

## Now & Then in Ripon ... Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society

# A world on strings: The rise of Johnny Faust

Marionettes, a particular class of puppets manipulated by strings, have existed as far back as ancient Egypt, around 2000 BC. Many examples have been found in the tombs of pharaohs.

Their use ranged from religious rituals in Egypt to entertainment in Greece and Rome, and they flourished in Medieval Europe for Nativity plays — hence the French name marionette, meaning “Little Mary.”

By the 18th century, marionettes had developed into sophisticated, human-like figures in Italy, France and England, becoming a globally popular art form for storytelling and performance.

The marionettes currently on display at the Ripon Historical Society were created by talented puppeteer John Faustman, born in Ripon in 1917. A 1939 graduate of Ripon College, Faustman later toured nationally and became known professionally as “Johnny Faust.” He was the son of Carl (1892–1950) and Eve (1892–1970) Faustman, a local artist who created the Ripon Heritage Prints series. John became known for his elaborately detailed marionettes and dynamic stage productions.

In a 1934 publication titled *How to Make and Operate Marionettes*, Faustman described in third person how his interest in puppetry began around age 10 after reading a short magazine article about making marionettes. The idea, he wrote, “beckoned him into a world of tiny figures all dancing merrily to the tune of little flutes.” Within a year, he presented “Jack and the Beanstalk,” his first production, in the basement of his family home. Interest quickly grew, new marionettes were built and improvements followed.

Faustman named his first troupe “The Pixie Marionettes.” He fashioned them from wood putty using plaster of Paris casts. Over time, the figures became increasingly elaborate in construction and performance ability.

The Ripon Historical Society’s collection represents only a small portion of Faustman’s extensive repertoire. Included are the “Three Little Pigs” marionettes and the “Big Bad Wolf” hand puppet. There is also “Peep-Squeak,” featuring a green pepper body and rolling pin ears. Perhaps the most complex figure is the vaudeville skeleton “Wheeze,” whose limbs appeared to fall off when the strings were released. “Wheeze” was featured in a vaudeville routine titled “Loose Bones.”

By the time Faustman was a senior at Ripon College, he had spent 10 years building and refining his troupe. Along with fellow students, he formed the “Ripon College Puppeteers.” Their first performance, “Little Red Riding



**MARIAN AND JOHN** Faustman toured together for about five years before John’s death. *submitted photo*

Hood,” was staged in 1938 at the college’s Little Theater. In the *Ripon Commonwealth Press*, Faustman described the group as “the first showing of our new group of non-eating actors in Ripon.”

The Ripon College Puppeteers performed at campus functions and in nearby communities, helping Faustman earn money to support his tuition. While attending college, he also organized a class in puppetry. Students learned to construct marionettes, build stages, manipulate strings and imitate character voices. Faustman became a welcome presence in many communities, where children and adults alike delighted in learning the craft.

During his senior year, master puppeteer Tony Sarg (1880–1942) performed at Ripon College. Faustman reportedly shadowed Sarg and assisted in manipulating several of the figures in the show — an experience that undoubtedly influenced his professional ambitions.

Faustman’s repertoire continued to expand, including productions such as Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Gold Bug,” “Hansel and Gretel,” and a variety of vaudeville acts. By January of his senior year, he had given more than 300 performances.

Beginning in 1938, Faustman was employed for two seasons by Bill Baird (1904–1987), one of the world’s most famous puppeteers and later known for producing the puppetry sequence in the film “The Sound of Music.” In 1939, Faustman spent the summer performing at the New York World’s Fair. By the 1940s, Johnny Faust had achieved international recognition.

Puppeteers of that era enjoyed celebrity status. They appeared on early television programs such as “Howdy Doody” and were featured on “The Ed Sullivan Show.” Faustman created his own productions for nightclubs and vaudeville circuits and toured extensively, traveling to Canada and Panama and spending 38 days cruising the east coast of South America. During World War II, he

performed at USO camp shows for American troops.

In 1944, the *Commonwealth* reported that he was touring southern cities and hailed him as “America’s ranking manipulator of marionettes.” The article described Faustman as “tall and lanky” and praised his ability to breathe life into his creations, calling his act “a landmark in entertainment.”

On Aug. 31, 1947, Faustman married Marian Stellmacher (1914–1980) of Ripon at his parents’ home on Watertown Street. Marian was also a graduate of Ripon College. That same year, the *Commonwealth* reported that Faustman’s troupe had made its first appearance in a Hollywood-produced film.

Renowned puppeteer and historian Allan Cook (1932–2019), former curator of the International Puppetry Museum in Pasadena, Calif., recalled Faustman in his book *Alan Cook: A Puppet Collector’s Odyssey*. Cook landed his first professional job with Faustman in 1948 after returning from the first National Puppetry Festival in Oklahoma City.

Cook described how Faustman toured small appliance stores for Philco, a Philadelphia manufacturer of radios and televisions, performing promotional shows. When Faustman’s assistant was jailed for drunk driving, Cook was called in as a replacement from the Bob Baker Marionette Theater in Los Angeles.

Cook’s first performance with Faustman was “Alice’s Adventures in Philco Land,” staged in a small Santa Barbara appliance store. According to Cook, the space was so tight that stoves and refrigerators had to be removed to make room for audiences seated on wooden benches. The production featured marionette characters from “Alice in Wonderland,” including Alice, the White Rabbit, the Mad Hatter and the Queen of Hearts.

Cook also recounted Faustman’s resourcefulness on tour. He carried plaster molds from city to city, soaking them in



**JOHN FAUSTMAN PULLS** the strings on one of his marionettes. Inset, is the White Rabbit he created for “Alice’s Adventures in Philco Land.” *submitted photos*

motel bathtubs and applying an extremely thin layer of plastic wood so heads would dry quickly and withstand frequent travel. The elaborate “Philco Land” marionettes, including Alice and the White Rabbit, now reside at the International Puppetry Museum.

Faustman began his career as a teenager and had been touring for a decade by the time he married Marian at age 30. The couple toured together for about five years before his life was cut short in 1952 at age 34. Faustman died suddenly while performing a puppet show for the March of Dimes; the reported cause was a heart ailment.

At the time, the family was living in Baltimore, Md., with their two-year-old son. Marian later moved to Chicago with their son, John. In the mid-1950s, Eve Faustman made frequent trips to Chicago to visit her daughter-in-law and grandson.

Six years after Faustman’s death, Marian was living in Appleton and married to James Cowan. In the early 1960s, she was a member of All Saints Episcopal Church, which decided to establish a marionette troupe to present the Christmas story. Drawing on her years of touring experience, Marian led volunteers in constructing puppets, developing stage lighting and sound, and stringing the marionettes — her particular specialty.

In December 1965, the All Saints Marionettes presented their first show, a marionette adaptation of “Why the Chimes Rang.” Over the years, the group developed a rotating repertoire of four seasonal productions and continued performances into the 1990s.

Last November, an angel marionette used in that first 1965 performance was retired and donated

to the Ripon Historical Society by David Payne of Fox Folk Marionettes & Friends, Inc., in honor of Marian Stellmacher Faustman Cowan. The angel, built under Marian’s supervision, features a wooden block body, plaster head and hands, screw-eye joints and fishing line connections. Its strings are controlled by a wooden crossbar known as an “airplane controller.”

Typically, the All Saints marionettes used nine strings — two for the feet, two for the hands, two for the shoulders, one for the head and one for the back. The angel, however, required fewer strings since it had no legs and “flew” into its scenes.

Today, Fox Folk Marionettes & Friends continues the tradition established by All Saints, performing throughout the year and using many puppets created under Marian’s supervision.

Faustman’s original marionettes were donated to the Ripon Historical Society by his mother, Eve. Marian later explained that Eve retained them because of limited storage space elsewhere; at one point, flooding in Marian’s Chicago basement destroyed some of John’s puppets.

In 1979, Marian contacted the society and requested that some marionettes be returned so her son could inherit part of his father’s legacy. Although not legally obligated, the society relinquished a portion of the collection. Marian died the following year. Their son, John Faustman Cowan, died in 2021.

The marionettes of John and Marian Faustman are currently on display at the Ripon Historical Society’s Pickard House Museum, 508 Watson St., open Fridays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.