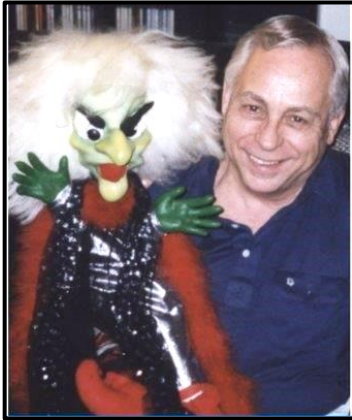


Larry Smith

A Puppeteer That Was Nobody's Dummy



If you grew up in southwest Ohio during the 1950s through the 1970s, you are likely familiar with a famous local TV show featuring hand puppets created by puppeteer Larry Smith, Battie Hattie's daddy.

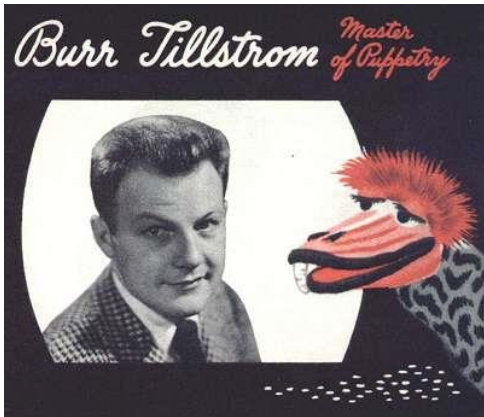
Debuting in Dayton, Ohio, in 1952 at age 14, Larry began puppeteering on WHIO with a show titled the *Tic Tock Toy Shop* and earned \$3 an hour.

Remaining on the air through 1956, the *Tic Tock Toy Shop* aired opposite Walt Disney's *Mickey Mouse Club*—with Larry besting Disney in the ratings for the entire run.

Larry was mentored by Burr Tillstrom, creator of the show *Kukla, Fran and Ollie*, and Larry enjoyed ratings higher than those of *Captain Kangaroo*.



Donated on June 29, 1974, to the Vent Haven Museum in Fort Mitchell, Kentucky, is a dummy of Larry Smith himself! To the right-hand side are three of his hand puppets. Photo [Vent Haven Museum](#)



Creator of the *Kukla, Fran and Ollie* show, Burr Tillstrom was unique in the history of television. His live, daily, ad-libbed puppet show was watched by more adults than children and had sponsors like *Life* magazine and The Ford Motor Co. Photo Source [Kuklapolitan](#)

Smith's show was a hit, and he helped raise the popularity of the *Uncle Al Show* on WCPO, which had an unprecedented run from 1950 to 1985.

In 1960, Smith went to New York to work on the Broadway show *Kukla, Burr and Ollie*.

Did you know there was a ventriloquist's dummy amid Larry's puppets? The dummy was used in the *Contemporaries* TV show from 1963 to 1964, ten years before the *Muppet Show*.

This was an evening show for adults and kids and was about the time he was hanging around with Jim Henson, so a few of the puppets have the *Muppet* look to them. But he was way ahead of its time and ten full years before the *Muppet Show* premiered, also in primetime. Larry tinkered with soft-sided puppets but eventually returned to his *celastic* hard-mold creations because he felt he could do more with them.

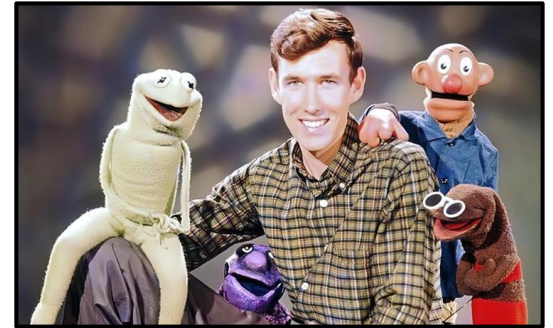
Smith left WCPO in 1964 and went on to work at WLWT, WCET, and WXIX.



The Larry Smith ventriloquist's dummy is on display at the [Vent Haven Museum](#).

In 1968, WXIX TV premiered the show *Larry Smith Puppets*, which became such a hit that sports celebrities such as Johnny Bench and Pete Rose—along with music and entertainment stars like David Cassidy, Bobby Sherman, and Tiny Tim—made appearances.

Larry attended the National Puppetry Festival at the Detroit Institute of Art in 1960 on his way to vacation in New York City. After the festival, Burr Tillstrom said, “Why don't you and Jim and Jane Henson, come over to Saugatuck and spend the weekend with me?” Jim Henson was an up-and-coming puppeteer with his own local show called *Sam and Friends*, which introduced Kermit the Frog which lasted from 1955 to 1961. The Muppets, as we know them, didn't get their start until 1969 on *Sesame Street*.



Growing up in Leland, Mississippi, Jim Henson began developing puppets in high school. He created the show *Sam and Friends* while a University of Maryland freshman in collaboration with Jane Nebel, whom he later married. Photo [DAPS Magic](#)

Larry retired in 2006 after his last public appearance at the [National Voice of America Museum of Broadcasting](#) when he received the Founder's Award from the [Media Heritage Foundation](#).

See the entire original collection and puppeteering apparatus at the [National Voice of America Museum of Broadcasting](#)

Sources:

[WCPO](#), [WVXU](#), [DAPS Magic](#), [Kuklapolitan](#), [Wayne Martin Puppets™](#), [Vent Haven Museum](#), [Facebook Larry Smith](#)

Dummy photos, circa 1962, courtesy of the Vent Haven Museum

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