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# Museum is still a source of wonder

## Children's Museum in Indianapolis world's fourth oldest

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — The Children's Museum likes to think of itself as grown up enough to be the largest of its kind in the world, but still a source of wonder for youngsters.

Like the millions in the audience it serves, the 60-year-old museum continues to grow and attempt to adapt to changes in the era of computers, a global society and a high-technology world.

David Cassady, educational director at the world's fourth oldest children's museum, remembers coming to The Children's Museum on an elementary school field trip and visiting it on his own after school as a child of 9 or 10. He began working for the museum in 1958, intending to use the post as an interim stop until he got in or out of law school.

He's been there ever since. "I fell in love with The Children's Museum," he said.

Today's children, who have been exposed to computers and television, are a lot more sophisticated than children several decades ago, he said. The museum, which also is a treat for adults, has changed too.

Museum director Peter Sterling, whose office is decorated with everything from ethnic art to toys, said, "We want to make sure we serve kids in a world that's changing rapidly.

You have to be as flexible and adaptable as you want these kids to be."

The museum, which charges no admission, has more than 130,000 pieces in its collection, including about 7,500 toys and dolls and the

"You have to be as flexible and adaptable as you want these kids to be."

— Peter Sterling, museum director

Behind-the-scenes pieces include a collection of space and adventure toys from the last 50 years, popular culture items such as Care Bears, vintage clothing and textiles stored in acid-free paper in a climate-controlled vault, and items such as old furniture and appliances, campaign buttons and walking sticks — even a frightening looking machine that was used to give hair permanents.

Many museums gear themselves toward children.

"They all serve children, yet each museum is totally different," Cassady said. "Most are really more discovery-learning center oriented. That's what makes us different."

The Indianapolis museum focuses on exhibits that have historical value, in addition to using hands-on learning opportunities such as their science exhibits.

As part of the evolution of The Children's Museum, some museum personnel met recently with futurists

Museum is to try to show relationship between disciplines such as the connections between science and art and science and history.

Mildred Compton, who retired in the fall of 1982 after 21 years at the museum, including 18 years as director, saw the staff grow from about 120 and helped the museum plan for, raise funds, build, move into a new facility opened in 1976 — the museum's fifth and current home.

Attendance was about 1.4 million in 1985.

One of the most popular pieces in the collection is an operating turn-of-the-century carousel, which formerly operated in a local park.

The museum's staff of painters, carpenters and electricians is constructing a new "Passport to World" exhibit, which will open in December and include part of museum's collection of 50,000 art objects donated by Frank and Theresa Caplan, co-founders of educational toy company Great Playthings Inc.

Sterling said, "We don't want the largest museum in the world. We want to be the best children's museum."

# This circus veteran is just a born performer

GRAND PRAIRIE, Texas (AP) — There is orange paint in Mel Hall's flattop, in the bristles framing his face.

"Makeup," apologizes Hall, fingering the orange stripe. "I guess I didn't get it all out."

No problem. Within the hour, he is on a royal blue folding chair, squinting into a magnifying mirror, smearing a fresh layer of paint onto his softly folded face.

The orange blends right in.

The eye-assaulting checkered pants are another story.

"I'm a clown," Hall says. "I can get away with it."

He calls himself Happy the Clown, and he works at the International Wildlife Park.

Twice on weekdays, three times on weekends, he tells dumb jokes and performs silly magic tricks.

Then the 71-year-old climbs on his unicycle. Seven feet up in the air.

"I have to watch out for bumps," Hall says. Serious stuff for a senior — except that this clown comes with experience.

He was born in the circus.

"I was born in a Top Wagon, which is what you'd call a Gypsy Wagon, in Kentucky," says Hall. "My dad, Robert Hall, was a ventriloquist. My mother, Kay, was a contortionist."

Hall learned to ride a unicycle at age 12 when his father lopped two wheels off a tricycle.

He had lots of practice. His family traveled in a Model T truck throughout Illinois and Missouri, spending a week in each small town.

Hall stayed with the family act until he was 20, when he went to South Texas. There, he and a

friend performed at nightclubs and the skating rink, "passing the hat" for profits.

As his act improved, so did Hall's engagements. Soon he was performing in nightclubs throughout the country, amazing audiences on his unicycles — which reached up to 9½ feet in height.

His greatest stunt was riding the unicycle upside down, his hands pushing the pedals, his feet high in the air.

Eventually the act made it to Loew's Theater on Broadway in New York City, where he performed his unicycle act in tails, one week each summer, three years in a row.

He worked with Bob Hope, Jimmy Durante and Mickey Rooney and was a featured performer in the movie "Sensations of 1944," starring Eleanor Powell and W.C. Fields.

Soon after filming "Sensations," Hall met his wife, Aurelia, performing in the Pollack Shrine Circus. Two years later, they married and had the first of four children.

It would be the children who upstaged Hall's career.

"As soon as they could walk, I began teaching them how to ride the unicycle," Hall says. "I used the free-enterprise system of bribing. If they practiced, they got an ice cream or got to go swimming."

The bribery paid off. Ervin, the oldest son, mastered the wheel at the age of 2 and was written up in "Ripley's Believe It or Not."

When Ervin was 5, he and his sister, Carmen, 3, and Jimmy, 2 went on the road, with mother, Aurelia, as chaperone.

"They all rode out on their unicycles and the people went crazy," Hall says.

They made \$250 a week the first year, \$350 a week the second year.

"Pretty soon they were outgrossing me, making \$1,000 a week," says Hall, who traveled a circuit then with his wife and children.

Five years later, at age 40, Hall retired his cycle to work on his children's act, which included his youngest daughter, Jeannine.

It would be 25 years before he rode again.

"I was living in Beaumont . . . and the kid who produced the Shrine Circus there asked would clown for him," Hall says. "I told him I didn't know a thing about clowning."

"He told me just to go out and wave at the crowd and smile."

Hall did as told — and it worked. When added the unicycle to his act, the smiles got bigger.

The circus performer was back in business. Hall is living this summer at the Wildlife Park next to an abandoned bathroom building, sleeps in a converted delivery truck and hangs costumes along a fence.

He also trains chickens to walk the high wire.

"Here, Charley," Hall calls to a rooster. The bird walks up a ramp and then across a stretch of wires to a platform. The bird turns, walks away back, hops through a hoop that Hall is holding and, finally, back to his cage.

"Now for the finale," Hall says.

He opens another gate. A different rooster walks up to the platform, turns twice and walks back down.

"He just likes the bows," Hall says.

That's what Hall likes about show business. The bows.

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