

## I See History

by Terry Fator

Holding this book in my hands, gazing at the pictures of ventriloquist figures from long ago, I don't see cracked faces and peeling paint, I see history. No, that doesn't describe it properly: I experience history. Contemplating Matthew Rolston's portraits reminds me of the first time I set foot in the Vent Haven Museum in Fort Mitchell, Kentucky. I was not prepared for the enormity of emotions I would experience upon seeing the puppets from several generations of ventriloquists. My feeling had always been that it would be a nice novelty, something that would be forgotten quickly, but I was immediately struck by how amazing it was to stand in a place with such a palpable sense of the past.

DEPARTMENT OF POLICE, DETROIT, Mich.,				BUREAU OF IDENTIFICATION			
Name		Aliases		Color		WHITE	
Crime		LAUGH GETTER		Date of Arrest		FEBRUARY 31 1924	
Previous Rec.		TEMPLE THEATER AND ALL OTHER HIGH CLASS VAUDERVILLE THEATERS		Arrested by		"THE GREAT LESTER"	
Arrested by		"THE GREAT LESTER"		Pract. No.		1	
BERTILLON MEASUREMENTS							
Height	1 m 49-0	Head Length	10-5	L Foot	10-7	Circle	Age 30 Born in WIS 1 1890
Eng. Height	4-10	Head Width	9-6	L Mid F.	6-1	Periph. Z.	VAMP
Outside A.	1 m 60	Cheek Width	8-7	L Lit F.	5-2	Apparent Age	SHEET 16
Trunk	71-5	R. Ear	2-1	L Fore A.	30-1	Nativity	U.S.A.
Remarks Incident to Measurement		HAS A WONDERFULL YAY WITH THE LADIES		Occupation		MONEY GETTER	
DESCRIPTIVE							
Right Thumb print to be impressed IMMEDIATELY after Signature is written	Forehead	Facial	MED	Ridge	VEX	Mouth	OPEN
		Height	HIGH		Base		HOR
Signature is written	Pecul.	Width	TRAD	Length	MED	Projection	V PRO
		Teeth	GOOD	Breadth	TRAD	Chin	ROUND
	Measured at Police Headquarters		DETROIT		Date		FEB 31 1924
	Prisoner's Signature		Remarks				
		IS A GREAT TALKER IN AN ENTERTAINING WAY					

This one-of-a-kind "mug shot" promotional card was created for an appearance by the Great Lester at the Temple Theater in Detroit, Michigan, in 1924.

Wandering through the museum, gazing at the puppets of my heroes—Edgar Bergen, Paul Winchell, Jimmy Nelson, and many others— I could grasp the story of each character I was viewing. As I looked at Charlie McCarthy and Mortimer Snerd, I closed my eyes and imagined myself being at one of those 1930s radio broadcasts, watching the live show that was being aired throughout the country. My mind drifted to the family listening to that show together in their living room.

I could almost smell the traces of a home-cooked meal already eaten, on those Sunday evenings as the family gathered eagerly around the radio to listen to their after-dinner entertainment. Who would be the guest star tonight? Marilyn Monroe? Roy Rogers? Last week W.C. Fields and Charlie's bantering had the family laughing so hard the kids were rolling around on the floor!

Snapping out of my reverie, I continued to find myself gazing at Jimmy Nelson's 'Farfel.'

Again I was transported to another time. I closed my eyes and beheld the stage of the Texaco Star Theater and its host, Milton Berle. I could see Jimmy Nelson striding onstage in his Texaco gas jockey uniform, with Danny O'Day. I wondered if he was nervous or confident, or perhaps a mixture of the two?

I flashed forward and saw millions of children watching Farfel the Dog cry in his sing-songy bass drawl, "CHOC'-LATE!" Once more I was brought back into the present as I opened my eyes.

I had a similar experience as I viewed the Paul Winchell display, reliving his moments as a top children's television star; he created entirely new puppeteering techniques that are still unparalleled today.

It would be easy to just dismiss such a feeling and not allow one's imagination to return to the glory days, but alas, that's not who I am. One of my favorite displays at Vent Haven is a group of puppets that had washed up on the shore after a shipwreck.

Closing my eyes, I envisioned a splendid cruise ship with fancy dining utensils and polished brass handrails.

I imagined the handsome ship-board showroom where audiences laughed and cheered the ventriloquist as he expertly entertained them with the illusion of creating life from wood and fabric.

Then I saw the lonely puppets washing onto a shore where they were found and later displayed in a small museum in Kentucky.

The Vent Haven Museum is a place where anyone can be drawn into the worlds of past glories and the entertainers of yesteryear, and

I highly recommend it. But until you get the chance to go in person, this book is definitely the next best thing to being there! Let your imagination run free and enjoy the past.