

SAUGATUCK-DOUGLAS
HISTORY
CENTER

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SDHC OPENS BURR TILLSTROM EXHIBIT
AT THE OLD SCHOOL HOUSE FRIDAY, MAY 3

APRIL 26, 2019 -- A free, public exhibit celebrating children's TV program pioneer Burr Tillstrom's life and legacy in Saugatuck opens Friday, May 3, from Noon to 5pm, in the Old School House, 150 Center St. in Douglas. Its initial opening weekend coincides with the first annual Kuklafest, a three-day puppetry conference at Saugatuck's OxBow School of Art, after which the exhibit will remain open through the summer, with hours to be announced soon.

Tillstrom is remembered for creating "The Kukla Fran and Ollie Show", which premiered on WBKB-TV in Chicago in 1947, after his puppets gained national awareness in 1940 as part of RCA's demonstration of the new television medium at the New York World's Fair. The show enjoyed network prominence first on NBC then on ABC until 1957. It entertained millions of children and adults alike with the antics of Tillstrom's *Kuklapolitan Players*, a menagerie of hand-puppet characters that interacted with live hostess Fran Allison, and set the model for television puppeteering.

The exhibit will display Tillstrom's puppet stage from his time as artist-in-residence at Hope College, drawings and ephemera from his high school years, his Saugatuck parade puppets Kukla and Ollie, along with photographs, film and recordings of Tillstrom and the Kuklapolitans.

The Kuklafest conference at OxBow is designed for serious puppeteers from around the country. For local residents, the conference opens with a Friday night gala fundraiser at The Saugatuck Woman's Club, and culminates on Sunday at "A Picnic with Puppets", an event for local families at Oxbow.

Born in Chicago in 1917, Tillstrom became aware of Saugatuck when visiting the Summer School of Painting here in 1943, prompting him to buy a barn on Spear Street that became his part-time residence while he maintained an apartment in Chicago. He occasionally performed and taught in the Theater Department of Hope College, and with his Kuklapolitans, frequently supported community projects.

In the 1960s, Tillstrom gave the attractions of Saugatuck TV exposure as the setting for a pilot episode of an American travelogue show being explored as a new format that the Kuklapolitans could do without Fran, after she moved to California.

They were the hit of Saugatuck's Village Centennial Celebration in 1968, and an important part of the National Bicentennial Pageant held at Saugatuck High School in 1976. They appeared in parades whenever they were in town, and Tillstrom purchased the first plank in Douglas' Kidstuff Playground in 1985, shortly before his death in December of that year.

For more information about the History Center, its Museum in Saugatuck and Old School House in Douglas, and its activities planned for the months ahead, visit www.MySDHistory.org.

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PHOTO ATTACHED SEPARATELY (see jpeg "YoungTillstrom")

Caption: Early photo finds a youthful Burr Tillstrom honing his craft; famous puppeteer, TV pioneer and Saugatuck resident is remembered in summer exhibit at The Old School House, opening May 3.