

The Toby and Susie Tent Show Arrives at the Kinmundy Park  
By Helen (Robb) Garrett

Summertime in Kinmundy and all the surrounding small towns meant the arrival of the Toby tent show. It was set up in our city park with a crew who did it all. They put up the big tent; set up the stage; put on their own make-up, and sold the tickets. The starring role was that of Toby, a freckled face actor with a wide grin, some missing teeth, a wig of tousled red hair, and shoes several sizes too big! His checkered pants were baggy ones, held up by red suspenders and a bright yellow coat!

In the very early years, the show moved by horses and wagon. Later in the early 1900's, the shows and cast moved by rail. Finally the tent shows had their own trucks for the moves from town to town. The ones I remember in Kinmundy and Alma moved by trucks. Hundred of fans braved the heat, wind, rain, and mud. Inside they sat on hard folding chairs and long wooden benches. The house lights were killed; the curtain went up! The shows began each evening with a 30-minute concert by the "orchestra"! This always included an accordion player, a banjo, and guitar players. They all joined in the singing. They performed the old standard familiar songs, as well as the popular songs of the day. After the music, the play began; consisting of a comedy drama divided into 3 or 4 acts. Between acts of the play, various performers were featured: magicians, song and dance teams, ventriloquists or maybe jugglers. We were all entranced and on the edge of our seats!

The most important feature of the evening was, of course, the play. The plot, although highly predictable, reflected small town values and tastes in every detail. Toby, himself, was the star and was a simple, honest man—(simple to the extreme, in fact!) The undesirable characters of the play—the gossips, the ruthless bankers, the hypocritical church deacons, (who for one reason or another) were out to ruin him! Toby never loses his sense of integrity, however, and circumstances always turn out right for Toby as well as his family in the end.

The cast changes very little from show to another, even though the plots were quite different. The characters at the center of the plot were always Toby, his wife Susie, the very pretty daughter Peggy and Roland,

the young handsome male lead. Several other characters played more minor characters, but all are clearly defined. The villain is the black-coated scoundrel seen in the old melodramas. The “leads,” the hero and heroine are good-looking, full of virtue, and overcome all odds to be together in the end! The bad characters are always held accountable and punished as the play comes to an end. After the main show, there was an after show or concert presented, with an extra charge, of course! We always begged to stay for that, too!

In the 1920's, there were over 400 Toby and Susie tent shows on the road. They opened in April in warmer areas of the United States, making their way north as summer came and into the fall.

Yes, the tent shows are a thing of the past now. Once there were hundreds of them playing in towns from Canada to Mexico. Long before the days of wide movie screens and television, tent shows were bringing live theatre to small towns. They did more; they served as a proving ground for the budding talents for many performers who later achieved greatness. A few names mentioned were: Clark Gable, Buddy Ebsen, Red Skelton, Milburn Stone, Lyle Talbot, Jennifer Jones and many more.

The names of the stars who got their start in tent shows above were copied from Born in a Trunk, a memoir book by Billy “Toby” Choate who owned Bisbie’s Tent Show and traveled through Illinois, but in the bigger towns. He is deceased, but earlier presented his biography to friend Bob Ford of Alma.

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