



HISTORY

I did all this while you were watching TV By Ross J. Ward

People often ask how Tinkertown came to be. How did a kid from South Dakota wind up with a roadside attraction in Sandia Park, New Mexico. As the story begins in 1949, my parents took me to Knott's Berry Farm in California. It was long before the rides and various Snoopy attractions and long before Disney moved in down the block. After a steady diet of Saturday matinee westerns at the Old World Theater in Aberdeen, South Dakota, here was a nine-year old kid surrounded by the West! Real covered wagons, Indians, old time buildings and the rust and dust and lust of the west. Even real horse manure on real dusty dirt streets. It changed my life right then, right there.

When we returned to eastern South Dakota, I began making buildings out of cardboard boxes. My drawings became loaded with six-shooter packing varmints stalking the streets of ghost towns. The back porch of the old house became my own Old West Museum. Hand drawn wanted posters, mining camp scenes built of Lincoln Logs, plastic people, buffaloes made of modeling clay and dozens of clay people populated a 2'x16' space that was, so long ago, the beginning of the present day Tinkertown.

"How come you never got interested in sports?" asked my best friend, Gary Anderson. Gary, who had polio, wished he could play baseball, basketball and so on. In the summer between 6th and 7th grade, Gary and I built a western town in his back yard. We went scrounging in the alleyways behind the stores in my old home-town and found all our building materials. We didn't know we were involved in found object art or recycling in those days. We weren't ahead of our time, we just did it that way because we didn't have any money!

As I remember, our town was called Carson Gulch after Kit Carson or Sunset Carson (not Johnny Carson, he was still a kid then, too!!) We had about twenty buildings made of orange crate and apple box wood. We built a hotel, a saloon, a Wells Fargo and so on. The back yard was a rough dirt area perfect for the Western desert and we made the most of it. We had stage coach trails and the Old Santa Fe Trail and rocks and stones with plastic Indians in hiding and a few prewar metal cowboys and Indians. We had toy horses and spent our nickels and dimes at Woolworth's and Newberry's for more people and animals. What we couldn't find, we made. Modeling clay became anything we needed. Stick fences and corrals as well as a rodeo grounds grew from twigs and popsicle sticks.

We had shoot-outs on main street all day and show-downs with our mothers at night for getting our pants so dirty out on the frontier. It was an amazing summer. Gary, at times, forgot about his crutches as he and I roamed the Rockies and crossed the Great Divide. We made vast plans to someday see the real ghost towns of Cripple Creek, Dodge City and Bodie. The librarians in the Alexander Mitchell Library called us the Texas Rangers, but helped us find more pictorial histories of the West. I learned then how to use those wonderful green books called The Readers Guide to Periodical Literature and made many trips through those magic pages on that long old dark-wood table. Magazines from the 20's taught the kid from the 40's about the world of the 1850's.

Gary left Aberdeen that fall for therapy in Minnesota. His Dad found another job and the family all went to Minneapolis. Gary's family sold the house and our little town was hauled to the





dump before we knew what happened. We did salvage most of our little people and a few are in Tinkertown to this day. A lead Indian chief lives in our miniature trading post as I write this. I never saw Gary again. It was like we did what we did and he rode on. Via Con Dios, mi compadre or Hi-ho Silver! Who was that kindly unmasked man with the silver brace?

I never answered the sports question either to Gary or to my Dad who had been a champion ball player in grade school and a sports fan all his life. I was named Ross in honor of champion boxer, Barney Ross. We all have our heroes. Dad's and mine were seldom the same except in the old Westerns. Not the singing cowboys like Roy and Gene, but the fast riding, fast shooting, non-kissing variety like Johnny Mack Brown, Sunset Carson, Hoot Gibson and Dad's favorite, Yakima Canute.

Life progresses and by the 8th grade I had begun to shift my interest to girls, but the miniatures were always there. In 1952 I started to carve a little and soon began a miniature circus. At one point, I had two paper routes to support my hobbies. It was around this time that I began to draw more seriously as well. What began as a few small circus wagons grew into a little show of about 35 wagons and 5 tents that really could be set up and torn down. The circus was populated by toy animals, some carved figures and a lot of painted clay people. A few wagons and several figures still exist, but the better part of the circus went up in smoke years later.

The short-lived nature of my early projects seems to echo the lives of the real old western "shoot-the works" mining towns and even the star today, broke tomorrow mud shows of the early circus days.

All through high school and into my fretful two years of college, my interest in the past (and in the presentation of the past) continued to grow. I continued to spend hours in the library, amassed volume after volume of elaborate notebooks filled with new facts. Unfortunately, high school gave no credit for my extracurricular self-education and I was always on the verge of failing my classes, while learning more and more each week of what I wanted.

The summer after I barely graduated from high school I worked for an old roadside attraction called Rockerville Gold Town in the Black Hills just outside of Rapid City, South Dakota. Terry McCullen, an former lawyer, had bought the actual townsite of Rockerville, an early gold mining settlement in the Black Hills of South Dakota and developed a Knotts style ghost town attraction on the original town site. Just after World War II, the tourist business really began to happen in America. There had always been the old resorts, hot springs, parks, etc, but suddenly the war was over, the depression was long past and people wanted to hit the road and have a look!

"Sell 'em a look" said Ray Bivens of the Black Hills Animal Farm. "They'll pay everyday to see the same old bear and you won't need to buy a new bear every day either." The Black Hills was an education in sales, business, what to collect, what to build and how to have a pretty good time doing it. Tinkertown was not yet born, but was certainly conceived in those wild old days of the late 50's and early 60's in the barns, farm auctions, western saloons, small town dance halls and road side attractions of the Black Hills.

I showed my miniature circus at Rockerville and later at the Horseless Carriage Museum, Roy Healy's exhibit of over 100 antique cars and a variety of collections. Working for Mr. Healy as a sign painter, ticket seller, and general handy-man increased my knowledge of antiques, history and showmanship. He showed me how to make a living and have a little fun while doing so!

In the fall of 1961, I went hitchhiking around the Western half of America and met Don Pablo in Arizona. Don Pablo was an old time Indian Trader- He was born in 1898 and lived years at Curry





Corners- 15 miles north of Scottsdale Arizona. He collected a collection of great renowned displayed at his House of Relics out on the desert. I sensed a kindred spirit and Don Pablo and I corresponded for years and each time I was in the Phoenix area I never missed a chance to sit and visit. There seemed to be a network of self-styled characters in those days who were all somehow "selling a look." Don Pablo had a stroke in 1972 and his whole place was auctioned off while he lay in a nursing home, never to recover. It was a sad ending to such a colorful life.

Those great old road signs with giant snakes, mystery caves, outlaw hide-outs and skulls warning of Death in the Desert seemed to be everywhere. I painted many signs in those days and still do (if a bit more subdued.)

I wound up in California for a while and spent several days at Knotts Berry Farm. My childhood fantasy was alive and well and even better than ever! Still no Snoopy rides and even more old west. The train had been added. More streets, more of everything it seemed and that's when I met Allegra Mott.

The Mott family had worked together for years building and collecting the famous Mott's Miniatures. They started the collection in Iowa and later moved it to California and finally, in the late 50's to Knotts Berry Farm. It was a fantastic accomplishment. Dozens of tiny homes and stores filled with fascinating antique miniatures and collections both compelling and intriguing.

On a rainy night in early December of 1961, after an hour of conversation with Mrs. Mott, Tinkertown was born! She gave me some ivory elephants so small they will pass through the eye of a needle. Almost forty years later, the elephants are on display in the Tinkertown Museum.

In January of 1962, I was drafted into the United States Army and for the next two years was stationed at Ft. Carson in Colorado Springs. It was during those years that I began to work on the miniature old time country store that was roughly based on Walter Knotts General store in Ghost Town. Small chairs, counters a pot belly stove, etc. began to fill a box in my locker. It was during this time in Colorado that I met and married my first wife, Sandy. She moved to Colorado from South Dakota and, in 1964, following my discharge from the Army, we moved to Phoenix. In our small house in Sunny Slope, Arizona, I built the general store building and furnished it with the miniatures carved and collected over those Colorado years.

My last 9 to 5 job was with Walker Display Co. in Phoenix where I learned a lot in a short time and improved my sign painting skills. All sorts of scrap materials were thrown out every day and I began to collect these and bring them home in order to continue my miniature work. Soon a hotel came into being and next a Chinese laundry. Another twist of fate occurred in the fall of 1964 which would affect nearly everything I did for the next 25 years. I had been laid off at Walker Display as the summer slowed down and during that summer of 1964, I began in earnest to hustle signs. I lettered trucks, did murals in bars and restaurants, painted mail boxes and spare tire covers and survived.

That fall, I was painting signs at the fairgrounds during the week before the Arizona State Fair opened. Norma Cappell, whose father-in-law owned a carnival, introduced me to Doc Cappell, a classic old-style showman who had gotten started in the 'biz' as a medicine show operator in the old horse drawn days. Doc had his winter quarters in Coolidge Arizona, just south of Phoenix. He asked if I had ever painted anything as big as a Dark Ride or a Fun House. The answer was no, although I had done quite a number of murals by this time and, subject matter aside, the challenge of working on something this big was too good to pass up! So began a 'job' which would eventually take me to nearly every state in the union as well as Australia and Central America. I had become a member of that small group of





artists whose work is seen by thousands but who often winds up in the books as 'Artist Unknown.' I had become a "Show Painter."

The Outer Limits dark ride was my first project, followed by a Haunted Castle walk-through fun house and a set of merry-go-round horses. Doc introduced me to other show-folk and one lead led to another. I enjoyed the creative balance of working on massive painting jobs, some bigger than a 3 story building and then returning to yet another project for my miniature town. I only mention the circus and carnival art to show how I self-financed the building of our current museum without government aid, grants or interference.

As the Western Town grew, during those early years in Phoenix, my wife, Sandra, and I showed the display in store windows and toured in the carnival circuit for two years. I painted signs, show fronts and Merry-go round horses and my wife and several friends sold tickets to the miniature village. We finally settled in Albuquerque, New Mexico in the fall of 1967.

In July of 1968, our daughter, Tanya, was born and we spent several months looking for a house in which to raise our family. When we found a five room cabin in the Sandia Mountains, we had no idea that the miniature village had found a permanent home. I continued to paint for the carnivals, taking advantage of my time on the road to collect as many antiques as possible. Our son, Jason, was born in August of 1970 and, like the kids, the miniature village continued to grow. As Tanya and Jason were growing up, their friends thought it was wonderful that they had access to such a "doll house."

I finally settled on "Tinkertown" as a permanent name in 1978 and the exhibit was shown in a sixteen foot trailer at the New Mexico State Fair, Downtown Saturday Night and at other events around the state for two years. It was also during this year that I began a bottle fence with a few bottles picked up in the ditches of our littered roadsides. A small beginning which grew to include over 50,000 bottles and literally tons of rock and cement. Inspired by the free form style of Grandma Prisbey of Simi Valley, California, the Bottle Village of Rhyolite, Nevada and the Bottle Houses of both Knott's Berry Farm and Calico Ghost Town, as well as the artistic beauty of Alex Jordan's House on the Rock, the Tinkertown construction found a middle ground between those styles and now incorporates elements of the Old Southwest in a free-flowing form which blends with life in the Sandia Mountains.

In 1980, with the help of my second wife, Carla, we continued the bottle construction and planned a permanent building for the miniature village. In the fall of 1983, we opened our Museum to the public. Whether by plan or fate, our house is located on one of the National Scenic Byways, the road to the Sandia Crest and, due to the fact that the original Pete's Restaurant was once a taco stand at the top of our driveway, the land is zoned for special use. As Carla and I worked together, what was once a five room cabin became the twenty-four room museum structure you see today. This place was, indeed, an ideal location for the dreams of a nine-year old boy to finally come true. If you can dream it, you can build it and Tinkertown is my proof.

