The Granpa Cratchet Story

A Personal Interest Story – By Jay Ramseyer

Watch out, here comes Granpa Cratchet driving a miniature model "T" across the fairgrounds with radiator squirting, horn blowing, and hodown music blaring almost as loudly as Granpa himself yelling “Watch out! Old man coming through!” Granpa calls it his "Old Time Hucksterwagon", a phrase left over from the childhood of his creator, Sam Bowman. The idea for the miniature truck came from a local grocery store on wheels that actually traveled to homes out in the county in the nineteen fifties near Sam's hometown of Sharpsville, Indiana.

Granpa's miniature truck travels all over the United States to fairs, festivals, amusement parks, conventions, and corporate functions of all kinds.

Granpa brings back the nostalgia of the good`ole days complete with all kinds of great products that Granpa tries to sell like his `Ole Time Miracle Wonder All Purpose Ailment Elixir, Lot-A-Bull Fertilizer or his All Purpose Hog Wash. Of course, we can't forget the assortment of gadgets especially designed to make life easier, like Granpa's false teeth washer he invented when his own set of dentures accidentally fell into the blender. You can expect a wild story with every product.

Granpa, a professional puppet like you’d see on national TV, seems to be a cross between the characters of Ralph Cramden (from "The Honeymooners") and Mr. Haney (of the "Green Acres" TV sitcom), as he spins old time jokes and stories all rooted in the life of the good old days. When you run across him he might be getting arrested, towed, or ticketed by the local sheriff, all in a good natured publicity stunt of course.

While adults like the stories linked to the good ole days, the kids seem to like the hugs Granpa hands out to every child. If the jokes and stories are not entertaining enough, just watch the faces of the children. Their smiles say it all.

**The Beginning of A Very Successful Business**

Actually, Bowman’s story didn't begin with Granpa Cratchet. It started out some thirty five years ago in Sunday School where he was assigned to work with very young children. While trying to find creative ways to teach the kids he purchased some puppets from a local toy store. His success with these led to the purchase of some professional puppets and He found the perfect platform for his creativity.

He soon took the puppets into his local school where he was teaching. He had been assigned as reading tutor to a little first grader who had been abused by her father and wouldn't speak to Sam. He stuck one of his characters, Secret Agent Ralph, out through a box and spoke through the puppet. The little girl would talk to the puppet and so began the building of trust and eventually she turned from the puppet to speak directly to her tutor.

The principal saw Sam carrying the puppets in and invited him to do shows in the school library for all the kids. It was there that Sam really learned the art of puppetry and all those important lessons about what works great with kids in a show.

Sam was working with a large retailer at Northwoods Mall in Peoria, Illinois where he resided at the time. He saw several shows come to the mall, some not done so well, so he offered his services. The very first show was a big hit and more mall bookings followed.

Everything Sam saw other shows do, he did better or differently, allowing the show to evolve itself, with excellent results. What emerged were miniature buildings, slapstick humor and audience participation. He also developed a central character with a consistent name and personality. Then he created an advertising theme complete with all the radio, television and newspaper ads needed to present a successful advertising campaign.

The show quickly developed into a very effective format presented in a life like setting completely self contained with sound, lighting and special effects.

His early shows featured a character called Secret Agent Ralph, in his Secret Agent Hideout. In the show he has to arrive at his telephone booth for his secret message before the phone stops ringing, or the phone booth self-destructs. You can hear the kids a mile away as they help Ralph get to the phone, catch the bad buy and fulfill his now not so secret mission, making a whole lot of kids, parents and event managers very happy.

**The Invention of the Puppetmobile**

Still, something more was needed. Sam noticed how much better the children and adults responded to a character when they got to touch or talk to the character one on one. This was seen in a special "workshop for schools" held during the weekdays at the mall. Kids were bussed in for special demonstrations, billed as field trips, where the kids could make their very own sack puppet to take home.

Bowman also noticed that most of the merchants in the mall, who were paying the bill, often didn't see the show, which made it difficult to resell. The answer to this problem came from fellow puppeteer John Geddes in the idea of a puppet vehicle that could drive around. It served two very important purposes. First it allowed the show to travel around the mall and appear in front of all the stores so they could see how effective it was. Second, it let the kids meet the character one on one, with lots of conversation and hugs.

The idea of a puppet driving a miniature vehicle, with the puppeteer hidden inside, soon proved to have great entertainment value in itself. Out of this success was born the philosophy that every child should be able to feel like they are the friend of the main character.

The outstanding characters, telling awesome stories, with important themes and messages set in realistic building type staging, all added up to rave reviews by top promotional people in the business and Secret Agent Ralph began to travel.

After Ralph played several consecutive times in the same area, the local children began to know the show too well, so the idea was born to create several stage shows that could rotate. This kept the show fresh while building a following with each repeat appearance of Ralph. So Ralph became a mild mannered reporter, disguised as a secret agent, complete with a miniature TV station and a media van in which to drive around. The TV station hosts a wide array of shows with diverse themes all disguised as TV shows and Ralph drives around in his miniature TV van interviewing people.

From there several themes were developed providing entertainment to fit every season and event a mall might want to showcase.

**Granpa Cratchet Is Born**

The next link in the chain of events was an invitation to play the Heart of Illinois Fair. The manager, Ilene Fry, suggested the development of a country theme that would better suit fairs and Granpa Cratchet was born.

Granpa was natural since many of the ideas Sam comes up with can be traced back to his childhood days on the farm in Indiana. "Being away from the city and having three younger siblings to entertain all helped me develop my creativity," says Bowman.

He also spent many hours riding the tractor with his own grandpa, who was his tie to the nostalgic years of the steam engine and threshing machines. "My Grandpa was the model farmer from the good `ole days. He'd quote the village blacksmith and sing "precious name, oh how sweet."’ It all rubbed off on Sam and the effects can be seen in Granpa's shows.

**Old Fashioned Themes Developed**

Granpa now has six different stage shows and each one teaches an important lesson that kids need to hear. At his general store Granpa teaches the golden rule, at his workshop he teaches safety first, at the chicken coop he teaches work together, at his farmer’s market he teaches take the garbage out, at his farmhouse he teaches follow your instructions and at the barnyard he teaches do your chores. All lessons parents love. DVD’s of these shows can be purchased after the show or at Granpa’s web site, [www.oldcoot.com](http://www.oldcoot.com).

Every show is filled with the same slapstick and audience participation formula that has made them a great success coast to coast with several touring units. Bowman now has five of the little PuppetmobilesTM.

Over his thirty seven year span it is conservatively estimated that Sam’s characters have performed over fifty thousand shows at more than two thousand events and all over the world by satellite. Granpa has appeared several times on national television and around the world; four times on the Today Show alone. He has been sponsored by such corporate giants as Pizza Hut, Taco Bell, Pepsi, Coke, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Campbell's Soup, Exxon Oil Co. and many more.

Sam’s creativity has generated several ways to continue the impact of Granpa Cratchet after he’s left the local event. After each show mom and dad can purchase a DVD of the show or a Granpa Fun Pack filled with movies, wall posters and video games and a music album that teaches the lesson of the show.

As Granpa travels around the grounds in his Puppetmobile he gives out free be-in-a-movie tickets that show a child how to visit Granpa’s home on the internet at [www.oldcoot.com](http://www.oldcoot.com) where they can view short videos, learn more about Granpa and play games that teach his lessons.

**The Man Behind the Puppet**

Sound like the all American success story? Well, maybe. But you can't really appreciate this story unless you know a little something about the Sam Bowman behind the scenes. He has been a public speaker, retail manager, singer, teen center director, radio announcer, television producer and writer, carpenter, factory worker, machinist, meat inspector, auto driving teacher, and church pastor just to name a few.

His patchwork past begins to make sense when you understand Sam's commitment to his faith. Most of his life has been spent with people, helping them build their faith. This is his central purpose in life.

Sam believes these many experiences have been God's way of developing his talents and readying him for greater service. Even now, all these experiences are well utilized in the formation of a business that requires a wide range of skills. As a born again Christian Sam's convictions run deep. They have helped him through financial, business and personal crises. While there is no direct religious message in the shows the high standards of quality, family material is quite evident.

Your children can visit Sam’s characters on line at [www.oldcoot.com](http://www.oldcoot.com) or you can read inspirational writings from Sam’s life on his personal blog and web site, [www.samuelswords.com](http://www.samuelswords.com).

We may be able to see one final lesson here. This country was founded on the freedom to pursue life, liberty and worship God as we see fit. Perhaps we need that part of our heritage renewed for here is one example of its positive effects; the freedom to discover, to create, to build and freely pursue one’s dreams.

Sam has been known to work at summer children’s camps for little or no pay. One such situation resulted in the loss of Sam’s own two year old son to a drowning accident. He recounts the story of his son's favorite toy was an audio cassette Sam had made featuring his characters and how he demanded it be played every day and how he was then laid to rest with it clutched in his hand. Perhaps no one will ever know how great the impact has been on the countless thousands of children all across the world who have been touched by Sam’s characters. Granpa Cratchet may not be famous by modern media standards, but he lives on in hearts of millions of children who wait all year just to go see a show and get a hug from their favorite old time Granpa.

You can read hilarious stories of life on the road with Granpa and hundreds of his one line jokes in a new book called ***Because Granpa Says So, That’s Why,*** available on Amazon. Sam and his wife Debbie live on their mini-farm in Indiana with their grandson, Anthony. Together they have written a new book, also available on Amazon; The Summer of Paintless Toenails: Losing a son, gaining a grandson. Its the story of how they put two families together and survived drugs, death and diapers and are now starting a new family in their mid sixties. An ever growing number of grandparents in their sixties are raising second families. The book chronicles their story and has lots of tips and insights designed to help guide grandparents as they work to raise a generation of whole, healthy, happy and productive children.

You can meet Granpa Cratchet coming up at (your local event information) . Bring out the whole family and enjoy one of his highly entertaining shows.