

The Toy Soldier Turns 30

Editor Stuart A. Hessney covers The Toy Soldier's 30th anniversary autumn open house hosted by Jim and Carol Hillestad

Text and Photos: Stuart A. Hessney

Halloween was a great treat for traders and collectors who made the pilgrimage to the Paradise Valley of Pennsylvania's Pocono Mountains for The Toy Soldier's 30th anniversary open house and cellar sale Saturday, Oct. 31, 2015.

Proud proprietor James H. Hillestad and his wonderful wife, Carol, usually host open houses on a semiannual basis on the Thursday before the springtime Miniature Figure Collectors of America Show and Mart in Valley Forge, Pa.; and on the Saturday prior to the fall's East Coast Toy Soldier Show & Sale in Hackensack, N.J. Typically, many of the attendees stop by Jim's museum and shop while en route to one of those major U.S. shows, as was the case on this Halloween.

Jim had been eagerly looking forward to the 30th anniversary event. He even hired a very talented band, The Wayfarers, to set up in the lovely garden outside the museum to play and sing 19th-century tunes reminiscent of the American Civil War period.

Jim's hard work and high hopes for a successful event were rewarded by



Note how American Dimestore toy soldiers do battle around the base of the museum's sign on Halloween 2015.

Mother Nature providing ideal sunny weather and a terrific turnout of about 70 people. The Hillestads based their attendance estimate on consumption of Carol's delicious split pea and ham soup. Tasty sandwiches, hot dogs,

drinks and other sundry treats were also part of the gracious hospitality extended to attendees.

It was a truly memorable day that was a milestone three decades in the making.



Jim Hillestad looks ecstatic as construction of his museum gets under way in 1990. (Photo Courtesy of The Toy Soldier)



The two-story museum begins to take shape in the Pocono Mountains.



Canadian collectors Jeff Duncan and Eric Clarke (from left) in the museum's lower-level gallery.

PARK LIGHTS SPARK

In 1984, Jim was working for Chemical Bank at the World Trade Center in New York City when his friend and future brother-in-law Park Hammatt paid a visit to his office. Jim asked him what brought him to Manhattan? Park answered that he was going to attend a toy soldier fair across the Hudson River at Schuetzen Park in North Bergen, N.J.

Jim immensely enjoyed playing with 54-mm painted metal Britains toy soldiers as a young boy, so he was intrigued. He returned to his Staten Island home and dug out a box full of his childhood toy soldiers lovingly packed away by his thoughtful parents.

Jim took a few of his sets along on the day of the show. The first dealer that he showed them to (whom shall remain nameless to protect the guilty because he's still active in the hobby)



John Sparmblack with the Victorian Christmas sleigh set that he made exclusively from *The Toy Soldier*.



New ACW Union railway diorama titled "Engines of War, Petersburg 1864."

raised Jim's eyebrows in astonishment and dismay by pressing one of the antique toy soldiers to his nose, sniffing it and saying, "Smells like fresh paint."

Being a newcomer to the modern-day hobby and all, Jim thought that encounter was kind of weird. However, another dealer gladly bought all of his sets for \$150. Armed with ready cash, Jim curiously continued exploring the show.

Suddenly, he discovered newly made toy soldiers from Trophy Miniatures of Wales Ltd. It was love at first sight! Compared to Jim's relatively static old Britains, Trophy figures were vigorous and action-packed. He bought some

and instantaneously his interest in collecting was reignited, all thanks to Park's fortuitous influence.

BUSINESS BORN

By the following year, Jim had already begun selling figures to help subsidize the expense of collecting more for himself, and thus *The Toy Soldier* was born in 1985!

It was still the pre-Internet age of mankind when collectors had to buy things via the telephone and/or mail order. Jim became frustrated because it could take six weeks or longer to get an order fulfilled, sometimes because the set desired had to be made. He



Host Jim Hillestad (left) with Antonio Marti Cusido of Alymer. Jim is holding a presentation sword from the 1981 wedding of the United Kingdom's Charles, Prince of Wales, to Princess Diana.



The attendees included Dan Jones, Joe Saine and Doug Dearth (from left).

conceived the idea of stocking a sufficient inventory of sets to provide customers with that era's snail-mail equivalent of instant gratification when it came to order fulfillment.

The Toy Soldier's headquarters became three storage units near the airport in Newark, N.J. Jim still worked at the bank, so his toy soldier business was conducted after hours and on weekends.

"I vividly recall Saturday mornings," Jim mused. "Armed with a thermos of coffee, portable radio, lawn chair and order book, I set off from Staten Island to the storage facility. Exhilarated by the thought of doing business, I unlocked a unit's padlock, raised the corrugated steel door – a heartening



TS&MF's editor mustered this impromptu "Collection of Characters & Idiots" for an open house photo-op. They include a scout version of the old Britains Village Idiot crafted by Don Ritchie, a funny figure of Jim Hillestad wearing a Viking helmet reflecting his Norwegian heritage made by Martin Ritchie (no relation to Don), and a British Army line infantry Idiot created by the late Bill Brunton.



Collectibles for sale in Carol's cottage studio included this British "Park Concert Band of the King's Own Scottish Borderers" made by the late E. Joe Shimek II of Potsdamer Zinnsoldaten in the style of old toy soldiers from Germany.

sound as it loudly heralded the occasion – and set up shop."

"There never seemed to be enough coffee, the radio lost out to the planes roaring overhead toward the nearby airport, and the wind (laden sometimes with snow) whistled through the alleys," he added. "But it was my business and it was exciting!"

New shipments from overseas were stacked on steel shelves inside the storage units. Jim would draw stock to fill orders from the past week, load the toy troops into his car and take them home to the couple's co-op apartment.

"It was a wonderful place to live, but

it didn't lend itself to all that goes into packing and shipping toy soldiers," Jim related. "Two huge bags of Styrofoam peanuts, which we affectionately dubbed Inez and Fred after my cousins, were kept in the bathtub. The shower curtain concealed them from visiting company. But despite our best efforts, evidence of Inez and Fred could be found throughout the loft."

CRESCO CALLS

With The Toy Soldier business and Jim's personal collection rapidly outgrowing the Hillestad residence, the couple decided to go house



New Zulu War diorama depicting Lord Chelmsford's return to the scene of the Battle of Isandlwana in January 1879.



A couple of *The Wayfarers* perform in garden.

hunting. They found a suitable eight-acre property with a nice house that didn't need a lot of work and moved to Cresco in Northeastern Pennsylvania.

"That move coincided with my leaving Chemical Bank after 26 years," Jim recounted. "Our goal was to find privacy, be near water, be able to build a museum dedicated to displaying toy soldiers, and be within a two-hour drive of New York City and Philadelphia. We were successful on all counts."

Construction of the two-story museum was begun in 1990 and it opened in 1991. Visitors can view beautifully displayed toy soldiers, dozens of detailed dioramas with



Martin Ritchie's U.S. Army 3rd Infantry Regiment "Old Guard" Continental Color Guard and Fife and Drum Corps. Note how the drum major salutes with his left hand.

wide-ranging historical themes, and a world-class collection of militaria and British royal memorabilia.

The museum stands only a 200-step walk down a garden path from the Hillestad home. The museum is enveloped in a pine forest and sits on a ridge overlooking a trout stream that was a favorite fishing spot of U.S. President Teddy Roosevelt. The Hillestads' neighbors include deer, turkeys, coyotes, black bears and numerous tourist attractions.

GARDEN PARTY

Vendors displaying their wares during the autumn open house included Richard Walker of History Works/

Del Prado, who set up a display of his figures in the garden. He also brought along some odds and ends, such as two Christmas-themed ACW sets made by W. Britain exclusively for Treefrog Treasures, British Toy Soldier Co. ceremonial and World War I soldiers, and glossy items from Frontline Figures on behalf of his pals Peter Reuss, Patrick Adams and Gerard Prime, respectively.

Also in the garden was a model of the Arc de Triomphe de l'Etoile in Paris offered for sale by Michael Rosso, who formerly operated Stockade Miniatures in nearby Stroudsburg, Pa.

Inside the museum, Pennsylvania Martin Ritchie of U.S. Military



Prototype of a British landing barge from the Battle of Quebec by John Jenkins Designs.



Victorian England Christmas display, complete with the Toy Kingdom shop.



Examples of Frontline Figures garrison part of Richard Walker's table in the garden.



Richard Walker showcased his own Del Prado figures along with collectibles from some other makers.



W. Britain prototypes/master figures painted in gloss portraying circa 1795 British Army 10th Light Dragoons.



Collector Don Wilkens and Richard Walker of History Works/Del Prado (from left) outside the museum.

Miniatures spotlighted his U.S. Army 3rd Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard) Fife and Drum Corps in Continental Army-style uniforms. The drum major carries a spontoon and uniquely salutes with his left hand to uphold a tradition started by order of Gen. George Washington due to risks involved when marching through the narrow streets of 18th-century towns. Also on parade was a Color Guard depicting the ceremonial unit based in Washington, D.C. The standard-bearers and escorts are modeled in blue infantry tunics while the musicians wear the reverse of red jackets. These sets are perennial favorites of collectors, according to Martin.

As usual, The Toy Soldier's proprietor had an interesting selection of items by various makers from around the world for sale both in his museum and Carol's cottage studio located on the opposite end of the garden. Museum highlights include Jim's exclusive,



Mike Rosso was selling an impressive model of the Arc de Triomphe de l'Etoile in Paris.



Linda Wilkens couldn't make it to the open house, but she sent her husband Don with a cake complete with pictures of the museum's sign and toy soldiers saluting The Toy Soldier's 30th anniversary.

Christmas-themed Victorian sleigh set titled "Last-Minute Delivery – No Room for Error." It was crafted by John Sparmlack, who was on hand. Jim's latest dioramas depicted an ACW Union military train and the aftermath of the Anglo-Zulu War's Battle of Isandlwana.

STUDIO STUNNERS

Courtesy of Paul N. Herrmann from the Toy Soldier Shoppe in Greenfield, Wis., the studio housed a John Jenkins Designs resin prototype of British landing barge filled with grenadiers en route to the French and Indian War's fateful Battle of Quebec. The details include nicely varied characterizations of oarsmen.

The studio was also the setting

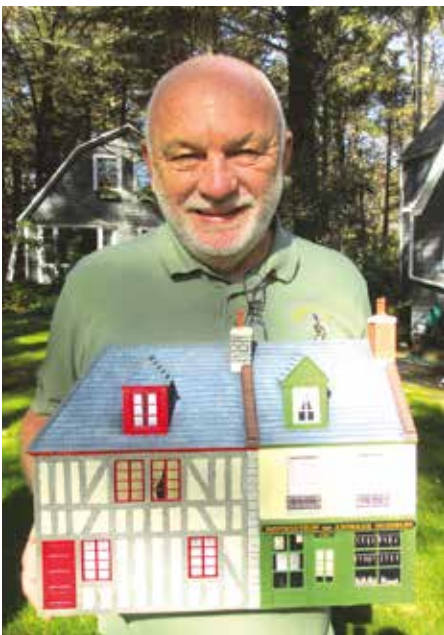


Ken and Ericka Osen packed a lot of visual punch into this relatively small pedestal diorama animated by figures from W. Britain's 18th-century "Clash of Empires" series.

for a splendid display of W. Britain prototypes/master figures and dioramas on wooden pedestals mounted by General Manager and Creative Director Kenneth A. Osen. He was accompanied by his wife, Ericka, who brought some of their own Hudson & Allen Studio scenic items. They included a marvelous model of a much

photographed French exterminator's shop in Paris complete with dead rats hanging in the window. Canadian collector Don Ritchie bought the "Rat Killer's Shop" and plans to display it with cats peering into the window.

Makers and dealers on hand just to simply have some fun, socialize and tour the museum included Al Green



Canadian collector Don Ritchie caught himself the French "Rat Killer's Shop" made by Hudson & Allen Studio.



Jim and Carol Hillestad cut the cake just prior to a champagne toast to The Toy Soldier's 30th anniversary. Harry Jones is seated to Jim's right.

of Green's Collectables, Daniel P. Jones with his dad Harry, TS&MF cartoonist Doug Dearth from Order of Battle, Joseph Saine, and Alymer's Antonio Marti Cusido. The latter took the honors for traveling the farthest distance by finding his way to Jim's museum all the way from Valencia, Spain.

Affable American collector Don Wilkens' wife, Linda, was unable to attend, but she had graciously designed a huge sheet cake complete with pictures of the museum's sign and figures by various makers saluting The Toy Soldier's 30th anniversary. The event was climaxed by Jim and Carol cutting the cake and, most appropriately, everyone raising a

champagne toast to what has become one of our hobby's greatest institutions well-worth visiting by appointment or during an open house.

"We thank all our wonderful customers, manufacturers and fellow dealers who have helped us along the way," Jim said. "It's a privilege to have such friends." ■

HILLESTAD'S GETTYSBURG DIORAMAS ON THE MOVE AGAIN

James H. Hillestad's four dioramas depicting key moments during the three-day Battle of Gettysburg in 1863 are continuing their tour of historic sites in Pennsylvania.

Jim deployed figures produced by W. Britain to create the dioramas. They were originally displayed for four years in the National Civil War Museum in Harrisburg, Pa. A stint in the Pennsylvania State Capitol in Harrisburg followed.

Most recently the dioramas were moved during October 2015 to The Columns in Milford, Pa. The historic home houses the museum of the Pike County Historical Society in Northeastern Pennsylvania.

The jewel of this museum's collection is known simply as

the "Lincoln Flag." After President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated by actor John Wilkes Booth in 1865, the large flag which had been draped over the balustrade was used to cushion his head as he lay mortally wounded on the floor of the Presidential Box at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C.

Through a series of coincidences and bequests, the flag became the property of a Milford family before it was eventually donated to the Historical Society. It is on permanent display at The Columns. The four Gettysburg dioramas are exhibited in the Lincoln Room of the museum.

Jim is a military historian and the founder of The Toy Soldier Museum in Cresco, Pa. The year 2015 marked The Toy Soldier's 30th anniversary.

Jim has also published more than 100 articles on historical events



Jim Hillestad with his ACW dioramas on display in the Lincoln Room of their new museum home.

and subjects. Many of them have appeared in the pages of TS&MF and The Standard, the quarterly journal of the W. Britain Collectors Club.

--Stuart A. Hessney



ACW dioramas animated by W. Britain toy soldiers are now housed in The Columns, a mansion museum in Milford, Pa.



The "Lincoln Flag" is the jewel of the Pike County Historical Society's collection.