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Honoring Burr Tillstrom: Television Pioneer and Friend of Hope College

By Rebecca Stanton and Grace Pettinger

For decades, audiences across the Chicagoland area and beyond were transfixed by the captivating and heartwarming talents of Kukla, Fran and Ollie, the hosts of their self-named television program, *Kukla, Fran and Ollie*. Frances “Fran” Helen Allison was an adventurous and spunky young woman who set off on an adventure to captivate the hearts of children and adults alike through her escapades with puppets. But many people didn’t know the mastermind behind the project, the creator of all of the puppets that appeared on the show, including Kukla and Ollie themselves.

Burr Tillstrom was one to take chances, dropping out of college to pursue a career in puppeteering, and luckily those chances paid off. Tillstrom and his characters, Kukla and Ollie, evolved into television stars. This evolution was deeply connected to the important events of the early 20th century. According to Jerry Crimmins in “Burr Tillstrom, 68, legendary puppeteer,” Tillstrom began working for the Chicago Park District puppet theatre in 1935, after dropping out of college at the end of his first year. During the Great Depression, the federal government invested in arts programs through the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to stimulate employment and the economy. Through this program, the Chicago Park District and the puppet Kukla were created. Tillstrom developed the character of Kukla over time, allowing him to find his own personality and even his own name. As Kukla came to life in the late 1930s, Tillstrom made a living doing vaudeville shows, private parties, and shows for schools or women’s clubs. As these shows went on, he found another interest in creating a monster that wouldn’t scare children, but operate with kindness and gentleness. With this thought in mind, Ollie the dragon was born. With Ollie, Tillstrom portrayed a “monster as the world’s most powerful medium” using “a dragon to communicate, transmit ideas, interchange thoughts, and opinions.”

With these characters, he began to build the Kuklapolitans. Throughout the Second World War, Tillstrom and the Kuklapolitans put on war bonds shows. At one of these shows, he met his future partner in puppetry, Fran Allison. It wasn’t until 1947 that he and Allison collaborated as performers on their own television show, *Kukla, Fran, and Ollie*, when RCA sought to put on a television show for children on WBKB. No one knew that the show would soon become a household favorite for the entire family for the next ten years. *Kukla, Fran and Ollie* became Tillstrom’s lifework, which he was happy to continue to develop and foster, long after the show aired its last episode.

Through television, Tillstrom created a new form of art that not only revolutionized puppetry, but television culture. First, Tillstrom made puppetry more reachable to a larger audience. In his autobiographical tapes, he

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I hope this issue of the newsletter finds you healthy and thankful. The past few months have been filled with great research and writing by our interns and student archival assistants, and we are pleased to present their work. This issue includes articles about well-known puppeteer Burr Tillstrom, as well as an intern’s experience working with archival collections. As you may have realized, we provide our students the opportunity to work and thrive in the archives to gain experience and discern their future careers, many as librarians and archivists. We are thrilled to be part of that journey.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

Honoring Burr Tillstrom (continued from page 1)

discussed the intimacy of puppetry. He argued the ideal number of audience members as less than 100. However, as a person’s fame and shows became larger, the show lost the intimacy that it once possessed. On television, the audience could experience the performance from their living room, where they could hear and understand it at an intimate, quiet level. This allowed the characters to deeply communicate with the audience and gave the show the ability to change the lives of millions, while maintaining the small setting necessary for the success of the art form.

Tillstrom brought the spontaneity in his personality to his show, making it a distinct and long lasting feature of his show. He and Allison never used a script throughout the ten years of the show’s production. They would typically talk about the theme they would explore or possibly outline the general plot of the show, but they often would “ad-lib” the exact lines. In an obituary, one author quoted Tillstrom who once said: “the magic takes over, the characters write these.” He allowed the Kuklapolitans to come to life, making the show truly magical for viewers. This distinct spontaneity carried into his entire life, well after the show ended. When creating his autobiography, he found it difficult to put his thoughts down on paper. He noted that he decided to use video in order to not only mimic his television experience, but also the spontaneity aspect of the show and his identity. This was an important aspect of the show not only that made it magical, but also to Tillstrom, himself.

After Kukla, Fran, and Ollie finished airing in 1957, Tillstrom didn’t finish his career and neither did the Kuklapolitans. Richard Christiansen, in “Burr Tillstrom: An Innovator Who Had His Hand in Here-and-Now Projects,” explains that Tillstrom appeared in programs, newscasts, and theatre productions. He constantly looked for new projects in which to participate. He also argues that Tillstrom actually didn’t like it when individuals called him a veteran or pioneer because he wanted to be active and relevant in the puppetry community after his show ended. His most famous post-Kukla, Fran, and Ollie was the Berlin Wall Hand Ballet.

The biggest feat that Tillstrom dreamed of accomplishing for his oeuvre, a video autobiography dedicated to telling the story of the production of Kukla, Fran and Ollie, was helped along by people from a surprising corner of the world: Hope College in Holland, Michigan. Tillstrom established a legacy for himself at Hope when he participated in an artist-in-residency program in April 1972 through Hope’s theatre department. In 1972, Hope hosted six artists in residence for a month each, allowing them to teach classes, work with students and faculty, and impart their creative wisdom. Tillstrom received one of the largest featured

However, authors also called him a pioneer of television. Within the early days of black and white television, he united the family with his artistry and professionalism. He impacted not only children, but adults as well, as his show was loved by all for its innocence, fresh humor, and simple morals. The love and peace portraying Kuklapolitans became one of early television’s top-rated programs. Tillstrom created a piece of art that revolutionized his art form, as well as American television. He laid the foundation for future generations of puppeteers and also future television personalities.
articles in the Anchor of the artists, showing the importance of his presence on campus. In the Anchor article, “Communication is a key word for Burr Tillstrom,” the artist helped students understand what it meant to be a professional and artist. He also taught students to acquire an appreciation for different perspectives and media. There, he worked closely with faculty and students and was also awarded an honorary Doctor of Letters.

While Tillstrom grew acquainted with the Hope College community, he became actively involved with the faculty and staff of the communication department. Tillstrom became close with communication professor Ted Nielsen, with whom he corresponded long after leaving the residency. One factor that may have helped Tillstrom’s ties with Nielsen remain strong was Tillstrom’s summer home in Saugatuck, Michigan, less than twelve miles south of Holland. He spent most of his later years divided between Chicago, Saugatuck, and his newer home in California, almost always reserving the summer months for Saugatuck. As a result of their close connection, Nielsen became a springboard for many of Tillstrom’s ideas and was an important cog in bringing to life his vision for the autobiography.

From the late 1970s into the early 1980s, when Tillstrom realized that he could make his dreams of creating a video autobiography into a reality, he expressed his plans in detail to Nielsen through mail correspondence, most of which is now stored and available for viewing at the Joint Archives of Holland, along with other files from Tillstrom’s time at the institution. He realized that the best way to secure funding for his dream would be to apply for a fellowship grant from the Guggenheim Foundation, an organization that offers aid to scholars and artists in pursuit of “research in any field of knowledge and creation in any of the arts,” established in 1925 by the U.S. Senator Simon Guggenheim in honor of his son. Many of the letters exchanged between Tillstrom and Nielsen have drafts of his application attached, revision after revision showing just how dedicated Tillstrom, Nielsen, and others in their circle were to making this project a reality.

In the midst of the application process itself, Tillstrom decided to commence the project where and how he could: at Hope College in the communication department’s recording facilities. He wrote at least three parts to a script featuring himself demonstrating operation of the Kukla puppet, referencing them by name in the script and choosing to incorporate Hope College into the legacy he wanted to craft through the autobiography. He also brought music tracks from the show to Hope College to share with his collaborators there and include in the project. Drafts of the script and some of these tracks are available at the Joint Archives of Holland today.

After months, even years of preparation, revision, and dreaming, Burr Tillstrom did not get to see his fellowship awarded or his project come to fruition. He passed away at his California home on December 6,
1985. The legacy of *Kukla, Fran and Ollie* would not be told, or so one might think.

When Ted Nielsen heard the news of Tillstrom’s passing, he took the project upon himself. He knew how much this project had meant to Tillstrom, and his own friendship with Tillstrom meant a great deal to him. Nielsen started by contacting many of the others in Tillstrom’s circle to get everyone up-to-date on the status of the Guggenheim application.

“I would like to continue the project, not just because of its importance in the history of that part of television, but because Burr deserves it,” Nielsen wrote Mr. Newton Minow. He added later on in the letter: “our working relationship was more of the ‘family’ kind of relationship that Burr prized so much. I was only too happy to help with what we could provide in terms of materials and equipment... and time to do this worthwhile endeavor.” The impact Burr Tillstrom had made on Nielsen clearly went beyond that of a colleague, or even that of a friend.

Thus, Ted Nielsen then contacted the Guggenheim Foundation. This was where his plans to honor Tillstrom and complete his project hit a snag: Ted was informed by the foundation that he and his supporters couldn’t proceed with the application that Tillstrom had been carefully crafting before his passing. If Nielsen wanted the Guggenheim fellowship, even to complete Tillstrom’s project, he would have to submit an application in his own name. That meant, essentially, starting over from scratch. To make matters even worse, the deadline for that current year had passed, so Nielsen would have to wait until the next application period opened.

Whatever the cost, Nielsen was determined to complete what Tillstrom had started, and he began corresponding with others to talk about potential options for proceeding with a new application. At the same time, he couldn’t let so much time pass before he could honor his friend in a special way. So Nielsen went to a place where he knew his voice would be heard: Hope College. At Hope, he worked with others in the communication department and members of the theatre department to establish an endowment scholarship in Tillstrom’s honor, the Burr Tillstrom Scholarship Fund. Hope College describes the award as follows:

*A scholarship honoring Burr Tillstrom, television pioneer and creator of *Kukla, Fran, and Ollie*, for the friendship and inspiration enjoyed by Hope students, faculty, and artists, through his collaborative association with the [Theatre] department. The scholarship is awarded to a theatre major who demonstrates financial need, has completed at least one year at Hope, and in the estimation of the Theatre Department faculty has been an outstanding participant in the program and shows genuine promise of making a significant contribution to the profession.*

While working to establish this scholarship, Ted Nielsen continued to work towards fulfilling Burr Tillstrom’s vision for the biography. Tillstrom’s records at the Joint Archives of Holland do not indicate whether or not Nielsen was able to succeed, but it is clear that the immense passion and dedication he poured into the attempt were surely an immense honor to Tillstrom in and of themselves. Nielsen’s efforts as a member of the Hope College community allow Hope students today and in the future to feel the effects of Tillstrom’s legacy in the theatre department and beyond, more than thirty years after his passing.

**About the authors:**

Rebecca Stanton is a 2020 Hope College graduate who is now living in the Chicagoland area and pursuing her Master’s degree in Library Science with an emphasis in Archival Studies. She worked for the Joint Archives as a student employee during her final year at Hope and found a passion for working with archival documents and sharing their stories through writing. Rebecca will graduate from the University of Illinois’ Library Science program in spring of 2022.

Grace Pettinger is a senior at Hope from Mount Vernon, Iowa. She is graduating in December 2021 with a bachelor’s degree in History with a minor in Writing. She has worked at the Joint Archives of Holland for three years as a student researcher. She has also participated in summer research with fellow students Maria Seidl and Brooke Carbaugh, Professor Lauren Janes and the Joint Archives. After graduating, she plans to enroll in a graduate program to pursue a master's degree in Archival Management in the Fall of 2022.
That hovering gray disruption that has upended so many lives for the past year also made its presence known this spring semester at the Joint Archives of Holland. But as with many businesses, schools, and work, the institution persevered. Although the building remains closed to the public, it is still changing the lives of Hope students eager to learn about the impact and importance of past stories imprinted on the present. I was lucky enough to be one of those students.

Working as a student intern for the Joint Archives of Holland during the spring semester of 2021 turned out to be a lot tougher, and simultaneously more meaningful, than it would have been a mere two years before. I had worked as an intern at the Van Wylen Library during the spring of 2020, when COVID first reared its ugly head, and I had greatly enjoyed my time working with other librarians on and offline. Returning to Hope in the fall, I missed the freedoms, challenges, and independence of an internship, and decided to contact Geoffrey Reynolds at the archives to see if I could gain an internship there. Due to COVID restrictions, I highly doubted that this would be possible, but Mr. Reynolds graciously explained the internship to me and offered me the position.

At the beginning of the internship I was quarantined due to a COVID exposure from a family member, so Mr. Reynolds gave me an online project to work on: a diary from Thomas VanderVeen, who served as an American soldier during World War I. Cursive has become a rare form of writing in my generation, but I was able to decipher VanderVeen’s handwriting since I often received letters from my grandparents in the same loopy script. VanderVeen’s account began around May 30, 1918, and already he alluded to the end of the First World War, reporting that the peace treaty has “got to be signed now by June 8, or war again.” VanderVeen expressed his frustration at the rowdiness of his superior officers who got drunk, caroused with German women, and griping, “some example they set” for the rest of the soldiers. Refraining from these inappropriate celebrations earned VanderVeen a District and Service Cross on June 23rd, an honor which he reports humbled and embarrassed him as he shook hands with major army officials. The Germans accepted the peace treaty the next day and many celebrations, both by the German people and the American soldiers, ensued. Interestingly, the American army seemed acutely aware of the financial problems that were to haunt Germany, even as they pulled their forces from the country. VanderVeen traveled to Paris to witness the parade and see the Louvre with his regiment before reluctantly heading back to America in July.

He had hoped to receive his discharge papers before heading back so that he could travel to Holland to visit his relatives, but the Army did not release him from duty until August of 1918. And even then, it took him three months to secure a boat which would take him to Holland in November, despite his girlfriend, Grace, begging him to come back to her again and again. He stayed in the Netherlands until April of 1919, when he finally returned to America. Interestingly, his postwar writings include a lot of anti-war sentiment, as he expressed his frustration with America’s manipulation of American men and the war in general.

“I hope I am through for life with the army. Had enough of it. But it has been rich on experiences. And I have found out that all this talk about our fight for democracy and our democratic army a big fake, a damned bit. We are the tools and victims of the great money interests, who are fighting each other to death, but it is the little man that got to do the fighting for them under the guise of patriotism or democracy or some other nice sounding slogan....The Allies after crushing the military power of Germany are getting themselves in shape now to crush each other. Bigger armies or bigger navies everywhere. That is the result of our war for [the] world - democracy. It has all been in vain. They will have a hard time to get me in it again.”

His fervent discontent with the American cause so soon after the war ended seems strikingly similar to the widespread criticism of America’s democracy today, since America’s foreign relations and warfare tactics remain controversial topics. I found myself relating to Thomas VanderVeen in the sense that we were both living through significant historical time periods, where death lurked at every turn. Yet his deliberate avoidance of his girlfriend, despite her continuous requests for him to come home, came off as juvenile and unkind; he got to travel the world while she sat at home waiting for him! Thomas VanderVeen’s diaries revealed his ambivalence toward the world after living through a time of crisis, but his dedication to his family and his service are admirable to say the least.

My first and largest in-person project at the archives centered around the Hondelink, Hoekje, and Stegeman families, and their impressive work as missionaries in Japan, whose good works spanned generations. A family friend named Peter Hartmann donated this collection of diaries, journals, newspaper clippings, scrapbooks, and
images relating to the Hondelinks. His graciousness extended so far as to organize some of the materials into neatly labeled manila folders with extra notes and dates on the Hondelink family, making my job a lot easier! Due to COVID, only one person could work in the archives at a time, and so Mr. Reynolds carefully arranged the schedule so that each person could work for two to three hour time slots. Working alone might have been the most difficult part of this internship for me, but I developed a greater sense of independence and pride in my work on this remarkable family’s papers.

Naming the collection served to be one of the most conflicting struggles I faced, as the Hondelink collection actually starts with Grace Hondelink’s parents, the Hoekjes, who emigrated from the Netherlands and served as missionaries in the United States. Reverend John G. Hoekje married Gertrude in 1878, and the couple had six living children, three of whom went on to become missionaries. Grace earned her teaching certificate from Hope College in 1903 and traveled to Japan that same year, where she met her future husband, Garret Hondelink, a resolute and talented preacher who had been in Japan since 1902. Grace and Garret got married in 1904 and had a daughter, Margaret, in Kagoshima. Unfortunately, the Hondelink family’s time in Kagoshima was cut short due to Grace’s serious illness, and in 1908 the Hondelink family returned to the United States. After a few years of searching, the First Reformed Church of Rochester became Garret’s home church, where he and Grace served until his retirement in 1946. Grace became the President of Missionary RCA, a leader of the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), and a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

In the many documents I shuffled through, it became clear that in the winter of 1949, Grace suffered the devastating losses of both her brother, Willis Hoekje, and her husband Garret in the same month. Willis died on January 10, a few weeks before Garret suffered a sudden heart attack on January 31. Letters poured in from friends, family, contacts in Japan, church members, and acquaintances to offer their condolences to Grace and good memories of Garret. It must have been an extremely difficult time for Grace and her daughters to have lost two significant members of their family in such a short amount of time. I was reminded of the loss of my own grandmother during high school, and how hard it was to see my mom in pain, pain that I felt and could not take away from her. Like the Hondelink family, we were upheld by the love and support of our own family and friends during the loss of my grandmother, and the testimony of her goodness by others meant more to us than they could ever know. Grace eventually passed away peacefully in 1961 and was praised for her work as a missionary and her position as a strong female leader.

Willis Hoekje, Grace’s brother, also served as a missionary in Japan, although he was stationed in various locations from 1927 to early 1940, and did not serve at the same time as Grace and Garret. Willis met his wife, Anna Hail, in 1912 in Japan, and they both worked at an all-girl’s school in Osaka. He took many pictures of his time working in Japan, while Garret and Grace’s papers contain many newspaper articles and writings from their time spent there. Their three accounts combine to form a cohesive attempt to spread God’s word in a foreign land without showing disregard or insult toward Japanese culture.

Grace’s sister Gertrude, born in 1890, also graduated from Hope College and served as a missionary in Japan five years after graduating from Hope in 1912. That same year she married Reverend Henry Van Eck Stegeman, who was a member of the board of trustees at Ferris Seminary in 1935 [insert picture] She served as an organist in Japanese churches and made an effort to change the clothing styles for Japanese children to look more American. The couple left Japan permanently in 1941, due to anti-American and Christian sentiment, but Gertrude especially kept in close contact with Grace until her death in 1977.

Hanna Gamelia Hoekje graduated with a teaching degree from Hope, became a teacher at Holland High School in 1917, and was a prominent leader of the Young Women’s Christian Association. She wrote multiple religious and secular poems, one of which she wrote after the unexpected death of her sister, Emma Cornelia, in 1937. A poet myself, albeit not a very good one, I loved reading Hanna’s poetry because I too had written poems in love about my siblings. Emma was also a teacher at Holland High and possibly died of kidney failure at the young age of 42. Hanna was with her when she died, and the collection includes many shocked but sincere telegrams and letters arrived after Emma’s death.

Grace and Garret Hondelink had two daughters, Margaret, born in 1906 in Kagoshima, and Juliana (also known as Polly, Antoinette, Tony, or Julia), born in 1909. Juliana graduated from Hope College as a valedictorian in 1931 and lived until 2002. Her older sister Margaret also graduated from Hope and was a prominent musician in addition to being a dedicated teacher and a model citizen. In 1969, she won the “Citizen of the Year Award” after her retirement four years earlier, and she continued to offer private lessons until 1990. She passed away two years later.

Sifting through Hanna Gamelia’s poems, church programs which Grace had collected, and the piles and
I organized these families both by person and by date into two separate boxes, giving diaries and notebooks their own folders. Sitting in the archives, surrounded by old documents and letters, I found that almost all of one box had been filled with Garret and Grace’s writings on Japan. Although I had more scope on the Hoekje family, Grace and Garret Hondelink dominated this collection to such an extent that I decided to name these materials in honor of them. With these final touches, I completed my work on the Hondelink, Hoekje, and Stegeman families, and took a step back to consider how their singular journey related to my own knowledge and interests. I found the newspaper clippings from Japanese newspapers to be the most interesting to me, as I took a class on Japan and newsmaker clippings from Japanese newspapers to be the most interesting to me, as I took a class on Japan and democracy. Many of the journalists appeared to be ambivalent toward Americans and Christianity, switching between embracing Western ideals and values and condemning them. The abrupt end of Willis Hoekje’s missionary journey made sense to me, as Japanese nationalism had risen to a terrifying pitch by 1939 and anti-American sentiment ran rampant due to the exclusive immigration laws passed in America. I also found myself coming back to appreciating the incredible lives of Grace Hondelink and her daughter Margaret, two women who made such an incredible impact on their respective communities.

My last internship project, the Myron “Mike” Van Ark collection, was an online postcard project, which allowed me to continue my work when I was quarantined a second time. The collection consisted of mainly postcards. It was such a large digital collection that another archive student researcher and I split the collection in two, each working to identify more than five hundred images to determine if they were part of the collection. Not dissimilar to doing a puzzle, I would come across postcards that looked exactly the same, but with different addressee’s, or only the front or the back of a card. The postcards could be traced back to 1890 or as recent as 2006, but almost all of the postcards showed images of Holland, Waukazoo, Zeeland, and other Michigan landmarks. Although this project remained the largest, it was also the most difficult and time consuming since there were hundreds of images, and I had to compare each one with the digital collection online. Nevertheless this project enabled me to navigate technological platforms better, and gave me insight on how archival work can continue successfully online.

Thomas VanderVeen’s search to find meaning after World War I, the Hondelink family’s inspiring journey to spread the Christian faith, and the digital beauty of the postcards from the Van Ark collection gave me a varied view of archival work and the modern world. As much as we may not want to admit it, this virus has tested our faith in our country, in our relationships with others, and even in God. But it has also reminded us of the value of our fellow human beings, the importance of accepting those who differ from us, and the value of something as simple as love. For it is love that drove the Hondelink’s to a different country, love that led Thomas VanderVeen to critique his own country, and love that we carefully process these beautiful images of Holland.

As I sit here, in a sanctuary-like workroom in the archives, my love for this internship, the gift of in-person classes, and the growth of the last four years overwhelms me. All at once I am aware of how loved and lucky I am to be given this opportunity, not only to gain experience, but to report it to you. This has been a year full of trials, but also of external beauty, new beginnings, and hidden gems in our own lives. It is my hope that my experience here sparks you to reflect upon your own life, and the significance of that stories and history intertwined.

About the author:

Mary Laffey was born the oldest of three children in Downers Grove, Illinois. From a very early age, she developed a deep love for reading, writing, and history, a passion which she pursued while at Hope College. Mary graduated in May of 2021, and currently spends her time working at Oak Brook Public Library, videotaping the weird things her dog does, or devouring historical fiction novels.
Kukla, Burr Tillstrom, Ollie, and Fran Allison, ca. 1957