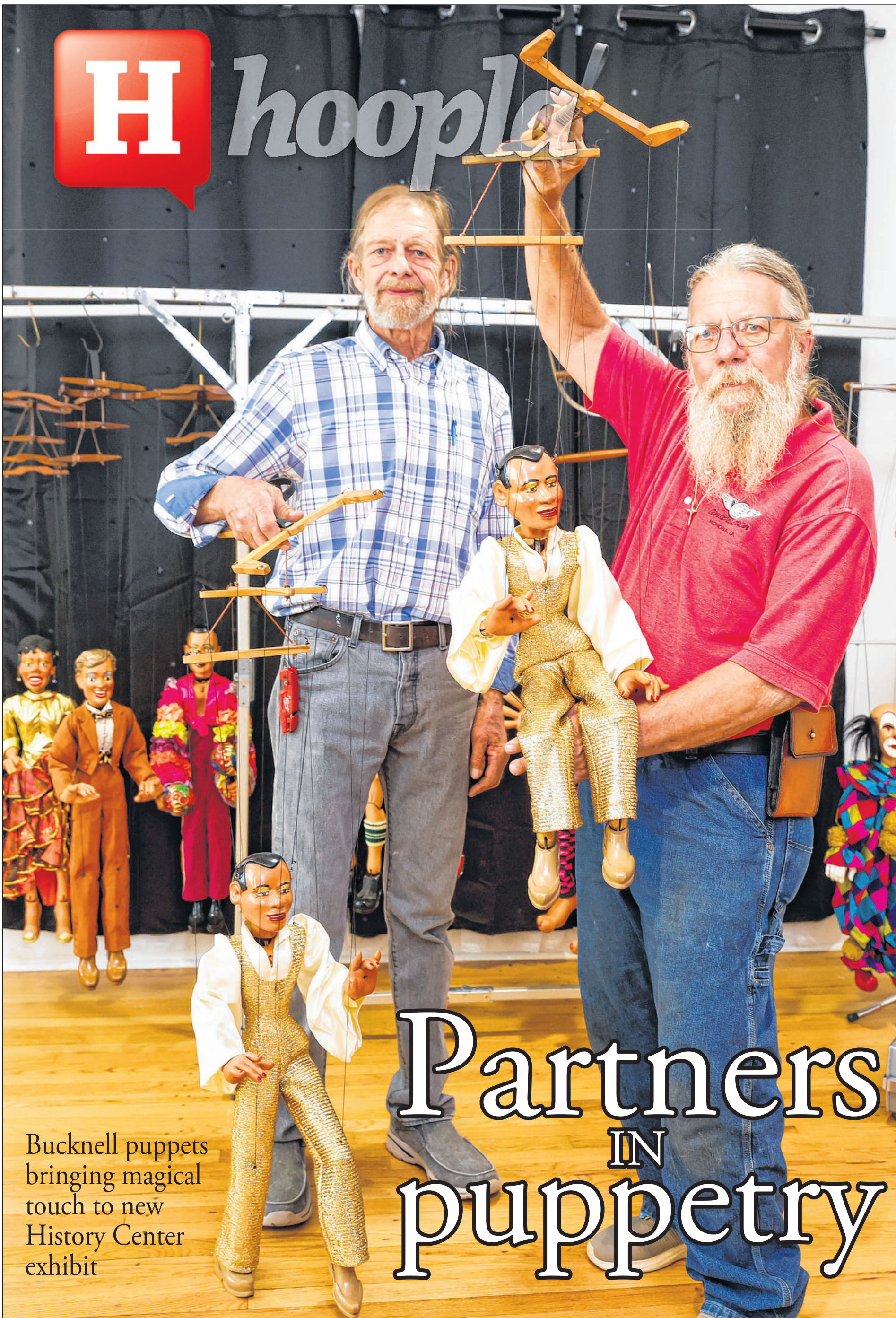




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Partners IN puppetry

Bucknell puppets bringing magical touch to new History Center exhibit

Del Bucknell (left) and his brother, Curt, pose with some of their father's marionettes May 24 as they arrange artifacts from the collection of their parents' puppeteering careers for the new exhibit: "Bruce & Nola Bucknell: Partners in Puppetry" at The History Center, 800 Second Ave. SE, Cedar Rapids. The exhibition will include 13 of the original Bucknell marionettes, video footage of performances, and a hands-on area where visitors can try their hand at controlling a marionette. The Bucknells lived in Cedar Rapids and toured the U.S. and Canada with "a variety show on strings." (Jim Slosiarek/The Gazette)

By Diana Nollen, The Gazette

CEDAR RAPIDS — Being a Bucknell child came with strings attached. All three children began working with some aspect of their parents' marionettes as soon as they were big enough to help.

Bruce and Nola Bucknell's world-famous marionettes, made in their Cedar Rapids workshop, aren't your average, everyday mass-produced puppets. They are intricate works of art that for more than 50 years, delighted thousands of children and adults at conventions, churches, parties and fairs across the country,

into Canada, and even on WMT-TV in Eastern Iowa, where the Pinhead Brothers starred in commercials debuting the Hy-Vee jingle, "A helpful smile in every aisle."

A selection of original Bucknell marionettes will be smiling from Saturday to Nov. 18 in a second-floor gallery at The History Center in Cedar Rapids.

The most well-known figure was Billy Boulder, a prospector voiced by Max Hahn, who became Dr. Max, host of a locally legendary children's show on WMT-TV from 1961 to 1981. Billy Boulder also starred in commercials for

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IF YOU GO

- **What:** "Bruce & Nola Bucknell: Partners in Puppetry" exhibit
- **Where:** Second-floor temporary gallery, The History Center, 800 Second Ave. SE, Cedar Rapids
- **When:** Saturday to Nov. 18
- **Hours:** 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday; noon to 4 p.m. Tuesday and Friday; 4 to 8 p.m. Thursday
- **Admission:** \$7 adults, \$5 students
- **Opening day:** Outdoor performances by Del and Curt Bucknell, 10 and 11:30 a.m. Saturday; \$5, which includes museum entrance, at historycenter.org/bucknell. Bring seating; That's So Cheesy food truck on-site with food for purchase.
- **Information:** historycenter.org/current-exhibit



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Puppets/Couple was largely self-taught

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Wilson's franks and other meats, and made appearances at Eagle Food Centers and Lindale Mall in Cedar Rapids.

Since TV was black-and-white during Billy's heyday, some of his food props were painted in shades of gray, including a rather unappetizing string of hot dogs, nestled among the items in Billy's props box.

The puppets have been in storage about 30 years, packed so well that they survived the 2020 derecho, safe in a stone dairy barn on son Del Bucknell's farm near Cedar Rapids.

Out of 60 on loan for the exhibit, about 16 original Bucknell marionettes have come out of hiding for another moment in the spotlight.

"Bruce & Nola Bucknell: Partners in Puppetry" also includes vintage photographs, flyers and memorabilia; video footage of past performances; the couple's reel-to-reel tapes; and history noted on placards. Visitors of all ages can step up to the hands-on corner, and try manipulating marionettes purchased for this purpose. But hands-off the Bucknell puppets — they are for viewing, not for touching.

"They're not toys," Del said.

"They are very well-made and they are beautiful, but they are older in many cases," said Tara Templeman, The History Center's curator and collection manager. "They're a little bit fragile, which means that they all need to be protected behind Plexiglas or stanchions to keep people from touching them, because if we have 2,000 people interact with them, they won't hold up to that kind of wear and tear."

All three Bucknell children — brothers Del and Curt and their late sister, Elaine — made their own puppets and learned how to make them move. Del and Elaine began working in the family business at age 5, and Curt at age 3.

According to the history tidbits accompanying the exhibit, Elaine put on shows to help pay for college, and toured throughout the Midwest in the 1960s. Bruce and Nola continued into the 1970s, then Del took the reins in the 1980s, when Bruce turned his attention to caring for Nola, who developed Alzheimer's disease. The business basically halted after her death in 1988. Bruce died in 1990.

Brothers Del and Curt are now in their 70s, but they've been brushing up their skills and will perform with the marionettes at 10 and 11:30 a.m. Saturday on the museum's lawn. Tickets are \$5, which includes entry to the museum that day.

PROCESS

Largely self-taught, Bruce built more than 300 puppets, using old-world craftsmanship. Each one took 300 hours from concept to completion, and was made in triplicate, so Bruce and Nola could each have one if they were touring separately, leaving the "spare" at home.

According to the "Opening Act" placard accompanying the exhibit, Bruce's family moved to Cedar Rapids in 1927, when his father became manager of the Cedar Rapids Fair and Exposition at what is now Hawkeye Downs.

Bruce became fascinated with puppets at



Curt Bucknell (right) and his brother, Del, install a sheet of glass around Snafu, one of their father's marionettes, as they arrange artifacts May 24 from their parents' puppeteering careers for the new exhibit at The History Center in Cedar Rapids. (Jim Slosiarek photos/The Gazette)



Some of the marionettes on display as part of the new exhibit: "Bruce & Nola Bucknell: Partners in Puppetry" at The History Center, 800 Second Ave. SE, Cedar Rapids.



Always wanting his creations to be more lifelike, Bruce Bucknell invented a way to make elbow and knee joints move more realistically, which became a hallmark of his work.



Sleeves and maracas of a marionette will glow under black light in The History Center's new exhibit: "Bruce & Nola Bucknell: Partners in Puppetry." Nola made all the costumes.



Marionette heads on display as part of the "Bruce & Nola Bucknell: Partners in Puppetry" exhibit at The History Center, 800 Second Ave. SE, Cedar Rapids. Bruce created the marionettes and his wife, Nola, created the costumes.

a plaster cast, filling it with plastic wood. The torsos also were cast in plastic wood, Curt said, but the arms and legs were carved out of white pine. The crossbar controls changed through the years, and as they became more complicated, Bruce turned to maple, then black walnut for a premiere show, Curt said.

Always wanting his creations to be more lifelike, Bruce invented a way to make elbow and knee joints move more realistically, which became a hallmark of his work.

"He designed the joints so they only went one way like your body

does," Curt noted. "He used the human structure (for) a lot of the unique designs."

"I think one of the interesting and cool things about the Bucknells is that they were expert creators of marionettes," Templeman said, "and they pretty consistently won awards for the most lifelike marionettes on the market. ..."

"They just built what they needed when they needed it. Bruce, for example, completely revolutionized the elbow and knee joints in marionettes, and his design has been adopted by basically the rest of the field to create more lifelike movements in the puppets — and that was just born of necessity," Templeman added.

Bruce painted the puppets, then turned them over to Nola, who added her fabric artistry. She spent up to 125 hours making costumes so elaborate that if a gentleman was sporting a suit and tie, he was wearing a complete shirt under his tailcoat, not just cuffs sewn onto a sleeve.

Mambo dancers could have up to 85 yards of fabric gathered into



A photo of Bruce and Nola Bucknell is seen in a display case as part of the "Bruce & Nola Bucknell: Partners in Puppetry" exhibit on display Saturday through Nov. 18 at The History Center.

ruffles that swish as they move. And the tap-dancing duo clad in sparkly gold jumpsuits have tiny taps that actually click and clack on the floor.

Nola added buttons and zippers to the costumes, to make it easier to clean the garments and dress each marionette.

Some of the fabrics and puppets even glow under back lights — especially the skeleton whose body parts come apart when it's moving, then realign perfectly when it's still. That's one of Curt's favorite Bucknell marionettes. Del, now 74, likes Charlie, the trapeze artist who moves like he's ready to join Cirque du Soleil.

REACTIONS

Musical theater composer and playwright Robert Lindsey-Nassif of Cedar Rapids became enchanted seeing school performances of the Bucknell "variety show on strings."

"I've really been hugely influenced by them," he said. "I think it's part of how I got into musical theater and to this day, I collect marionettes."

"I just was so struck with the professionalism and the beauty of the puppets. My dad arranged for me to go to the Bucknells' house and see their workshop, and it was like the wizard's den. It was just astonishing to me, and my dad

built me a marionette theater."

About 15 years ago or so, he saw that Elaine was going to recreate a Bucknell show at the Lisbon library.

"I rushed out there and it was everything I remembered — the same soundtrack, the puppets — everything ... and I was just enchanted all over again. ..."

"I've been haunted by it since that day, and I kept thinking something has to happen."

So he made it happen. He tracked down the brothers, learned the puppets still existed, and approached The History Center about staging a Bucknell exhibit.

"What a great Linn County story it is, since they were manufactured and produced by a Linn County family," Templeman said. "And so it was easy fit for stories that we would like to tell, and it was a good way for us to introduce some whimsy into our exhibits and our storytelling here at the museum."

It also can build bridges between those who remember the Bucknell marionettes, and those who don't.

"The hope," she said, "is that people will have some sense of nostalgia and want to share that with the next generation."