



Tribune photograph by MAGGIE MCGINLEY

"Diamond" Jim Parker clowns it up while holding some of the circus clown props he has collected. Parker's clown

paraphernalia collection "... is like going through a graveyard," he says.

Man didn't join circus; it joined him

By JEANETTE WHITE
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GIBSONTON — When Jim Parker pleaded with his parents to let him quit grade school and join the circus, they would hear nothing of it.

So instead, the Nebraska native saw to it that the circus joined him.

Now, 40 years later, the ghosts of Parker's Big Top heroes surround him in the form of figurines, photographs and posters cluttered among worn, glittery costumes and colorful props, comprising what he suspects is one of the largest private collections of

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— “Diamond” Jim Parker

circus memorabilia.

“Walking down here is like going through a graveyard,” says the 51-year-old Parker, fingering an over-sized white leather shoe. “I see all my old friends who are gone. Every-

thing has a special meaning.”

A faded foam rubber tooth.

Painted metal wardrobe trunks.

Blue jeans twice as wide as Parker's own 270-pound, 6-foot-2-inch frame.

And row after row of 8-by-10-inch photographs of laughing clowns, frowning clowns, dancing, clowning clowns, cluttering all but small strips of the brown paneled walls in his back-street, double-wide mobile home.

“Diamond” Jim Parker, ringmaster of it all, sinks into an armchair, apologizes for the lack of air conditioning, and wonders

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Circus collection is man's life

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aloud at how it all began.

"I really wanted to be an animal trainer, but where you gonna find an elephant in Nebraska? The big excitement was when the circus came to town."

And the lump left in his throat when it left town inspired Parker to begin collecting programs, newspaper articles, photographs — all the circus-related memorabilia he could find.

But he never outgrew his attraction to the tent shows, as his parents hoped he would, Parker said. And he never will.

Instead, it led him to do public relations work for circuses throughout his 20-year Navy career. And when Parker was 22, it wasn't difficult for circus owner E.K. Fernandez to convince him to clown part-time in Honolulu.

He ripped sheet after scribbled sheet from a notebook before settling on a face design based on diamonds: patriotic red and blue, until he learned black left a bolder impression.

"Diamond Jim," the novice clown dubbed himself, and he began rearranging his military leaves around performances and benefit shows.

Throughout the shows, Parker met many of his clown alley heroes, whose autographed pictures now cover his walls, whose costume trunks he brushes for cobwebs, whose likenesses he copies in the dozens of figurines he paints for the quarter-inch scaled circus tents sprawled across a table in his living room.

Lou Jacobs, once billed as America's Greatest Clown, remembers working with Diamond Jim in San Diego in the early 1960s at a Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey show.

"We had to go through the routines, and he did very well. He looked it, you know?" says 86-year-old Jacobs, who retired from clowning in Sarasota two years ago. He first saw Parker's collection in April.

"The last time I saw him, he asked if I had something I could give him someday, maybe a tie or a suit," Jacobs says. "I probably will, too."

Among Parker's treasures is a

plastic figurine fashioned after Jacobs, complete with his trademark red bulb nose and high forehead.

Remembering his friends, Parker gingerly picks up his version of the late tramp clown Emmett Kelly, toting a pea-sized head of cabbage.

"And I chewed gum to make the large bust and rear end for the Bobby Kay clown," he says, pointing out a curvaceous pink doll. "But a cockroach chewed it up."

Again serious, Parker shakes his head. "When I started, I never dreamed I'd have this much."

He strolls into the small kitchen, along the way pointing out circus-related novels, videos, license plates, portraits. And when he reaches the clown-shaped refrigerator magnets, he laughs his startling, booming laugh. "I'm not a well person."

And the best years of all, he says, were the four after he retired from the Navy. Then, finally, he became what he calls "a real clown," a full-time, professional clown, trav-

eling with Bentley Brothers Circus and Circus Vargas.

But then came the strokes in 1979, and a doctor's orders to slow down. Thank God, Parker says, for the job offer to be caretaker at the Gibsonton lot where several circus families live in recreational vehicles during the off-season.

So in the winter, at least, he's surrounded by his favorite kinds of people — the showfolks who tediously cover their skin with clown white and grease paint, who train their lions and elephants in his backyard, who swing from a bar hanging in the oak tree near his window.

Now Parker's main concern is finding space to expand his collection, which is rapidly outgrowing his Gibsonton home. And then ...

"What happens when I'm gone?"

Parker shrugs, and pauses for a long time.

"I don't know," he says quietly. "Leave it to someone who cares, that's all I know."