Kirksville’s Own TOYLAND

Lowell Bond, the original owner of the store, stands with a new shipment of toys in July of 1957.

In the rush to make shopping easier, discount stores have made many specialty shops nearly obsolete, including one kind that is fondly remembered by many adults: the toy store. Northeast Missouri is lucky, however. It can still boast that is has a place where a person can go to be alone with his imagination. That place is Tucker Toys in Kirkville.

Tucker Toys, located at 206 N. Franklin, is the only specialty toy store in Northeast Missouri. Originally named Bond’s Toyland, the shop was the idea of Lowell Bond. After approximately seven years, however, Bond decided that he wanted to enter another business. The change of ownership from Lowell Bond to Jerry Tucker took place on February 1, 1961. Mr. Tucker had sold shoes for Myers Bros. of Kirkville, and at the time of the purchase, he had been on the road selling insurance. One day Mr. Tucker was in the store and heard Mr. Bond talking about wanting to sell the store, so he inquired about it. Asked what prompted him to change careers, he simply stated, “I was tired of being a traveling salesman.”

The change has been a successful and, apparently, a happy one. Everything Mr. Tucker does today, nearly 28 years later, points to this satisfaction. For example, not ofen does a person driving in an urban area see the owner out shking the rug and sweeping the sidewalk in front of his store. However, anyone driving past Tucker Toys at 8:15 a.m. will see Jerry Tucker starting his work day in this way.

When a customer walks into the store, he finds more proof of contentment: Mr. Tucker’s smiling face. Mr. Tucker will be busy either cleaning or restocking his shelves with new shipments of merchandise, or sometimes just playing with the toys. And what toys and how many! There are toys everywhere! At first, the store appears disorganized, but a little investigation reveals order. Play toys for the smaller children are up front, while building toys, dishes, trains, guns, collectors’ items, hobbies, and stuffed toys have a space of their own. Mr. Tucker says Tucker Toys is like an old country store with every nook and cranny filled to overflowing!

But why would a person want to sell toys? For 27 years, Jerry Tucker has enjoyed meeting children and seeing their eyes light up as they explore different corners of his store. Through the years, these children have grown to adulthood and now they are bringing their children. He sees the same look of wonder in these new young eyes.

Over the years, Tucker Toys has carried collector lines of dolls such as Vogue and Madame Alexander, horses such as Breyer, and model cars such as Matchbox. Often not found in large department stores because suppliers prefer a more exclusive market, these are items which attract people from miles around. For the past 33 years, this store has attracted customers from St. Louis and Kansas City and has had telephone shoppers from as far away as Dallas, Texas. Mr. Tucker said, “We deal with doll collectors from all over the country.”

The reason Mr. Tucker can attract customers from afar is that he fills his inventory by wisely ordering from suppliers in New York or Chicago. He orders most heavily in April to insure that his stock will meet the heavy demand of the Christmas season. According to Mr. Tucker, that is when people come into the store asking, “What is a good Christmas gift this year?” In more recent years, however, people have been saying, “I just don’t know what to get my son or daughter. They have everything.”

Added in 1978, this metal awning protects the store’s menagerie from Kirkville’s hot afternoon sun.
Throughout Tucker Toys' history, Mr. Tucker says that both year-round and at Christmas, the best selling doll has been Barbie. Barbie has been a good seller, he says, because marketers have known how to keep people interested in her. They set a limit on the number available at one time, and because of this limit, Mr. Tucker said he sometimes had a waiting list ‘a mile long’ when he was able to get only four Barbie dolls. Even when different versions of Barbie come out, her manufacturers use the same tactics. In the sixties, Mr. Tucker said, real mink coats for Barbie cost $1,000-$1,500 each, but those items were not available at Tucker’s! “The most expensive Barbie coat we sold at that time was for $12,” says Mr. Tucker. Although Barbie is not the top seller now, she continues to draw many buyers to the store.

Mr. Tucker also says that “fads” such as talking and walking dolls ‘didn’t last long because the kids get tired of them.’ Hula hoops and yo-yos have been other fads, although they have not died as quickly as the others. Hula hoops and yo-yos try to make a comeback every year. Mr. Tucker thinks that Cabbage Patch Kids are just another fad. He feels that had Coleco limited the supply as Mattel did with Barbie, instead of flooding the market, the Cabbage Patch Kids would still be going strong. Games have also been a good seller through the years. Monopoly, Clue, and Rook are the basic games; most other games are just spin-offs of these. Mr. Tucker thinks that children will play with something longer if they have to be creative and use their imaginations.

The store’s appearance has remained basically unchanged over the years. Inside, shelves have been stabilized and stock has been shifted, but the only external change has been the addition of a new awning to shield the store from the afternoon sun.

The toy store has always been in the same location, but not everything has been perfect. While children were dreaming of sugar plums and wondering if their Christmas orders would be filled, a hot water pipe broke and flooded the store on Christmas Eve, 1984. On a trip for some batteries late that night, Mr. Tucker found six inches of water on the floor. In addition, three times since the Tucker’s have owned the store, there have been break-ins. The windows have been broken and merchandise stolen.

Neighboring businesses have come and gone through the years. Wanting to increase his inventory during the 1960s, Mr. Tucker expanded his store’s footage into the store to the north (formerly Singer Sewing Center and presently Echoes Antiques Gallery), doubling its original size. The larger floor space made supervision more difficult, and there was an increase in pilferage and damage to the merchandise. Mr. Tucker decided to return the store to its original location and size (50 feet x 20 feet), and so it remains today. When asked if Tucker Toys would ever expand again, Mr. Tucker said, “If a business wants to be large, it must be large. If it is small, it must be small. There is no in between. I think we’re just the right size.”

Mr. Tucker does some newspaper advertising during the Christmas season but dependable mostly upon word-of-mouth advertising, because he believes that a satisfied customer returns again and again and tells his friends. Even as grown-ups, his customers keep coming back to bring in their children, and the cycle will repeat in the future.

Today, many an adult who makes his way into the store is transported back to his own childhood and to Christmas dreams coming true by the store’s unchanging appearance and by Mr. Tucker’s smile. So, today, whether you are planning for the busy Christmas season or for some dear child’s birthday or you just want an addition to your own special collection, perhaps the answer lies behind the door to Tucker Toys.

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By Tonya Eichor  
and  
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CHRISTMAS BLESSINGS  
TO EACH AND EVERY ONE!

May the message of Peace  
and Good Will fill every  
heart at this Christmas Season.  
And may your heart and home be filled with all the many blessings of the Yuletide.

Bond’s Toyland  
206 North Franklin.