

# Under the Big Top

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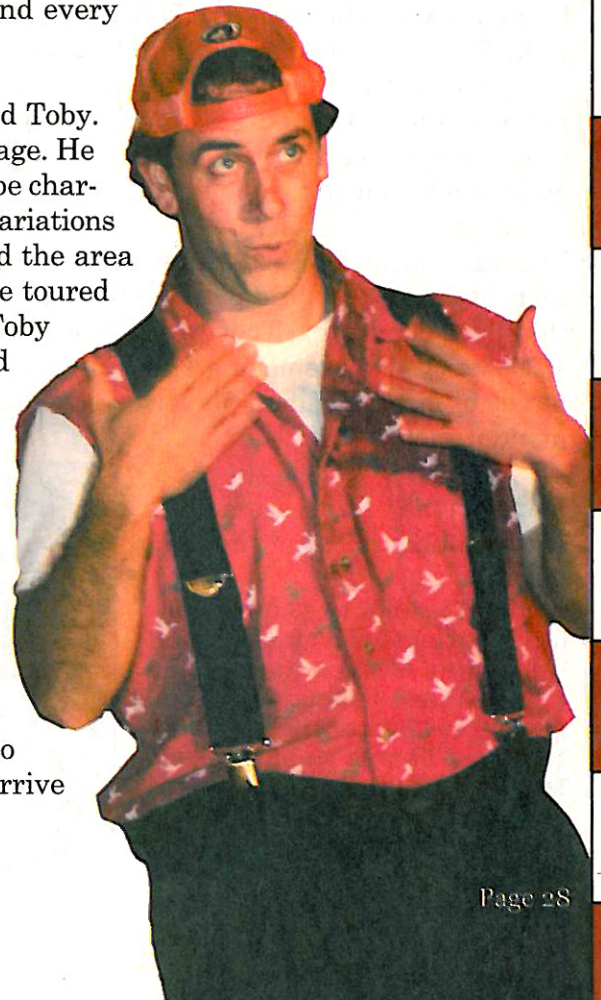
**F**ew people recognize the history and significance of the rare jewel that Parsons possesses, the world's last traveling tent repertoire company. One of the highlights of the annual Parsons Peavine Festival, the 'big top' is home to the Toby Show, a living monument to what was one of the most prevalent forms of rural entertainment.

The tent show probably is the nearest thing we have to a genuine American folk theater. For over 100 years, traveling tent repertoire theater companies represented an integral chapter of American theater history. In small towns that could not support full-time playhouses, the shows would come to the people, lock, stock and barrel. At their peak in the first two decades of the twentieth century, these traveling troupes numbered nearly five hundred, traveling throughout the Midwest and South. The shows were a combination of circus, carnival, illusion and magic, variety show and legitimate theater. Most of the tent shows travel over a relatively small territory, moving only 30 to 40 miles between shows. With a few exceptions, none traveled more than about 1,200 mile a year. Generally the shows were held under a gaudy red and blue tent like the big top of the circus, appearing every Monday morning in perhaps fifty small cities and towns in the heart of America, staying for a week, with a new play "each and every evening," and then moving on.

These shows shared one common bond: a character named Toby. Toby was the most enduring character on the American stage. He was usually described as a naive, silly-kid, mischievous rube character. Although he was a basic stock character, there were variations upon this description according to the particular actor and the area in which he played. Toby was a Midwest farm yokel as he toured Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, Missouri and Arkansas; the Toby of the Bisbee comedians in the mountains of Tennessee and Kentucky was more of a hillbilly, and in the West and Southwest you would find Toby in chaps and carrying side arms. The country bumpkin was instantly recognizable, however, in any area of the country, due to his red hair, freckles, blacked-out front tooth, ragged clothing and homespun humor. Hitching up his britches, he would employ slapstick winks, facial contortions and theatrical gymnastics to the delight of the audience.

In most of the towns "tent show week" was something like fair week or an especially long community picnic. Prior to the shows, a sign painter, called the "headman," would arrive in town before the cast to paper the

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**Dotty Hill (Aunt Susan Hemmingway) and Adam Stanford (Aaron Kronkheidt) try to keep straight faces while Toby performs his antics during "The Return of Aunt Susan".**

town with advertisements, and sell "spots" to local merchants. On Monday mornings the show would pull into town, set up their tents on vacant lots, school campuses and fairgrounds, and watch the quarters and half dollars roll in.

Cast members made sure that they were highly visible in every town so that they could become well acquainted with the community. They would find lodging in private residences, and during a week's stand they got to know the "towners" well. This was a very successful way to advertise. It was also a method in which to obtain local material to use in the show. Toby shows used this local humor to make the material applicable to the area and to create a

bond between the audience and the players. The managers usually altered the scripts to suit the community in which they were appearing so as to incorporate local humor and current events into the background for the antics of Toby. This familiarity fostered intense loyalty on the part of the local townspeople towards the company. Ad-libbing was a major part of the tent shows. Ad-libbing was a major part of the tent shows, and cast members loved nothing more than to "break up" another member of the cast, getting everybody on stage and off laughing together.

At the conclusion of the first act, the orchestra, in costume and make-up, would again play. At this time, the rest of the cast appeared intermittently in various vaudeville acts. They also employed the break between the acts to read the list of local advertisers from "spot signs" hung around the act curtain. The cast would make rounds through the audience to sell boxes of candy, promising a prize in every box, while Toby aided the sales with constant retorts from the stage. The sale of prize candy, popcorn and peanuts are as much a part of the show as the actors. Actors also sold tickets to the after-show concert, which usually took place immediately following the show. These provided an added and needed income for the show.

The last appearance in a run was called "get away night." After the performance, the company would tear down the tent and pack up the show in order to be on the road the following morning. To aid in the speed of packing, Toby would "pack scenery and props as the play progressed. He would "assist" the crew by removing stage effects during the third act, snatching cups and saucers from the hands of more dignified players and rolling up the carpets beneath their feet, to the intense merriment of the audience

During the Depression, tent show managers found their the-

**Cast of "The Return of Aunt Susan" included (L-R) Bill White as Robert Wentworth, Alyssa Brittain as Millicent "M'Liss" Hemmingway, Toby played by Shane Bridges, Mark Tubbs as George Cubine, David Taylor as Jeremiah "Jerry" Hodge and Elicia Jo Spain played the role of Eloise Hanson.**





atre market, which was solely based on rural folk, declining rapidly. First, the depression hit the smaller tent companies hard and many companies folded simply because of lack of funds. Later, movies and automobiles became much more accessible in rural communities and so contributed to the tent show demise. World War II also had a large impact on the tent companies. By 1949 there were only two shows on the road, Bisbee's and Brunks's Comedians. Back in the twenties, a tent show could be put on the road for three to four thousand dollars. By 1949, a truck to haul the tent costs nearly that much. Finally, in the late 1950s, television became more accessible to the rural community. Though Toby shows did decline in numbers, the genre did not completely die. In Branson, Missouri, The Toby Show had a very successful run for seventeen years.

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Established in 1898 as the Henderson Stock Company, Harold Rosier bought the company in 1937 and renamed it the Rosier Players. The Rosiers traveled with the show until Harold's death (on stage as Toby) in 1980. In 1997, the widow of Harold Rosier, a famous Toby, donated the Hard Corn Players, a complete tent show. Donated to Parsons in November of 2006, the show includes a 45' x 90' tent, four 1942 stake trucks, 300-400 original scripts, costumes, painted drops (some 100 years old), 300 blue folding chairs, and other necessities of the road. Parsons is now the caretaker of world's last traveling tent repertoire company, a fact that has not escaped the attention of even the Smithsonian Institution.

Our little "piece of the past" is just one of the splendid treasures that Parsons, Tennessee has to offer to her citizens and visitors.