A GOOD SHOW
CHEAP
THE GENIUS OF CHARLES ALBERT BOWDISH
By Carole A. Briggs
Just one year after Ferris demonstrated his wheel at the 1893 Chicago Exposition, Albert Neal Bowdish and his two oldest sons built an “aerial carousel” or wooden wheel that wowed the locals in Brookville, a small town north of Pittsburgh in Jefferson County. Two years later, a seventh child was born into this household of mechanical geniuses joining a long line of Bowdish artisans and entertainers. That seventh child was Charles Albert Bowdish, the creative genius behind what has become the Miniature Railroad & Village™ at the Carnegie Science Center in Pittsburgh and a man who enjoyed and shared his hobby for nearly 70 years.

In a letter written years later, Charles identified the people in the 1894 photograph of his father’s “aerial carousel.” They couldn’t have known it that day, but the Bowdish family would continue to entertain through mechanical means for decades to come.

**The Early Bowdishes**

According to family genealogy, Bowdish forebears arrived in North America from England about 1642. By 1838, eight years after Brookville had become the seat of Jefferson County, a shoemaker and teamster named Asa Bowdish had made his way from Erie to Warsaw Township. Twice married, Asa had three children by his first wife and four sons by his second: Philo, Warren, Joseph, and George. The four boys eventually settled in Brockwayville (now Brockway).2

“I ‘spose that the man who has done the most for this town, and got the least for it, is the Bowdishes,” was a comment made to reporter Bion Butler in an 1899 article describing the “four brothers who were geniuses in an humble way.” They built houses near one another, as did some of their sons. They built mills, and more wagons and furniture and things of that kind than all the rest of the men in this town…. Down in Brookville, Warren Bowdish built himself a couple of different houses and one or two wagon shops and George had one house there…. They built the first old velocipedes [an early form of bicycle] ever seen up here way back about 1870…. everyone [sic] of them was a mechanic, and all worked in wood.3

George, the father of Albert and grandfather of Charles, was a cabinetmaker and millwright, described as “a veritable mechanical genius,… able to do any kind of skillful work…. he lived at various points in the county, Brookville, Brockwayville, and Warsaw township, and in the States of Kansas and Michigan….”4

The family had musical talent, too—they were fiddlers, drummers, and organists. “George’s boy [Albert] can read music a blasted sight better than he can read print, and he could play an organ better than any cub in
this town when he was half grown. At the end of his recollections, Butler’s unknown interviewee pondered a bit.

You know, it seems to me that that’s the kind of man you want in a community. They haven’t never made such money for themselves, but they have lived, and been good neighbors, and they was never on the township for support…. for they ought to be rich if they had all they was entitled to, when all they ever got was their board and clothes…. ’

Young Albert “spent his boyhood assisting his father in mechanical work, acquiring a knowledge of such matters which has been invaluable to him. When quite young he began taking part in shows whenever opportunity offered, but did not adopt the profession until 1894.”

In 1876 Albert courted and married Theodosia Frances Rhines, the daughter of a staunch Baptist and lumberman in Richardsville, a hamlet north of Brookville. Their first son, Adrian Stean, was born there, but then the young family began to move about. Harry Neal was born in Traverse City, Michigan. The grave of a third son, Andrew Judson, who was born and died on September 26, 1882, is unknown. The first daughter, Mable Alice, was born in Brookville in 1885, but a fourth son, George Andrew, was born in Indianola, Nebraska, in 1888. By 1892, the family had returned to Brookville where Dorothea Mae was born. Finally, on February 28, 1896, the seventh child and fifth son, Charles Albert, arrived.

Albert found work at the Brookville Furniture Company and soon became a foreman. He also took advantage of the company’s machines to build his “aerial carousal.” Charles described what he’d known growing up:

The only one of its kind, it was the second Ferris Wheel in the world and perhaps the only one built of wood. More than 40 feet high, it was built ready for operation soon after the first one that graced the Chicago World’s Fair, year 1893, and some time before the third one was in operation in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Father operated his Ferris Wheel with a threshing-machine engine … and was run with a manila rope, and the only one equipped with a brake on the inside rim. All other Ferris Wheels depended on a cable. If it broke, they lost control of the entire wheel. Most of the woodwork of Father’s wheel was machined out at the old furniture factory, and carried over and assembled in the old Warner Tannery.

Although employed, Albert had always loved the stage, and in 1894, two years before Charles’ birth, he claimed entertaining his “adopted profession” and formed the Bowdish Stock Company intent on producing “high class amusement.” His slogan was, “Not a cheap show—We give you a good show cheap.”

Charles recalled that the family moved into living quarters in the Belvedere Opera House, Brookville, in 1902. A riding hall that had been built about 1890 and that included two large circus rings, the building could seat 650 and was used for shows,
The Bowdish family built and operated a merry-go-round in Brookville, and built and sold another to people in Sigel. Courtesy JCHS Archives.

public meetings, religious revivals, and the annual teachers’ institutes.

There he grew up surrounded by older brothers and a father who built mechanical objects and produced theatricals to entertain people. When he was 6, for instance, they built and operated a merry-go-round near the Belvedere.12 Two years later, they built and then sold a carousel outfit to people in Sigel, a crossroads town north of Brookville.13 That year, too, they transported a “wonderful piece of mechanism” to Brockway. “... vastly different from the always popular merry-go-round ... [it] bids fair to put the merry-go-round to the back woods in a short time. The Bowdish semi-circle is the only machine of the kind in existence. “ Bowdish and sons had orders for 10 machines and intended to build a factory and manufacture them on a large scale.14 “In 1916, after three years of work, they succeeded in completing a steam calliope, which is highly satisfactory…. The Bowdishes have always been eager to try new appliances, and had the first gasoline engine in Brookville."15

A family friend for 50 years and an unabashed Bowdish promoter, Alfred Truman, declared the Bowdish family to be “a family of geniuses” as the stock company began their 1911 season. He was particularly impressed with the design of the wagons the men built to move the equipment and scenery for the Bowdish Stock Company. “The genius of mechanics runs in the Bowdish family from generation to generation.... You are not only impressed with the art and skill that has been exercised in the construction of the vehicle, but also in the practical arrangement of things. It is the purpose of the Bowdishes to have their traveling equipment as self-contained as it very well could be, and to carry this out every available space is utilized for some really practical purpose, and in no instance has this been allowed to detract from the symmetrical proportions of each conveyance."16

Not only did the family have the ability to devise the equipment needed to transport the scenery, properties, and tents for the Bowdish Stock Company, they were the company, or at least a substantial part of it. “The Bowdish family comprises actors and actresses, and it may well be doubted if their counterpart can be found elsewhere considering their mechanical genius combined with their abilities as performers before the footlights."17 His entire family became engaged in Albert’s pursuits. His wife, Theodosia, and daughters, Alice Mabel and Dorothea, performed. George could act and was a mechanic who kept things in working order. Adrean Stean and Harry were accomplished wood turners and could design sets. Albert listed himself as “mgr traveling show.”18

During the winter months, he and his older sons worked in Brookville building the
wagons and things needed for the traveling company. Albert hired actors, scheduled shows for the summer months, and managed the Belvedere as well, booking plays and minstrel shows. Charles recalled that the plays had their own orchestras and included “chorus girls that could really sing and dance, and they all wore beautiful costumes.”

The company traveled through Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio, Maryland, and Kentucky. In 1909, the audience got an added treat when, following the performance of Her Fatal Marriage in the neighboring town of Reynoldsville, the local Baptist minister performed the service that wed Alice, the leading lady, to Joe Angell, the leading man.

“About thirty theatrical artists” from different states and Canada were engaged for the 1911 season to present plays at the Belvedere six nights out of seven, prior to going on the road during the summer months. And as always, it was “a good show cheap.” Becoming rich was not one of Albert’s ambitions, nor was it for his son Charles.

Charles Albert Bowdish
The earliest record of young Charles’ involvement in the Bowdish Stock Company may be a faded photograph that includes Theodosia, four other women, two girls, and a small boy, perhaps an indication that he traveled with the company throughout the region during the summer months.

Truman mentions in 1911 that “the Bowdish family comprises actors and actresses,” and it is quite probable that 15-year-old Charles was one of them. It is also likely that prior to the 1913 season, he helped his father and brothers use “their own means and ingenuity” to improve the Belvedere by building a ramp entrance, leveling the main floor, jacking up the gallery, and replacing the roof.

Charles was acting in one of his father’s traveling shows when the United States entered the war in 1917; the local paper listed those conscripted in Jefferson County, including “Charley Albert Bowdish, #342.” The first draftees, a group of 228, left for Camp Lee, south of Petersburg, Virginia, on September 9, but Charles did not leave until February 26, 1918, two days before his 22nd birthday.

Familiar with the role newspapers play in publicizing events and people, he sent the Brookville American editor a photograph of Camp Lee and then appeared himself several days later. He said he’d strained a “heart muscle” and was on a 60-day furlough. His honorable discharge papers certify the reason for discharge as “valvular heart disease, incurred not in line of duty.” He came home to Brookville on April 23, 1918, eventually to 8 White Street,
property his father and Harry purchased when the Belvedere Opera House was torn down late that year, and the residence that would become the site of his Christmas displays for more than three decades.31

According to his brother George, Christmas had always been a big time for the Bowdish family, and Albert, even before electricity was common, would create a special display with moving figures powered by a windmill.32 So when his heart problem kept Charles from resuming his acting career, his father suggested he take over the family's traditional Christmas display.

Christmas Day in 1919 was even more special for the Bowdish family because George and Mae Lessor chose to be married then.33 As best man and for the occasion and for the entertainment of the guests, Charles created a miniature scene that included part of Brookville's Main Street. Family friend and fan Alfred Truman saw it and urged others to visit and see it, too. Later Charles reflected about that holiday season: “It wasn't anything out of the ordinary but around 400 visited our home that Christmas season to view the display and that attention got me started. Since that year I’ve built two displays or more each year—always one at Christmas and another at Easter.”34

**The Brookville Years**

Charles continued the family custom and each year created a new display for the Christmas season. The possible exception was 1921 when he “left Brookville December 14 for the League Island Navy Yard Marine Hospital at Philadelphia where he expect[ed] to undergo an operation in the near future.”35

In 1925, Albert decided to produce a series of theatricals in the Brookville Park Auditorium Building, known familiarly as the “White Elephant” due to the fact that it was large, very much in the way, had cost an awful lot of money, and had not been used much since its initial construction in 1915. A generous 25 percent of the gross receipts would go to the Park Association. Prior to the July opening, one reporter wrote, “All of the younger Bowdishes except Charles have been playing in stock at some point or another; all have cancelled their present connections and are coming home” to act in *The Balloon Girl.*36 Although his health prevented his acting when discharged, by 1925 it had obviously improved, for Charles played Mills the Detective in *A Girl of the Underworld* that summer.

He continued creating his miniature worlds where each 1/4 inch equaled 1 foot. In 1928 over 800 people came to see the Bowdish tree and decorations, and it surpassed “anything of a similar nature that Mr. Bowdish has even attempted.”37

Interest grew. For the 1930 Great Jefferson County Exposition and Centennial Celebration, planners invited him to recreate Brookville as it looked when founded. Charles noted:

To rebuild Brookville as it stood 100 years ago in the wilderness, is a task that requires a great amount of labor and untiring patience. I have taken no account of travel, time or expense that is, a financial loss. This display was not constructed for publicity, advertising or personal gain. I have worked with only one view in mind: To reconstruct the Brookville of 1830 for every citizen, both young and old, who is interested in Brookville and Jefferson County.”38

Even with the Great Depression looming, the satisfaction of the creative process outweighed financial gain. Viewers marveled at his use of lifelike miniatures and mechanical devices, but Charles, after all, had grown up in a world fascinated with recorded sound and electricity. Edison invented the phonograph in 1877 and the light bulb in 1879. By 1910 Brookville streets had electric streetlights and families cranked up phonographs in their parlors. In 1874 the Ives Company manufactured a toy wind-up train and in 1910, the year Charles turned 14, their first model electric train. By the time he took over the family's Christmas display, he was familiar
Christmas tree dominated the village nestled in a valley surrounded by mountains. A sawmill, old-fashioned grain mill, houses, stores, and lifelike moving figures of people and animals delighted his audiences. By 1939, Bowdish claimed his registers showed approximately 100,000 visitors had seen his displays, which now opened shortly before Christmas and extended into February.41

The 1940 display contained “3,940 feet of electrical wire, 387 light bulbs, nine transformers, 73 switches, seven radio transcripts, four turntables, 400 trees, 380 figures, 97 buildings, 243 square feet of wire screen, 28 square feet of cork, 160 pounds of cement, 85 pounds of plaster of paris, 45 yards of muslin, 28 yards of burlap, 16 spotlights, a high-fidelity amplifier, and a handmade organ-type cabinet with an 18-pipe organ.42 Fifteen dioramas now portrayed The Beautiful Life of Christ, and Charles had created it all.

That same year, Charles emulated his father and took his dioramas, that now numbered 24, on the road—booking
religious programs throughout northwestern Pennsylvania and New York. His sister Alice read sermonettes, and her husband Joseph Angell sang. The dioramas depicting the life of Christ increased in number from year to year, but when the display was over, Charles typically discarded the miniature town or gave it away to hospital children’s wards. The next season he began anew. Like his forebears, he also kept abreast of technological improvements, and in 1952 “the entire program [for “Button Shoe Days” was] recorded on the latest in electronic tape recorders.”

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Charles used the 1930 program to his display to reflect on how much life had changed in the past century. Courtesy JCHS Archives.

LIABILITY INSURANCE, AND THE NEED TO EXPAND LED CHARLES TO CONSIDER NEW QUARTERS.

He approached the Brookville Chamber of Commerce and showed them his plans for a new building to house the exhibit and asked their help in raising $15,000 to build it. Early in 1954 local religious and community leaders met with him, formed the Charles Bowdish Display Corporation, and elected officers. The group would solicit churches and organizations and loan the money to Bowdish, who would repay the corporation within 10 years plus three percent interest. Bowdish prepared to break ground on March 31, 1954.

Meanwhile, the Pittsburgh Press printed an article about the exhibit, and Charles circulated “A Special Announcement,” which read: “Would your community be interested in thousands of visitors from every State in the U.S.A. making annual visits to your City or Town?” He was “definitely interested in a new location, a permanent building in which to house his display, and make it a year ’round event.”

A headline in the February 4 edition of the Jeffersonian Democrat read: “Site Chosen For Bowdish Display,” and explained that an acre of land on the south side of Clarion Road (SR322) and east of the Moon Lite Drive-In would be purchased.

C.V. Starrett, Buhl Planetarium co-coordinator, read the Press article and wrote Bowdish on February 11:

it occurs to us to ask whether there is a possibility that you might care to rent it to us for display at the Buhl Planetarium at the Easter season or perhaps during the Christmas season. Also there is a possibility that we might work out a plan whereby you would build such an exhibit for permanent display in our Theater of the Stars, especially to our order.

Starrett enclosed guest tickets and invited Charles to Pittsburgh. Charles replied one week later that he was interested but couldn’t get to Pittsburgh because his “display is scheduled here daily afternoon and evening through April.” He, in turn, invited Buhl representatives to visit Brookville and enclosed some literature.
Two weeks after the land purchase announcement, front-page headlines announced “Bowdish Display Plans Fail.” He had turned down the local group’s offer indicating “three percent was agreeable, but that he could not agree to a minimum specified amount on the principal each year. The figure would have been $500 semi-annually.” It would seem that like his father before him, Charles wanted a “good show cheap”; he didn’t want to worry about charging admission and paying a mortgage. Nevertheless, people in Brookville were disappointed.

Meanwhile, he negotiated with Buhl Planetarium to move his exhibit there. In 1954 Bowdish built two exhibits, one in Brookville and one for Buhl. The Pittsburgh Press included a photograph of the Buhl exhibit in the Sunday edition on December 12, 1954. Three thousand people had viewed it the previous day, and he announced plans to increase the display by 50 percent for 1955. Fifteen hundred people visited the Brookville exhibit the first week. The next year, he again prepared two exhibits—one in Brookville and one for Buhl Planetarium. It was the last Brookville exhibit Charles would build.

In 1930, Charles had shown his interest in American history when he re-created Brookville’s Main Street as it appeared in 1830. In 1962 along with Christmastown, Buhl Planetarium exhibited “Americana,” a collection of 31 buildings of national significance—including Nantucket Lighthouse, Concord Bridge, and the original capitol at York. Charles’ sister Alice conducted the research, and Charles built them all.

In 1964 it was named the Miniature Railroad and Village™ and by 1965 had grown to some 1,400 sq. ft.

He continued to work for Buhl as model builder, curator, advisor, and consultant, but now Charles had the luxury of carpenters and electricians to help him. Carl Wapiennik, who worked with Bowdish there, described him as “an original,” a man with an ability to look at natural things and envision what they could...
become." In 1982 Buhl, now the Buhl Science Center, dedicated its program book to Bowdish and the next year named the exhibit space Bowdish Hall in his honor.

In 1952 his home community selected Bowdish as one of the first three persons to receive the annual Walter Dick Award for outstanding work in promoting and developing Brookville.

AN OLD-FASHIONED FELLER WRITES

After moving the exhibit to Pittsburgh, Charles continued to live in Brookville, but camped out at Buhl during construction. These were the years of Vietnam, “hippies,” and a statewide teacher strike. The attention he’d once received in Brookville waned after the exhibit left his hometown, and he penned a letter to the editor in 1969 complaining that he’d been “turned out to pasture without one word of thanks for a job well done.”

A legend now in his community but no longer beloved, he continued to write and express his opinions about the culture around him. He revealed himself as a fiscal conservative, political independent, puritan, and patriot who was uninterested in wealth, and, surprisingly, a supporter of women’s rights. He had been an impressionable youth with two sisters and a mother all of whom were fully involved in the stock company when women achieved the vote. “We need women in every office (and I don’t mean just clerks). Isn’t it time for big daddy to recognize women for what they are, intellectual equals?... Isn’t it time for man to recognize the equality of the other half of society?”

Charles had lived through the lean years of the Great Depression and World War II and now found government spending an abomination. His father had promoted “a good show cheap” not a cheap show, so he found the loosening morals of television, movies, and Broadway anathema.

Charles never charged for his exhibits, although some local folks recall making donations, and wasn’t concerned about accumulating wealth:

“I have been told many times that I could be a wealthy man if I knew how to charge... I am rich beyond compare. I have a home to keep—more than work worth doing—wonderful friends—contentment—peace of mind—good health. Anyone with wealth like that—owns much—it can never be bought or sold.”

He was a devoted Christian, although not a member of an organized church, but most of all, Charles Albert Bowdish was a man who believed in an old fashioned Christmas. “I sincerely hope and pray that someday Christmas will mean more to the people of the world than it does today. But there will never be a real Christmas, peace on earth or goodwill toward men as long as men distort the truth, deceive, cheat, hate, envy and malign one another and openly condone sin and corruption in government.”

Sometimes just one or two letters to the editor appeared in a year, sometimes four or five. He usually signed his letters with one form or other of “Charles Bowdish, the old fashioned fellow that still eats supper,” a reflection of his rural roots where “dinner” was the noon meal and “supper” was eaten in the evening. In return he occasionally received unsigned letters of criticism and would retort tartly, “The Bowdish family has always worked hard and paid for everything they ever had and has always given freely of their talents (and they have many) when ever asked.”

Bitter towards society in his later years, during his lifetime Charles Albert Bowdish had combined his love of entertainment and his mechanical and artistic genius to create exhibits viewed by millions who shared his love of Christmas, his passionate faith, or simply admired his exceptional artistic skill.

THE BOWDISH LEGACY

Few attended Charles’ funeral service in 1988, led by his friend, a Roman Catholic priest. In 1990, Buhl announced the miniature railroad exhibit, nearly 1,500 square feet, would be installed in the new Carnegie Science Center (CSC) for the 1992 Christmas season.

Today the Miniature Railroad & Village™ in Pittsburgh is open nearly year round. The platform is 30 feet wide and 83 feet long, encompasses 2,300 square feet, and usually four trains and one trolley are running. CSC curator Patti Rogers supervises the many volunteers who operate and maintain it. New miniatures depicting southwestern Pennsylvania life between 1890 and 1930 have been added over the years, and Bowdish’s
fashioned Feller: Charles Albert Bowdish exhibit and a model railroad layout built in Bowdish-style. Today a dedicated group of volunteers operate and maintain the Bowdish Model Railroad Exhibit in Brookville, a layout that is about twice the size of the plan Charles first built for Buhl. Unlike Charles, however, the Brookville volunteers do not start from scratch each season. Instead they move, remove, and add models and animations, as they reconfigure the layout to show and tell the stories of Jefferson County. During the Western Pennsylvania Laurel Festival and again during Brookville’s Victorian Christmas Celebration, volunteers operate sound and light shows several times a day. At other times during the year, they run the trains and interpret county history to school children and reunion groups.

Their aim—“a good show cheap.”

Carole A. Briggs, curator of the Jefferson County History Center, writes books and regular columns about the people, places, and events of Jefferson County.

The Carnegie Science Center operates the Miniature Railroad & Village™ nearly year round. The platform is 30 feet wide and 83 feet long, and usually runs four trains and one trolley.

New this year at the Carnegie Science Center is an Isaly’s dairy store, once a common sight in Western Pennsylvania.

Carnegie Science Center, 1999.

responded, and the two men discussed plans to exhibit some of Bowdish’s models in Brookville once again.

In 1998 Bowdish models graced a Main Street store window. In 2000 the Carnegie Science Center and the Jefferson County Historical Society entered into an agreement so that Bowdish models not being used by the CSC could be exhibited in Brookville. That year 17 models were on exhibit in another show window.

When the Jefferson County Historical Society began the preservation of the Edelblute Building and its adaptation as the new Jefferson County Historical Society in 2001, one room was set aside for An Old-
35 Jeffersonian Democrat, 22 December 1921.
36 “Making a Theatre Out of the Park Building,” Jeffersonian Democrat, 9 July 1925.
37 “Many See Bowdish Tree,” Jeffersonian Democrat, 20 Dec. 1928.
38 “Brookville in 1830,” 1930 Program Booklet. JCHS Archives.
43 “Bowdish Display Heavily Booked,” Jeffersonian Democrat, 12 Sept. 1940.
45 “Charles Bowdish Display to Open Sunday For 32nd Year,” Jeffersonian Democrat. 18 Dec 1952.
47 “Worst Flood in History Causes Heavy Destruction,” Brookville Republican, 19 March 1936.
48 “Bowdish Plans Site for Exhibit,” Jeffersonian Democrat, 23 April 1953.
50 Petitt, Acker, 1954.
57 Brokville Visitors Register, 1955, JCHS Archives.
63 Dillinger, 1997.
65 Ibid. 18 March 1971.
70 Ibid. 21 Dec 1978.
71 Ibid. 28 June 1979.
73 www.carnegiesciencecenter.org
74 Document signed by Carnegie Science Center and Jefferson County Historical Society, Inc. 2 April 2003.
76 “Bowdish Exhibit Expanding to Include Ferris Wheel,” County Neighbors, 9 April 2005.

At the Jefferson County History Center in Brookville, the Bowdish-like exhibit is 28 feet long and 12 feet deep. Trains and the “Hoodlebug” trolley run on five O-gauge tracks.

JCHS photograph.