From Northern Kentucky

We thought Clarice Susan Munro, source of many good Magazine stories when her husband was a pastor in Shelby County and at Georgetown, was lost to us when he moved to Fort Thomas. This, of course, is because Northern Kentucky people too often find their friends and interests in a different state.

However, she has fooled us, and turned up more than one item of particular appeal to all Kentuckians. Today’s cover story about another Northern Kentucky resident, W. S. Berger of Fort Mitchell, is certainly unusual enough. Such a collection of dummies and ventriloquism books as the one at Vent-Haven deserves to be known all over the state.

H. Harold Davis’ cover picture shows only a few of the most colorful of the 250 or more dummies. The story, with additional color shots, starts on Page 18.
Where Good Little Dummies Go

When a ventriloquist dies or retires, his little 'man' will probably end up in Vent Haven, where there's also a complete library on the art

BY CLARICE SUSAN MUNRO

LOOKING for a little heaven on earth? W. S. Berger has a little heaven right in his home in Fort Mitchell, Ky. But you have to be a dummy to enter these pearly gates.

Berger, you see, is the lord of Vent-Haven, a "heaven" for ventriloquist's dummies at journey's end.

William Shakespeare Berger is 77 years old, genial, an intellectual, and a ventriloquist in his own right. Son of a German Shakespearean actor, he was named after the playwright-idol of the elder Berger, Strangely, though, Berger now prefers to be called just "W. S."

Berger tends his fabulous heaven of gay little ghosts with the help of his wife, known to friends as "Mam.

Even the Berger pets are colorful. Callie, a black-yellow and white, almost cheetah-looking cat, has free run of Vent-Haven, and rumples among the 250 or so dummies with her straw-colored mother, Bosco—both of them "spelled rotten" according to Mr. and Mrs. Berger.

Many of the celebrities of show business have crossed the threshold of Vent-Haven. Such names as Rudy Vallee, The Great Lister, Edgar Bergen, Paul Winchell, Senor Wences, Chris Cross, Stanwyburn, Jay Jaxon, Fred Ketch, Phil O'Fer, Al Robinson, Max Terhune, Jay Marshall, and Jimmy Nelson are written in the guest register—not for just one visit, but for many visits to this showman's paradise.

An entire room at Vent-Haven is dedicated to The Great Lister, top vaudeville artist of other days. A ventriloquist for 56 years, Harry Lester was also a sword swallow, magician, and fire eater, and until his death recently was an instructor in his own Hollywood studio.

Berger has all the symptoms of a born, dyed-in-the-wood collector. When 5 or 6, he was wild about snakes, with ambitions of becoming a big-name snake charmer. At 14, Berger had several tanks full of reptiles, live and dead, and delighted the neighborhood kids with his efforts at charming. Several dozen of these same reptiles, in jars and beautifully pickled, now line the shelves of the Berger basement.

Berger doesn't hunt snakes any more. Now the chase, no less relentless, is for the little wooden people of former vaudeville and cabaret days—anything, in fact, to do with the art of ventriloquism.

The Berger's nine-room house and extended garage are packed with ventriloquarian stuff—dummies, stage props, costumes, pictures, scripts, ancient playbills, and books.

Covering much of the wall space at Vent-Haven are more than 1,000 large photographs depicting ventriloquists of many eras with their dummies. Five hundred or so similar photographs are also in Berger's possession and will frame. There are drawings full of ventriloquial gags in several languages, 500 scripts of the past masters, and a stack of intriguing playbills, some 150 years old. (No wonder the place is plastered with NO SMOKING sign.)

In a fabulous library of ventriloquism books and pamphlets in eight languages, Berger believes he has about everything ever written on the double-talk art.

Clippings from newspapers fill about 100 scrapbooks, with an equal amount of newspaper and magazine material unmounted.

To W. S., his every piece of ventriloquism is a tender treasure, and every small grinning wooden head a living acquaintance or a boon pal. For recreation he goes about in a silver malleys.

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DUMMIES' HEAVEN Continued

moved from the "crackpot" class, he handles each of his 250 dummies with reverence, and the Vent-Haven visitor senses, with actual love. Each dummy sits in his own tiny metal chair.

Berger's wife takes pride in her husband's quaint hobby. However, when Mrs. Berger is asked which is the biggest dummy in the collection, she will point to her husband with mock disgust.

Mumma, as she calls him, is tired of dusting and arranging the gay little ghosts, but the rest of those dummies leave for even a temporary stay in the repair shop, and Mrs. Berger moans around for days.

Ventriloquism had an early appeal for the young Berger, fostered by the Punch and Judy tricks of his father. At 16, W. S. had already thought of running off to join a circus troupe. A business career helped him forget the circus idea, but the yearning to ventriloquize still smoldered.

It was in his 30s that Berger bought his first dummy, Tommie Baloney, and with the help of books on how to become a ventriloquist in a few easy lessons, launched out on his own as a pastime. He became a mean artist, but was at the same time busy being graduated, step by step, from office boy to president of the company where he worked. So Berger sacrificed the gags to business, and never did make a career of ventriloquism.

Although the collecting days of W. S. date back to 1916, it was not until his re-

treatment from an active business life in 1948 that Berger worked seriously on what is now believed to be the world's best and largest collection of "vent" stuff.

Tommie Baloney, Berger's first dummy, was the real inspiration for Vent-Haven. For once Berger felt the little wooden guy on his knee, and got the feel of those string controls, he couldn't help himself. He began collecting dummies and props, and would readily admit he got entirely carried away.

Berger's ventriloquial interest is by no means confined to his own Vent-Haven. He is president of the International Brotherhood of Ventriloquists, with members in 41 states and 26 foreign countries including Africa, Arabia, England, Greenland, India, Japan, Scotland and Sweden.

Seventeen Kentucky artists are registered in the Brotherhood, and the largest concentration of members is in Hollywood, with New York a close second. England tops the "foreign" list.

About 50 per cent of Berger's time goes into keeping elaborate records and case histories on the vents and their dummies. (Preacher vents, women vents, and teen-

agers have separate files.) W. S. also writes for the "trade" magazine of ventrilo-

quists—"The Oracle." The whole lively enterprise entails the writing of about 300 letters each month, so there's no time wasted around Vent-Haven. Berger is probably the busiest "retired" man in Northern Kentucky.

But the most painstaking job accomplished by Berger is his "Directory of Ventriloquists Throughout the World." The relentless compiler is not able to estimate the amount of time spent on the huge undertaking.

"It was just years and years of work," mused Berger.

Berger is indeed an addict to ventriloquism in all its phases. But the dummies, most of them bequeathed to Vent-Haven by the vents themselves, or bought from

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There are dummies built by all the famed makers

**DUMMIES' HEAVEN Continued**

vents and their relatives, are the prime source of his addiction.

Some of the dummies cherished by W. S. are incredibly battered, but it seems the more battered a dummy is, the richer its history. Almost every one of these show-kids has seen a life sad and gay 'neath the glaring "vaudeville" and cabaret lights of another era.

Berger's favorite of all his dummies is Skinny. In fact, W. S. and Skinny are bosom pals in the real sense. Skinny certainly does have a peculiar influence over his operator. W. S. swears he never forgot a script or lacked the power to ad-lib while Skinny sat on his knee.

The dilapidated Frank Byron, Jr., age 56, The Great Lester's original dummy, has performed around the world and was once rescued from a pool of water following a fire. During the "golden days," Frank Byron and Lester were the biggest names in ventriloquism. It was with Frank, Jr., that Lester did his famous act of making the dummy choke violently over a drink while he, the operator, appeared not to move a muscle of his face.

Berger's newest acquisition is life-sized and most glamorous, even to the point of being disturbing. Named "Marilyn Monroe" by her former owner, the blonde glamour girl was renamed "Cleo" by the more conservative Berger. It seems he felt uncomfortable with both the name and the uncanny likeness under his Vent-Haven roof. Cleo was made by a New York prop maker, from photographs of the actress. But the operator of the life-sized dummy used her only four days before abandoning the act because Cleo's "come hither" look and heaving bosom stole the show.

Hedda Wood (head-o'-wood) is a particularly saucy-looking lass carved by Frank Marshall, the artist who created Charlie McCarthy. Hedda smokes, winks, and has mouth action.

Vent-Haven boasts a life-sized replica of Senor Wences, the outstanding Spanish ventriloquist sometimes seen on the Ed Sullivan show.

The collection claims to possess at Vent-Haven figures made by every well-known figure maker.

The dummies are not for loan, says Berger, and they're seldom for sale. After all, this is a heaven for dummies, and they're not exactly free to come and go.

What about visitors and sight-seers at Vent-Haven? Well, they're welcome—if they're the considerate kind. But Must will tell you in no uncertain terms that visitors are not welcome if they are like an Indiana woman who arrived, uninvited and unannounced, on the doorstep of Vent-Haven at 8:30 one Sunday morning. Like most hosts, W. S. likes his company to call first to see if the time is convenient.

Now called Cleo, this was originally called Marilyn Monroe. Life size, its bosoms heaves, used to steal show.
Lillie is a girl dummy, used by the ventriloquist team of Vex and Walther. Her act was a giltby one, and her personality was terrific.

Kjill, a Laplander boy dummy, was made in Sweden by a teen-ager apprenticed to a dentist. Naturally, Kjill's teeth are real human teeth.

At left is Gussie the Goose, made for television, but now living in Vent-Haven because its owner became ill. This dummy can flap its wings, wag its tail, open its mouth, move its head, and of course, it "talks" when its operator wants it to. No, these dummies are not for loan or sale; it's a real dummy's heaven.

Continued on following pages
Jacko, a monkey dummy, is the collector's pride and joy. He's 42 inches tall, has eyes that roll, movable ears and tongue, a snuffling nose.

Frank Byron, Jr., was The Great Lester's original dummy; it used to choke violently over a drink. This is all that's left of him.

Jerry McGinty is quite a guy, what with a nose that flashes on and off, a mischievous eyebrow and movements of both the upper lip and nose.

Jasper, the Negro dummy, is the most coveted of the dummies at Vent-Haven. He performed with The Great Reynard.
William Shakespeare Berger, owner of the ventriloquists' dummy collection, poses with Pinocchio, a colorful dummy made in Barcelona. Naturally, Pinocchio speaks Spanish as well as English. He is equipped with saluting arms and a mouth activated by a string instead of a trigger.