

SAUGATUCK-DOUGLAS HISTORY CENTER

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PUPPETEER BURR TILLSTROM'S LEGACY CELEBRATED AT JULY 30 "TUESDAY TALK"

JULY 19, 2019 -- A new look at the Saugatuck legacy of puppeteer Burr Tillstrom, creator of early TV's "Kukla, Fran and Ollie" show, highlights Saugatuck-Douglas History Center's "Tuesday Talk" on July 30, in the Old School House, 130 Center Street, Douglas. The one-hour program begins when the school bell rings at 11 a.m. Public attendance is invited and audience participation is welcomed to enrich the discussion.

Presenters Michael Schwabe and Erin Wilkinson will talk about Tillstrom's involvement with Saugatuck's OxBow School of Art and the new annual KuklaFest Puppetry Conference inaugurated there earlier this year, their Burr Tillstrom Documentary Project, and Hystopolis Productions, which is the producing entity of these events. Of special interest will be excerpts of newly discovered footage of Burr Tillstrom from October of 1985, in which he candidly lays the groundwork for his autobiography, favoring an on-camera approach to the written word.

Schwabe is co-founder and Artistic Director of Hystopolis Productions, a nonprofit organization with offices in Fennville, dedicated to fostering and promoting the art of puppetry since its incorporation in 1985. He also is Artistic Director of The Village Puppeteers of Douglas (MI), founded in 2004. Wilkinson is co-director and editor of The Burr Tillstrom Documentary Project and project coordinator for KuklaFest.

"Burr Tillstrom's puppetry has had an immeasurable influence on my professional puppetry career of 37 years", Schwabe says, "but for me it started much earlier, in the 1960s. That era marked the second wave of Tillstrom's career, when he and Fran Allison hosted the CBS Children's Film Festival, as well as a show produced at WTTW in Chicago for PBS. As a child at that time, I was taken by the Kuklapolitans not only for their charm, but also because they bridged my youth with that of my parents, who knew the characters from the first wave of Burr's career."

By "first wave", Schwabe refers to Tillstrom's "The Kukla Fran and Ollie Show", which premiered in 1947 on WBKB-TV in Chicago, 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.

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. A free, public exhibit celebrating his life and achievements opened in May at the Old School House and will remain in place through the summer.

A summertime tradition since 1996, SDHC's weekly Tuesday Talks present entertaining and informative insights into local community life throughout July and August. This week's Talk is sponsored by SDHC members Bill Hess and Mike Mattern.

Tuesday Talks' increasing popularity puts limited seating on "first-come, first-served" basis. While

admission is free for current SDHC members, non-member guests are encouraged to attend with a donation of five dollars, or to become new members at the Talk.

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

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PHOTO ATTACHED SEPARATELY (see jpeg "BurrTillstromBackstage")

Caption: The lasting impact of Burr Tillstrom, seen in this early 1950s photo at work behind his TV puppet stage, is honored at SDHC's July 30 "Tuesday Talk".