
David Ripper

First Vice President  
Mrs. James V. Davis

Second Vice President  
David Wagaman

President Emeritus  
Dr. Michael Kramme

Secretary  
Carla Trees

Treasurer  
Monie Hayes

The museum is open from  
Memorial Day  
to Labor Day  
Thursday, Friday & Saturday  
10:00-4:30  
Other days  
by appointment

**The Winging It**  
Editor:

Grace Swank-Davis

Contact us at :  
E-mail:  
theatremuseum@yahoo.com

Telephone:  
319-385-9432

Web-site:  
theatremuseum.com

405 E. Threshers Road  
Mount Pleasant, IA  
52641

# Winging It

## National Society for the Preservation of Tent, Folk and Repertoire Theatre

Volume 20, Issue 2

Summer 2015

### President's Message

Please excuse the cliché

Nothing changes if nothing changes.

Two years ago, we restructured our organization in order to be in-line with demands of 21<sup>st</sup> century fund-raising opportunities. These changes are still in process yet we are moving forward to meet the legal and practical requirements to keep our mission. We have also moved to digitize the wealth of knowledge in our collection so to be in the position of sharing this with the entertainment world.

These changes have been upsetting for some as we as humans do not like to upset the status quo. However change (or rather update) we must in order to keep up with the demands of today's world. For an organization such as ours to have survived 45 years is remarkable. This is a testament to our passion and the updates we have put in place make us a stronger group so we can look forward to the next 45 years!

The proof is in the pudding.

We just completed our 30<sup>th</sup> annual Seminar and annual meeting. One of the most successful seminars we have had in several years! We accomplished goals and have received a great deal of feedback to improve and expand this seminar and annual meeting. David Wagaman is gathering all of this input and your board is looking at suggestions to make the necessary changes to keep this tradition for another 30 years. The structural changes have given us a vehicle to maintain this aspect of our mission viable.

We have formed alliances and partnerships to further our goal by pairing with "Curtains without boarders" and the Henry County Historical society. "Curtains" is pursuing a grant, which will help preserve our collection of drapes and curtains (the largest in the country) which should come in 2016.

The "Historical Society" has received donations from memorials to Martha Hayes and we are collaborating to create a fund to assist interns who will assist us in re-cataloging the collection into an order for easier access for today's student or researcher.

I am happy to say that, through the generosity of a pair of members, we have the funds and are moving forward to upgrade our cataloging system by adding two new work/research stations, which will expedite the cataloging into the PastPerfect program and allow us to do our recordkeeping for the Society in a much more organized manner. We are also to be the recipients of a grant from the Willa May Ford Charitable Trust, which will pay for improvements, and modernization of our displays in the Museum itself. More about this in the fall!

To continue our move forward, we need to show how serious we are about our mission to educate and entertain. We need to increase our paid membership! PLEASE, if you have not paid your 2015 membership do so NOW! Enclosed is the membership form, please fill it out and send it in! To accomplish our goals we simply need you to show your support. This is vital to the health and fundraising for our group. We have over 400 on our list of friends and less than 20% have actually paid their membership. WE NEED THE NUMBERS! Please join and encourage others to join today.

With your help, we can preserve the knowledge of the great performers and Rep theatre genre that we are so privileged to have on our resumes.

David

## Ad Libs

By Grace Swank-Davis

Greetings from beautiful downtown Mount Pleasant, Iowa.

Well, you will excuse me if I say this was one of the best Conferences we have had in a long time. We had very interesting and informative papers presented as the program on pages four and five will show, great entertainment, good food and drink.

This was our first conference without Martha Hayes and everyone worked hard to fill the void of her not being with us. Most of our regulars were there, and quite a few new faces. I hope we will see your face here next year.

We have had some great tours at the museum lately...David Wagaman and Claudia Streeter showed two of the Osmond brothers and their families (see more on this on page 7), I did a tour for the local chapter of the P.E.O.. David Wagaman goes backstage of every show that comes to the area and brings them to the museum.

Old Threshers is cutting back on its hours at all of its museums so we will only be open Thursday, Friday and Saturday this summer. Same hours: 10am to 4:30 pm until Labor Day.

Congratulations to Brian Iles and Shane Bridges for being added to the Toby Hall of Fame. Also to Mike Kramme for receiving the first ever Martha Hayes Award for Volunteerism.

Carla Trees was elected Secretary, and Monie Hayes, our new Treasurer. David Wagaman is now our 2<sup>nd</sup> Vice president. Congratulations to them all. We have to thank retiring Treasurer, Claudia Streeter for all her hard work. She has been on the job since the late, great Billie Turley retired.

Our condolences go to our new 2<sup>nd</sup> Vice President, David Wagaman. His mother, Wilma Wagaman passed away May 6<sup>th</sup> at the age of 102. David left his home in L.A. a few years ago to come back home to West Burlington to look after her. Because of his care, she was able to remain in her home. Moreover, the museum is better for his having coming back to the area.

That's all for now...remember you are always welcome on the lot.

Your 2015 board of directors are: David Ripper, President, Grace Swank- Davis, First Vice President, David Wagaman, Second Vice President, Carla Trees, Secretary, Monie Hayes, Treasurer, Toby Dick Ellis, Mark H Peper, MarkTubbs, Brian Haymond, and Amy Johnson Schaefer. Welcome to an exciting year !

### YES! I want to be a part of the Theatre Museum.

#### Membership Levels

Student..... \$15	Business Supporter.....\$100
Individual.....\$20	Director's Circle.....\$150
Family.....\$30	Angel.....\$500
Actor's Circle.....\$50	Gabriel Himself.....\$1,000

Name (s) \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_

State/Zip \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Membership Level \_\_\_\_\_

**Check Enclose (Payable to National Society)**

**Please return your payment with this form.**



## New Additions to the Toby Hall of Fame

Two new names were added to the museum's Toby Hall of Fame during the 2015 Conference in April.

Joining a long list of troupers who played Toby over the last 100 years are Brian Iles and Shane Bridges.

Brian Iles, a Mount Pleasant native, toured with Jimmy Davis' Schaffner Players in the 1990s and for the last 15 years has starred in Old Threshers' Summer Theatre's productions of Neil and Caroline Schaffner's plays. For most of those years, he has played Toby and has quite a following. Toby fans have remarked that Brian reminds them of both Jimmy Davis and Neil Schaffner.

Shane Bridges has been a professional actor in the Nashville, Tennessee area and now lives in nearby Parson, Tennessee. He has been closely associated with the Rivertime Players in Parson, both as an actor and playwright. For more information on the Rivertime Players and Shane, check out their great web-site: [www.rivertimeplayers.org](http://www.rivertimeplayers.org).

Congratulations to Brian & Shane and welcome!

Shane Bridges, Brian Iles and "Toby" Dick Ellis pictured in front of the Toby Hall of Fame.



During the 2015 Conference, President Emeritus, Dr. Michael Kramme was awarded the first *Martha Hayes Award for Volunteerism*. The award was created to honor the memory of Martha Hayes and as Martha was all about volunteering what better way to remember her.

Dr. Kramme needs no introduction to Natural Society members as he served as the Society's president for many years and has been deeply involved with the museum from cataloging the original collection of scripts to designing displays. He has been with and for the museum for over 35 years. Congratulations to Dr. Kramme.

Scenes from the 2015 Conference



## 2015 Theatre History Conference Program

## “RELEVANCE OF REPERTOIRE”

### Friday, April 17, 2015

- 1:30 Informal Activities and Registration at Theatre Museum  
 4:30 Registration and Social Hour – Mi Pueblo Real,  
 1106 Baker St.  
 6:00 Supper – Mi Pueblo Real  
 7:15 Welcome and Introductions  
 7:30 **IMPROV! Ann Richardson will direct and film anyone  
 who wishes to do an act or just improv for fun during  
 our social hour mixer.**  
 7:30 Social Hour (Pick Up Where We Left Off)

### Saturday, April 18, 2015

#### The James V. Davis Performance Center of the Theatre Museum

- 8:15 Registration, coffee, juice, rolls  
 Gift Shop open: Books, T-Shirts, etc.  
 9:15 Welcome and Program Notes – Terry McWilliams

#### Session I: David Ripper Presiding

- 9:45 Karla Crawford Kerr: *“Relevance”*  
 10:15 Richard Poole: *“Dr. Rucker – The Tapeworm King!”*  
 10:45 Coffee Break

#### Session II: Dr. George Glenn Presiding

- 11:00 Dr. Lori Muntz: *“Tell It To The Multitudes: Representing  
 Native Identity on the Chautauqua Circuit”*  
 11:30 Judith Zivanovic: *“Home Talent Productions from 1962  
 Evansville, IN Sesquicentennial”*  
 Noon Lunch Buffet at the Theatre Museum  
 12:30 Group Photos

### **Session III: David Wagaman Presiding**

- 1:00 Toby Dick Ellis & Mickey Lacey: Entertainment  
 1:45 Pat White: "*Henry County Theatres, Opera Houses & Auditoriums*"  
 2:15 Brian Hayman: "*Past Perfect – Where we are and where we want to be*"  
 2:45 Michael Smith: "'*Say Amen Somebody*' a review of the career and influence of Willa Mae Ford-Smith"  
 3:15 Coffee Break  
 3:30 Ken Bradbury: Entertainment  
 4:30 Landis K. Magnuson: "*Marvelous Moving Machines*"  
 5:00 Irina G. Popov: "*Playing the Undead: American Indians on Stage during the Age of Melodrama*"  
 6:00 Happy Hour and Catered dinner at the museum  
 8:00 Trouper Entertainment

### **Sunday, April 19, 2015**

#### **The James V. Davis Performance Center of the Theatre Museum**

- 9:30 Coffee, juice, rolls  
 9:45 *Presentation of the Martha Hayes Award for Volunteerism*  
*Induction into the Toby Hall of Fame*  
*Annual Business Meeting*  
 10:30 Time for More Research  
 12:00 No Host Luncheon at Jerry's Restaurant,  
 2105 E. Washington  
 1:30-4 Museum and Library open

Note: Any troupers in attendance who have not already told their stories on videotape, please let us know and we will arrange to have you taped sometime during the seminar.

31<sup>st</sup> Conference Tentatively Scheduled for  
 April 15-17, 2016  
 Come Back – Bring a Friend!

## I Am a Trouper

By Berry Hawkins

I am a Trouper. Not one of those law enforcement or military types. Not even a Boy Scout. If you don't know what I mean, it is because I belong to a dying, almost dead culture whose language spoke of pratfalls, canvas-work, and "Toby." I became a Trouper when I was a little boy, curled up in a basket on a stage, waiting.

Later, as an adult, I used to cringe whenever I had to participate in occasional organization-sponsored diversity awareness type exercises. This was not a matter of prejudice, but personal identity. At some point in the activity, the participants in these kinds of exercises are usually asked to describe the culture with which they identify. This was problematic for me.

Yes, my ancestors were largely of English stock, though the (notably) odd Scot or German made an appearance. There is even a reasonable claim that one of my forebears was full-blooded American Indian. But, honestly, I don't feel a visceral connection with these groups. During my childhood, it was absolutely clear to me that I belonged to a unique cultural cohort. I was born into a family of traveling tent show "gypsies," a troupe of multi-talented, rugged "the-show-must-go-on" performing entertainers. To me I was and will always be a "Trouper," the term we used to refer to fellow entertainers and ourselves. Who would understand?

When most people hear the term "gypsy" they think of ethnic Gypsies like the Roma in Europe, or perhaps the Tinkers in Ireland. The Troupers of my childhood came from every race and nation. What they had in common was life in the traveling variety shows and repertory productions that performed in tents and local theatres from the nineteenth century up to the nineteen fifties, though a couple hung on even longer. In the thirties and forties over 400 traveling tent shows were active in the United States. More dominant in the Midwest and Southern states, these transient shows provided live entertainment to a mostly rural population who had not yet been introduced to television or, earlier, even to "talking pictures." These "troupes" braved tornadoes, deluges, flat tires, empty wallets and the heat of Mid-western summers to put on shows for the public.

My father was a comedian who often played a popular role that appeared in most tent productions. This generic comedy part was called the "Toby" and it became so popular that some groups even became known as "Toby and Susie Shows." The Toby was the country bumpkin, who seemed stupid, but often stumbled on the solution others didn't see. Dad was the "Toby" in the Hugo Players, a traveling repertory group that operated almost fifty years in the fields of Iowa, Nebraska, and neighboring states. Like in circuses, every performer took on multiple duties. So Dad was not only the "Toby," in this and various other theatrical troupes, but also played dramatic roles and "doubled in brass," which means he played trombone in the band. He also did honky-tonk piano and could rattle the xylophone with four mallets at once before anyone had heard of Lionel Hampton. Mom acted female, or "ingénue" parts, while dancing, singing, and playing the clarinet. Uncle Ted was a tap dancer and played trumpet, Uncle Bob an award-winning Tuba player. During some periods, as many as ten members of our family were performing onstage. Even Grandpa played the clarinet, which he called his "old licorice stick," and could beat a complex rhythm with the "bones," and spoons. I still cherish a varnished set of playing bones he made by hand before the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We played under tents during the warm months and in Granges or "Opera Houses" during the winter.

My most colorful memories are of the Hugo Players, owned by Harry Hugo, a pint-sized, P.T. Barnum, and his wife, Larry, who sometimes traveled with a pet squirrel on her shoulder. Of course, they took roles in all the performances too. The productions featured plays – both drama and comedy, with vaudeville-type routines between acts. The acts varied a bit from season to season, depending on who signed up with the show, but some were regulars. My childhood hero was Duke Montague, "Duke, The Magician" who ended up making it to Broadway and my friends included "Tiny Tina," Robinson, 28 inches tall, who could stand in a brandy snifter. Despite being young, I did multiple duties, playing children in the sketches, selling candy in the aisle, and whatever else I could manage. My first lead role was the title character in a play called "Buffalo Billy."

My first memory in life was onstage. One "sketch" the show was performing involved a surprise ending having to do with a missing child. As a punch line to the play, the youngster in question suddenly pops physically out of a basket that was sitting on stage during the whole act.

That was me.

I vividly recall being curled up in that basket, waiting nervously until I heard my cue, the basket ribs pressing uncomfortably, thin beams of light coming through the slits. At Toby's punch line, I jumped up, and saw a scene that would become a metaphor for my life. There I stood behind the footlights. On one side of the lights were *my* people, the "Troupers." On the other side, numberless "Townies." From that moment, I felt as if I belonged to a strange inside group, the Real people, the Troupers – different, a minority, not part of normal society.

Indeed, in those days, show people were seen as disreputable "Carnies" or "Gypsies." Respectable people didn't leave home to travel around in tents, dancing in brief costumes and pretending to be what they were not. When we entered town, we were watched suspiciously. I recall once when we were shopping, that the door to a small business was locked just as we arrived, even though the sign said "Open." It's like a song Cher made popular: "Gypsies, tramps and thieves, we heard it from the people of the town," she sings, "... but every night they'd come around and lay their money down."

I always had an appreciation for what it was like to live in a minority group.

After my parents retired from the theater circuit, I continued performing as a ventriloquist in local and regional stage and television productions. I was soon a local sensation as the "child" ventriloquist. I worked my way up from Cub Scout troops, to fraternal lodges, from talent competitions to kids TV-shows. On regional TV, I met several folks who would go on to become famous. I quit doing the act when invited to go on the Ed Sullivan Show, because I was convinced that national exposure would mean forever making my life in show business, rather than another vocation. The invitation was a huge opportunity, but for years I had been pestered by hecklers and drunks, traveling long distances for short gigs, and nearly flunked out of school despite straight A's, because of the long absences required to do out-of-town shows. The show-business life didn't have the romantic appeal to me that it might have to people who hear about it second hand. I had other vocations in mind. I had decided to become a different kind of showman, a member of the clergy.

Besides, as a young man now, I faced an identity crisis. Would I forever remain the guy that was invited to parties, but told to "bring your dummy"? In school hallways would I always be asked to "make that locker talk"? Would anyone know me for who I really am? Would I forever be the insider who was really the outsider? Or would I abandon my identity as a Trouper, and find out what it was like to be like everybody else? Teenage angst, perhaps, but very compelling at the time. So I gave it up. I vowed that under no circumstances would I agree to perform my act.

Decades passed before I was able to do ventriloquism again on a limited scale, mostly for kids. With an adult's understanding, I knew that I would always remain marked with the experiences and identity of a "Troupers," but this would not be my only reality. So with that perspective, I could use my dummy to do a children's sermon in the churches I served, without being pigeonholed forever as the entertainer. Still, "once a trouper...."

Recently, I was able to attend a reunion and seminar at the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa. I was deeply moved to find permanent displays of what was once my family's life backdrop, literally including backdrop curtains. You could actually smell the greasepaint and powder in the exhibits of make-up, scenery, and old costumes. A theatrical trunk was just like the one my parents used as my crib. There is a "wall of fame" for the 150 to 200 or men who played the iconic Toby character in one or another show. I gave them one of my father, to be included.

A handful of living tent show veterans attended, most were elderly. Nevertheless, after the final banquet several troupers performed some of their old acts. At one point, unexpectedly, an old fellow stood up in the audience and apparently interrupted those on stage, while seeming to be confused and a bit stupid. At first I had a moment of embarrassment for the elderly gent, who I thought might be suffering from some form of dementia. Then I noticed that the comments he made seemed pretty funny. In fact, they were really funny, and the guys on stage were playing along.

I felt moisture form in my eyes as it became obvious that this was just a set-up for the old veteran trouper to launch into a hilarious "Toby" routine. As he went through his hilarious misunderstandings, "sight gags," puns, and physical comedy, I knew I was a thousand miles from my house, but I was home.

### Did You Know This?

By Bill Slout

The Chase-Lister repertoire company (Glen F. Chase and Will T. Lister), on the road since about 1890, with the Chase-Lister name lasting into the 1930s, was a successful establishment that toured the Middle belt of the country for many years performing the popular pieces of the day. The popular priced company operated much the same as other successful repertoire troupes, carrying a carload of scenery and staging a capable complement of actors. There were two units, the Northern and Southern, on the road under the Chase-Lister title much of the time.

#### BUT DID YOU KNOW THIS?

In 1904, 1905 and 1906, Charles Harrison was managing the southern Chase-Lister company and, with his wife, Gertrude, performing leading roles. But of greater interest, Charles Harrison was also, what could be termed as a resident playwright, writing exclusively for the Chase-Lister organization. His creations included "Cloverdale," "The Man from Arizona (sometimes called "Her Cowboy Visitor" because it takes place in New York City)," "The Black Hawk Mine" "Under the Stars and Stripes" and a 40 minute one-act play, "The Doctor's Prescription." Theater Museum members are certainly aware of his later works which made him the most performed playwright in repertoire and stock, particularly with "Saintly Hypocrites and Honest Sinners," "The Only Road" and "The Awakening of John Slater."



### The Osmonds Visit the Theatre Museum

Brothers Jimmy and Jay Osmond, two members of the world famous musical Osmond Family were guests at the museum on May 9. They are pictured here with their families along with the museum's Claudia Streeter and David Wagaman.

The family was in Mount Pleasant to witness Jimmy Osmond receive an Honorary Doctorate of Arts and Humanities from Iowa Wesleyan College.

By all reports, the Osmonds were very impressed with the museum, asking many questions and taking photos. It was a pleasure to have them at the museum.

### Presentation at the Amana Colony

By Brian Haymond

On May 5<sup>th</sup>. I took a trip to the Amana Colony where I attended the Southeast Iowa Speech Association meeting at the historic Ox Yoke Inn. Around eighty-five Iowa teachers and speech sponsors from the area schools were at this annual conference. I was asked to give a presentation on the Theatre Museum. My PowerPoint presentation gave an overview of our collection on both opera house and tent repertoire theatre as well as the summer theatre program. But my main focus was our library or "research center." I presented this as a unique resource for contest materials where they could rediscover bits, parts and one act plays to be used once again. This was met with several teachers asking about tours and how they could research items for speech contests



Attendees of the 2015 Theatre History Conference



Troupers



2015 Presenters

