

# The April Chicago Toy Show

Sunshine and blue skies made the outdoor pavilions a pleasant place to be.

## Better Known as 'The Day the Toys Left Town'

By Catherine Saunders-Watson

**A**NYONE WHO HAS EVER attended the Chicago Toy Show and witnessed its numbers has some idea of the impact this event has on the peaceful, semi-agrarian suburb in which it is held. The airlines and rental car companies unquestionably profit, and on a more regional level, hotels fill to bursting and restaurants and pizza deliveries call in personnel reinforcements to

cope with the demand. Everyone

in St. Charles, Illinois knows and appreciates the Chicago Toy Show, as it translates to one whopping payday for locals. But what the Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away. Have you ever stopped to think how the exodus of so many high profile dealers affects the toy business in Small Town, USA? I hadn't given it much thought until Dan Davis of Reno, Nevada, who had set up his incredible display of cast iron vehicles at the April 30 show, made a humorous remark as I was

**ABOVE:** Ron Ginkowski with his 1963 magic calendar from Spain. The main part of the black top hat flips up to reveal calendar pages. **RIGHT:** Eleven-year-old Ken Battersby couldn't resist the 4ft. tall Jolly Green Giant doll that talks when its palm is pressed. **FAR RIGHT:** "I found 'em at a West Virginia flea market," Dan Borgerding said of his never-worn Murk & Mindy jeans, a bargain at \$35.



snapping a shot of his booth. I had rounded a corner in the Main Building just before the gates were opened to the public at 8 a.m., and there, before me, was a cast iron toy collector's paradise, with a sign that said 'Dan Davis—Reno, Nevada.'

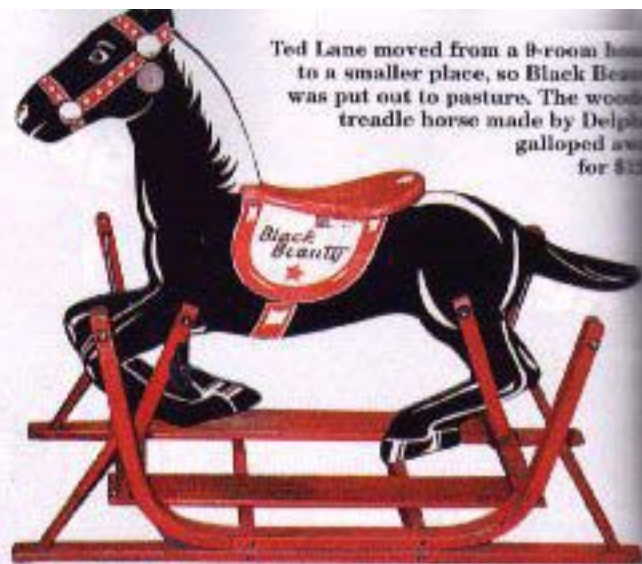
"I don't believe it—you found all these great toys out in the middle of the desert?" I asked.

Dan grinned and retorted, "Who says there are no toys in Nevada? There are plenty of toys in Reno—except when *Fee* left town."

It made me stop to ponder the toy drought that must befall, in particular, the 'provinces' across our land when the Chicago show takes over the business, three times a year. But the flip side of the coin is that the sum of the parts is greater than the total. You take the best toy dealers from 40+ states and more than a dozen foreign countries, deposit them in the middle of a rural patch of turf usually relegated to a county fair, stir in a few thousand toy-hungry customers to get the cash flow going, and you have the recipe for one phenomenal day of trading whose trickle-down effect ultimately benefits the collectors back home. That's how it went down this time around, and even the weather cooperated, with blue skies and moderate temperatures combining to produce an idyllic backdrop.

I usually start my rounds of the show in the Main Building, where you'll find the highest concentration of antique items. Having just seen the 1985 Jeff Bridges movie *Tucker: The Man and his Dream* (most writers are awake at three in the morning), I knew exactly what I was looking at when I encountered the unmistakable tin shape on Ed Snowden's booth. It was a red toy Tucker...but how could that be? They never made the car. "It's one of a kind—a Marx prototype," the Niles, Ohio dealer informed me. Then he flipped the car over to show me the designer's paint strokes underneath indicating it was made in 1947 at the second Marx plant in Glen Dale, West Virginia. "I got it from the man who bought out the plant. The toy was never put into production because the Tucker car was never produced. If this toy doesn't sell today, its next stop is the All-Marx Show (*n.b.*—*appropriately held in Glen Dale,*

**FAR RIGHT, top:** One of the busiest corners in the Main Building was Richard Olszewski's booth, where *Star Trek* AMOK time figures ruled the roost at \$190 for the set consisting of Capt. Kirk and Mr. Spock, shown here. **RIGHT, bottom:** David Boston flew all the way from New Zealand to set up with his friend Bill Renshaw. David holds a Hungarian Return of the Jedi Princess Leia figure belonging to Bill and offered for \$525. **FAR RIGHT:** Chicago Toy Show first-timer Jo Allers of Cedar Rapids, Iowa had a beautiful display of tinplate children's watering cans, spinning tops and sand toys.



Ted Lane moved from a 9-room house to a smaller place, so Black Beauty was put out to pasture. The wooden treadle horse made by Delpino galloped away for \$325.



near Wheeling, WV).

Not far from Ed's booth, I met a Chicago Toy Show first-timer, Jo Allers, who had come from Cedar Rapids, Iowa to test the waters. "My husband Dan and I do 25 shows a year," she said, "but this is the only toy show we've done. So far we've sold quite a bit of children's china and Halloween, so we're pleased." Hopefully we'll see Jo and Dan at the show again, as their vintage tin watering cans, spinning tops and sandpails, all in super condition, fit right into the scheme of the Main Building.

Boxes were still being shuffled about at Ted Lane's booth when we passed it, but one item quickly grabbed our attention: a really nice-looking Black Beauty wooden treadle horse. "I had a nine-room house, but I'm moving to a five-room house, so it was time to get rid of some neat stuff," the Oconomowoc, Wisconsin dealer told us. It had to be one of the greatest bargains of the day at \$125, and I reluctantly walked away from it, wondering how I could ever get it boxed up so it would survive the flight home.

Jerry and Paulann Turner, the Hot Springs, Arkansas couple who never seem to run out of wonderful comic character toys and advertising,

had a rare store display for Bonzo pen nibs, dating back to the 1920s or '30s. It was priced at \$575, which made me lift my eyebrows a bit, but admittedly, I had never seen another. "I know," Jerry said, reading my expression, "and the price I paid for it

seemed high, too, but if I see some-

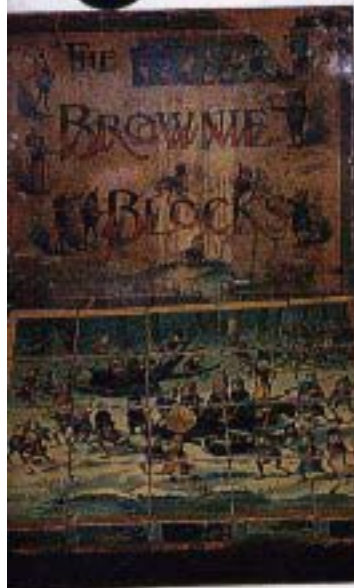
thing really unusual like this, I tend to buy it even if it seems expensive. I've found over the years that there's always someone who will happily pay the price to get something really rare or different for their collection."

Next door to the Turners, Dave Harris of Kokomo, Indiana showed us a very uncommon articulated celluloid toy of silent movie comedian Ben Turpin dressed as Hitler. The Tin Japanese toy, with an eye that rolled around under its clear plastic eye cover, consistent with Turpin's crosseyed schtick, was priced at \$350. (*Memo to Modern Dave—congratulations on getting a computer. Next mission for the 21st Century: a car that doesn't have a crank on the front of it.*)

British dealer Tom Pratchett gave us some insights on the toy market across 'the Pond.' "Right now, Bonzo sells, but Mickey Mouse has dried up, except for the high dollar items. Also, plastic cars seem to be selling. I don't know if that's because they're cheaper or because the next generation is buying and that's what they relate to."

On his table, Tom had a scarce French-made set of celluloid Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs skittles on original cardboard packaging. Price: \$400. Each character had the French equivalent of its name next to it, e.g., *Blanche Neige* (Snow White), *Dormeur* (Sleepy), *Timide* (Bashful), *Simplet* (Dopey).

Always knowledgeable, Dudley Maddox of Chicago told us the story behind his rarely-seen



TOP to BOTTOM: A colorful Halloween corner in the Main Building. A very rare 1948 red and yellow wooden aerial hook & ladder made by Buddy 'U' took pride of place on Chicago dealer Dudley Maddox's table. In fabulous condition, it was tagged \$1250. "Three have sold recently at auction for \$1600 each," he told us. The Buddy 'U' logo on Dudley Maddox's truck. Greg and Anne Rosensuk of Peoria, Illinois showed these 1891 Palmer Cox Brownies cube puzzle blocks. Made by McLoughlin Bros., priced at \$1200. British dealer Tom Pratchett thought his French-made Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs celluloid skittles priced at \$400 were very uncommon. We agree.



wooden Buddy 'L' aerial hook & ladder truck. "Most wooden ones were made during World War II, but after the war was over, Buddy 'L' continued to make a few of them, like this one which was made in 1948. They didn't do well, so they were discontinued." Dudley's example was in fabulous condition, and considering three others had sold recently at auction for \$1600 each, his asking price of \$1200 seemed very appealing.

Noah Rickun of Milwaukee had brought a large cardboard 'Battle of the Knights' store display from the late '50s/early '60s, complete with all its plastic figures. As I was admiring the set, Noah and his friend got into a discussion about its manufacturer, Multiple Toys. Did they or did they not become MPC Toys? The friendly disagreement continued as I exited their booth.

As anyone who has read my past reviews of the Chicago show may recall, I love eavesdropping in the crowd. That's how you find out what people are thinking, what they're buying, etc. Lingering in various places, I heard, "Look! There's an old Texaco Fire Chief hat—see that? I had one

o' them." And (at Joe Freeman's Tin Toy Works booth, "Would you possibly have a bumper to fit this? (*major excitement*) You do??" Then there was the comment, "Did you hear about the still bank that broke the \$10,000 mark?" It sounded like a Groucho Marx one-liner, and I was waiting for the punchline, but there wasn't one. And finally, "Auctions and reality are not the same." Aristotle might well have said that, had he been around today.

Moving on to the Doll Building, I was thoroughly impressed by the display of fine merchandise offered by William Zito, who co-owns the Heirloom Doll Shoppe, Hospital and Museum in Madison, Wisconsin. William has set up at the Chicago show for 20 years and knows precisely what to bring for his repeat customers. He's quite well-versed in his field and serves as chairman of judges in the antique division of a major international doll show.

It's not just high-priced Jumeaus that you'll find in the Doll Building, though. Alongside the seriously priced 19th-Century beauties, there are plenty of Barbies and other contemporary dolls to please the specialist collector of more modest means. Also a big drawcard in the Doll

LEFT: Ed Snowden of Niles, Ohio brought a unique Tucker prototype made by Marx. The toy was never produced because the actual Tucker automobile never left the factory. Underneath Ed Snowden's Tucker prototype is the design number, the name of the Marx plant (Glen Dale, West Virginia) and the date it was made: April 10, 1947. BELOW: Whatever type of doll you're looking for, you'll find it in the Doll Building.



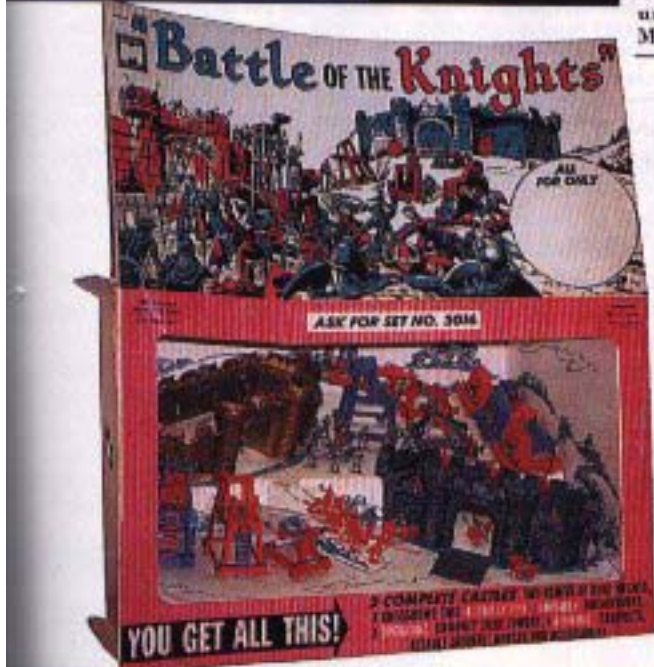
LEFT: Indian motorcycle dealer Jerry Mickey from Milwaukee, Wisconsin beamed with pride over his early purchases at the show. BELOW: A east iron paradise—the well-stocked booth of Dan Davis of Reno, Nevada.





Smith-Miller's GM cabover dump truck with remote squeeze handle, brought by Ken and Kathy Gregory of Indianapolis. Priced at \$8900.

LEFT, top to bottom: Barbara Moran's booth, filled with vintage Japanese toys of all types and space guns on the wall. Milwaukee dealer Noah Rickum's 'Battle of the Knights' store display from the late '50s/early '60s made by Multiple Toys featured all its original plastic figures. Price: \$1000. The only way to travel—with a 1920s Marx Merry-makers Band to divert the attention of motorcycle cops.



Building is the wide array of clothing, wigs, patterns and other accessories that might not otherwise be available to collectors. To be honest, I'm not a big doll fan, but I like to think I can spot quality when I see it, and there's a lot of quality, as well as knowledge, under that one roof.

After a hot coffee, I peeked out the door to see how it was looking outside. The early morning chill was gone, and the sun was warming things up nicely. Time to roll up the old reliable L.L. Bean coat, throw it into the trunk of the rental car and have a look through the outdoor pavilions—postwar toy territory.

There was a colorful gauntlet to run—Nightmare Before Christmas, GI Joes, Pokemon, '60s TV show memorabilia, games, Beanies, action figures, space toys and lunchboxes—before finally landing at the booth of Ron Ginkowaki of Kenosha, Wisconsin. It had been mentioned to me earlier that he had some interesting things for sale.

Ron didn't seem to concentrate on any one category; there was a compatible mix of old and new on his tables.

He told us he finds the Chicago Toy Show to be an excellent counterpoint to his online selling. "Some stuff sells on eBay that doesn't sell here, and vice versa. Some buyers want human contact." I was shown a terrific magic-related item, a 1963 calendar made in Spain that was shaped like playing cards flying out of a top hat. What graphics! At the other end of his range of merchandise, he had a Satellite Explorer space helmet, boxed and from the 1950s, available for \$385. "I bought it fifteen years ago at the Kansas City show and figured it was time, now, to put it out for sale."

David Boston won the prize for dealer who had traveled the longest distance to come to the show. The Auckland, New Zealand Star Wars specialist was set up with fellow dealer Bill Renshaw of Union City, Michigan. The two



friends do a lot of business back and forth, keeping in touch by E-mail.

Have Star Wars toys maintained their allure with collectors? "Absolutely," David affirmed. "I ship Star Wars toys everywhere you can think of. Name someplace weird? Okay. Libya. And yes, the toys arrived without incident."

One of the busiest booths I saw was that of Mark Huckabone of Grayslake, Illinois. He had a huge inventory of Star Wars, Superheroes, Megos—all those sorts of things I wish I knew more about. As we observed one transaction, a customer was very keen to buy a Toy Biz 'Green Lizard' figure from Mark, but Mark wasn't ready to sell it quite yet. He had bought it for his own collection, but the sharp-eyed customer had spotted it in a box of items put away to take home. Especially with the type of merchandise Mark sells, the early bird and the observant bird are the ones who catch the worms.

Even Mister Magoo could have identified the toy eleven-year-old Ken Battersby was clutching as he and his mother (also a toy collector) made their way through the Sheep Building. It was a 4ft. tall Jelly Green Giant made of felt, and young Ken was taking it home to put in his bedroom. The toy his mother described as "a good conversation piece" turned out to be more than just a visual item; if its palm was pressed, it could talk. Ken showed us how to unzip the top of the giant's shoulder to access the voicebox. "We like weird things," his mother explained.

The most expensive item at the show was the sensational 1/4 scale Pontiac Club de Mer dream car that had been brought by Joe Bortz, a prominent collector of exotic automobiles. A functional vehicle with motor, starter, lights and horn, it was displayed at the General Motors Motorama show in 1956 and was supposed to have been destroyed afterwards for insurance reasons. "It could actually be driven on the road, but shouldn't be," Joe explained. The car was passed down by GM's head of design to his grandson, and it eventually became the property of the Bortz Collection, which is in constant demand at automotive events. The Club de Mer wore a 'sticker price' of \$100,000.

An end-of-show survey with dealer friends indicated it was one of the best buying days they had enjoyed in quite some time. One friend told me he had no idea how he



ABOVE, left: Hopeful collectors approached Joe Freeman's booth in hopes of finding the right replacement part to complete their toys. As we were taking this picture, a successful match was made between toy and part, to the great delight of the toy vehicle's owner. ABOVE, right: Affordable Breyer horses at Mark Blackwood's booth ranged from \$15-\$65. BELOW, left: Dealer Buddy George travels three times a year from Massachusetts to the Chicago Toy Show in his nifty 1937 REO Speedwagon. It's the largest pressed steel 'toy' he owns. BELOW, right: Mike Henry of Chicago unloads his sizable cargo of toys to wheel into the Main Building.

would possibly be able to get all of his purchases home without professional help. Luckily, the postal and packaging center down the road had anticipated the need and had opened up for Sunday business, with a sign in the window that said, "We ship toys anywhere."

So, while the Chicago Toy Show might have lured the dealers away from their various bases of operation during the last week of April, leaving you 'toyleless in Seattle' or wherever you happen to live, the good news is, many dealers returned home triumphantly, with plenty of fresh merchandise—maybe even the toy you've spent the last ten years looking for.

