

Teacher is no dummy at entertaining [Elmira, NY, Star-Gazette]

Neighbors column by MOLLY McCARTHY

[Page 2C Monday, August 2, 2004]

Bruce Weaver loves ventriloquism.

He watched the famous duo of ventriloquist Paul Winchell and dummy Jerry Mahoney perform on Saturday morning kids' shows when he was a child growing up in Wentling's Corners, Pa.

Weaver received his own Jerry Mahoney doll when he was only 10 years old. It was a Christmas present from his parents, Millard and Doris Weaver. Bruce and Jerry treated the Weaver family to countless performances at their home.

Now 56, Bruce Weaver's collection of dummies has grown to about 20. But the Knoxville, Pa., resident still owns the Jerry Mahoney doll that inspired his love of ventriloquism, and he continues to enjoy puppeteering and performing.

In addition to Jerry Mahoney, Weaver's dummies include Edgar J. Woodley-- who is launching a write-in campaign to become president of the United States and recently ended a stump speech by saying, "Put wooden teeth back in the White House ... Vote Edgar J. Woodley for President--" and Gus the Bird, who has a penchant for stealing Weaver's hats while they are on stage.

"Now stop that," Weaver playfully admonished Gus during a show at the Gillett Senior Citizens Center last week.

One of the audience members at the show is arguably Weaver's biggest fan, his mother. Doris Weaver now lives in a suburb of Chicago, but she couldn't resist catching her son's act while visiting him in Pennsylvania for the week.

"I really enjoy it," she said. "I've been seeing these performances since he was a kid."

Some of the characters in the "Bruce Weaver and Friends Show" at the senior center may turn up again when Weaver performs at the 38th annual Tioga County Fair on Aug. 11.

"Oh, certainly. They'll be there," Weaver said.

A fifth-grade teacher at Westfield Area Elementary School in Knoxville, Weaver said he enjoys sharing his love of ventriloquism with his students.

"I try to put a lot of humor in my teaching," he said.

Ventriloquism might be very enjoyable, but it's not an easy skill to master, Weaver said. Ventriloquists need to make their characters seem alive and animated, memorize lines and control their lips.

"That's the one thing most people look for when you're performing," Weaver said of the art of learning to speak without moving your mouth.

Ventriloquism is not as visible now, as it was when he was a child, Weaver said. Gone are the days when famous pairs such as Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy appeared on "The Ed Sullivan Show."

However, Weaver said he believes that members of groups such as the North American Association of Ventriloquists and the International Ventriloquists Association will make sure it's not a dying art.

"Ventriloquism is alive and well," he said.



Star-Gazette file photo

Bruce Weaver used one of his ventriloquist dummies, Aunt Gabby, at an event at Westfield Elementary School in 2002.

Copyright the Star-Gazette, Elmira, N.Y. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved. Material cannot be posted online or sold to others.