

“The Toby Show”

By Lex Shuler

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Now that it's getting close to spring I've started planning some of the things I want to do when the weather gets nice. I guess my mind wandered a bit and I began thinking about all the things I liked to do when I was a kid. I remembered the Toby Show and suddenly I longed for those days when life was a whole lot simpler.

Back in the late forties, the Toby Show used to come to Alma, Illinois during the fruit harvest. There were a lot of orchards around Alma and most people had a little spare change when the fruit was picked. The Toby Show would set up in a big tent on a vacant lot near downtown. If you had a dime, you could be entertained with music, poetry, skits, magic and comedy all rolled up into one big show. It was a form of vaudeville, I suppose, soon to be drowned out by television. There was always some mystery about the Toby Show. I always wondered where the people came from, what did they do when they weren't doing all that great stuff we came to see.

In later years, I did some research and found that there were quite a number of Toby Shows that traveled about the countryside entertaining folks and they were all called Toby Shows. I always assumed the performers were a family troupe and their last names were Toby. Actually the Toby show was a short lived phenomenon right at the tail end of live variety shows. Television and other entertainment media chased the shows back to their home bases and they were never heard from again. Well, I shall never forget the dark tent and the bright footlights, the songs and laughter. I'm sure it was a respite for the older folks and a way to forget the daily grind for a while, but for a boy of 8 or 9 years, it was wonderful, amazing, and mysterious.