

Clown's collection keeps circus alive

By JEANETTE WHITE
Tribune Staff Writer

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 circus memorabilia.

"Walking down here is like going through a graveyard," says 51-year-old Parker, fingering an oversized white leather shoe. "I see all my old friends who are gone. Everything 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 aloud at how it all began.

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

But he never outgrew his attraction to the tent shows, as his parents suspected 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.

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.

"He's got the best collection in the country I've seen, and I've seen a lot of them. It brought back memories. Some of the boys died off, and they had no relatives, or relatives who didn't think much about it. Or nobody claimed their belongings, and Jim got it.