

# The Granpa Cratchet

## Personal Interest Story

Watch out, here comes Granpa Cratchet! A little old man driving a miniature model "T" across the fairgrounds with radiator squirting, horn blowing, and hoe down music blaring almost as loudly Granpa himself yelling "Howdy folks, welcome to the fair!" Granpa calls it his "Ole Time Hucksterwagon", a phrase left over from the childhood of his creator, Sam Bowman. The idea for the miniature truck came from a local grocery store on wheels that actually traveled the county in the late forties and early fifties near Sam's hometown of Sharpsville, Indiana. -

Granpa's miniature truck, about four feet wide and eight feet long, travels most of the United States with seven units of equipment to fairs, malls, festivals, parks, conventions, and corporate functions of all kinds. Granpa brings back the nostalgia of the good'ole days complete with all kinds of great products that Granpa tries to sell, including his 'Ole Time Miracle Wonder All Purpose Ailment Elixir, Lot-A-Bull Fertilizer, Fat Hog Feeds, and his All Purpose Hog Wash. Of course, we can't forget the assortment of gadgets especially designed to make life easier, like Granpa's false teeth washer he invented when his own set of dentures accidentally fell into the blender.

You can expect a wild story with every product. Granpa seems to be a cross between the characters of Ralph Cramden (from "The Honeymooners") and Mr. Haney (of the "Green Acres" TV sitcom) as he spins old time yarns, jokes, stories, and anecdotes all rooted in the life of the good ole days. When you run across him he might be getting arrested, towed, or ticketed by the local sheriff (all in good natured fun, of course).

You'll always have lots of fun if

you can work your way through the crowd of both adults and kids. While the adults like the stories linked to the good ole days, the kids just seem to like the hugs and kisses Granpa hands out to every child. If the jokes and stories are



not entertaining, just watch the faces of the children. Their rapt attention is focused firmly on Granpa.

Actually, all of Sam Bowman's success didn't begin with Granpa. It started out some fifteen years ago in Sunday School. Sam was assigned to work with the kids ages 3 to 8. This was not a group Sam was used to communicating with. While trying to find creative ways to teach the children, he purchased some puppets from a local toy store. His success there led to the purchase of some professional puppets.

Some how one thing led to another. He took the puppets into his local school where he was teaching. He had been assigned to be reading tutor to a little first grader who had been abused by her father and wouldn't speak to men. He stuck his first character, Ralph Se-

cret Agent, through a box and spoke through the puppet. The little girl learned, and eventually left the puppet for a closer relationship with the tutor.

The principal saw Sam bringing the puppets in and invited him to do shows in the school library for all the kids. It was there that Sam really learned the art of puppetry and all those important lessons about what works in a show and what doesn't.

At the same time he was tutoring, Sam was also working in a management training program with a large retailer at Northwoods Mall in Peoria, Illinois where Sam resided with his wife and three young children. He saw several shows come to the mall, some not done too well, so he offered his services. The very first show was a big hit and more mall bookings followed.

Everything Sam saw other shows do, he did better or differently, allowing the show to evolve itself. The results were excellent. What emerged were miniature buildings, slapstick humor, audience participation, and six shows a day instead of three. Also developed was a central character with a consistent name and personality, backed up by an advertising theme complete with all the radio, television and newspaper tools to present a successful advertising campaign.

The show quickly developed into a very effective and impressive format presented in a life like stage completely self contained with sound, lighting and special effects. During the show Secret Agent Ralph, in his Secret Agent Hideout, has to arrive at his telephone booth for the message before the phone stops ringing, or the booth self destructs. You can hear the kids a mile away as they help Ralph through

the whole show: getting to the phone, defeating the bad guys and fulfilling his now not so secret mission-making a whole lot of people, especially mall managers, happy.

Still, something more was needed. Sam noticed how much better the children and adults responded to a character when they got to touch or talk to the character one on one. This was seen in a special "workshop for schools" held after a short show during the weekdays at the mall. Kids were bused in for special demonstrations billed as field trips for preschools and elementary schools, kindergarten through grade four.

Sam's now growing team of helpers noticed most of the merchants in the mall, who were paying the bill, often didn't see the show, which made it difficult to resell the mall.

The answer came from fellow puppeteer John Geddes in the idea of the puppet vehicle. It let the kids meet the character one on one, with lots of conversation and hugs. The idea of a puppet driving a miniature vehicle, with the puppeteer hidden inside, soon proved to have great entertainment value in itself. It also let the show travel the mall and appear in front of all the stores. Thus was born the philosophy that every individual should be made to feel like they are the friend of the main character.

The shows, equipment, personable workers, and client's personal marketing plan all added up to rave reviews by top promotional people in the business and Ralph began to travel.

After Ralph played several consecutive times in the same area, the local children began to know the show too well. So, the idea was born of several stage shows rotating. This kept the show fresh while building a following with each repeat appearance of Ralph. So Ralph became a mild mannered reporter, disguised as a secret agent, complete with a miniature TV station and a media van in which to drive around. The TV station hosts a wide array of shows with diverse themes all disguised as TV shows. Then

Ralph drives around in his miniature TV van interviewing people.

Also developed were several more shows fitting every season and event a mall might want to host.

The next link in the chain of events was an invitation to play the Heart of Illinois Fair. The manager Ilene Fry, suggested the development to a country theme that would suit fairs.

Granpa Cratchet was natural since many of the ideas Sam comes up with can be traced back to his childhood days on the farm in Indiana. "Being without television, away from city entertainment and having three brothers and sisters to entertain, all helped me learn to create," says Sam. He also spent many hours riding the tractor with his own grandpa, who was Sam's tie to the nostalgic years of the steam engine and threshing machines. "My Grandpa was the model farmer from the good 'ole days. He'd quote the village blacksmith and sing "precious name, oh how sweet...", it all rubbed off on Sam and the effects can be seen on Granpa's shows.

Granpa now has five different stage shows. They include a little farmhouse show, a barnyard show, a general store, a farmers market and a workshop. Every show is filled with the slapstick and audience participation that has made the attraction a great success coast to coast with seven units, four stage shows, and eight puppet vehicles performing over 20,000 shows a more than 1000 week long events. Granpa has appeared several times on national television and around the world. He has been sponsored by such corporate giants as Pizza Hut, Taco Bell, Pepsi, Coke, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Cambell's Soup and the Chipwich Cookie Company, Exxon Oil Co. and Mr. Hero.

Sound like the All American success story? Well, maybe. But you can't really appreciate this story unless you know a little something about the Sam Bowman behind the scenes. He has been a public speaker, retail manager, singer, teen center director, radio an-

nouncer, television producer and writer, carpenter, factory worker, machinist, meat inspector, auto driving teacher, and church pastor just to name a few.

His electric past all falls into place when you understand Sam's commitment to his faith. Most of his life has been spent with people, young people, helping them build their faith. This is his central purpose.

Sam believes these many experiences have been God's way of developing his talents and readying him for greater service. Even now, all these experiences are well utilized in the formation of such a business that requires a wide range of experience to successfully operate. As a born again Christian Sam's convictions run deep. They have helped him through financial, business and personal crisis. While the religious aspect is not displayed in the shows, the high standards of quality family material and performance is quite evident in all his shows.

We may be able to see a lesson here. This country was founded on the freedom to pursue life, liberty and worship God. Perhaps we need that part of our heritage renewed. Here is one example of its positive effects on the will to build and keep building. Sam has been known, along with many of his staff, to work at summer children's camps for little or no pay. One such situation resulted in the loss of his own two year old son to a drowning accident while Sam was on the road trying to help others. Sam still sheds tears as he recounts how his son's favorite toy was a cassette that he had made featuring Secret Agent Ralph, of how he demanded it be played every day and was laid to rest with it clutched in his hand. Perhaps no one will ever know how great the gain has been to thousands of children all across the world who have been touched by Secret Agent Ralph and Granpa Cratchet.