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Send in the clown

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By **Peter Jones**

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"You'd be amazed at what I can pull out of here," Russell Scott says slyly, as he reaches into his bag of tricks — a plastic King Soopers sack laying on the table amidst cups of coffee and plates of half-eaten eggs and toast.

Scott smiles at what looks vaguely like a small antique fishing rod or a shapely prop from a Dr. Seuss book. It's actually a smoking pipe, Scott explains, likely made in 1853 and crafted from unknown animal bone.

"I'm asking \$325 for it. I'll take less if I have to," the 88-year-old antique collector says with only slight resignation. "I can't wait for the best price anymore."

As if to up the ante, Scott pulls out a bear tooth and a rare German Luftwaffe emblem from his grocery bag. Patrons at nearby tables peer over in curiosity, but Scott gets no takers.

The World War II military artifact is a rare gem that would likely bring a hefty profit on the worldwide market of the Internet — more so than in a local diner — if only this onetime Army Air Corps drill instructor had the patience for such newfangled marketplaces.

"I don't like eBay," he scoffs in apparent certainty, seemingly irritated at the mere suggestion.

Since closing down his tiny antique store last year, Scott has preferred to display what is left of his idiosyncratic stock at the Breakfast Queen diner on South Broadway. The antiques are not exactly selling like pancakes, but that's not really the reason Scott comes here.

About every other day, the retiree holds court in this old-fashioned staple of downtown Englewood. The eatery has become an all-purpose venue for Scott to eat his morning meal, chat up the waitresses, make small talk with whoever passes his table and occasionally unload leftovers from his store.

"It's family," Scott says.

With his orange sweater, thick black-frame glasses and oxygen machine, this octogenarian looks the part of any number of senior citizens who might seek social refuge in Englewood's no-frills breakfast hang-out. But Scott is more than a diner regular. He was a regular on his own TV series.

On this recent Wednesday morning, a vintage photo of Blinky the Clown sits atop Scott's walker in the Breakfast Queen's tiny foyer, a signal to all, especially to a local newspaper reporter, that the clown prince of local TV is in the house.



Mandi Stevens, 33, right, remembers watching "Blinky's Fun Club" at her grandmother's house. "She'd wrap us up in blankets and give us toast and we'd watch Blinky. ... It was before TV became so corrupt." Photo by Peter Jones

On the back wall is another framed photo of Blinky in younger days, smiling ear to ear in his signature make-up. The photo dates to when this resident diner-fly was a top star of local television and Denver's king of daily kids' programming.

Scott slowly lets go a smile when he hears a request that seems all too familiar.

"Everyone sing along!" a waitress asks the room in celebration of another customer's special day.

"Happy berf-day to you. Happy berf-day to you. Happy berf-day dear ...," Scott sings, almost under his breath.

"I'm behind. I missed the name," he laughs.

During nearly four decades of daily television, "Happy Berf-day" became a Blinky staple of endearing local TV dialect.

"It just came out that way," Scott says of his phrasing on the classic tune. "I guess nobody could sing it like I did."

Everybody loves a clown

"Blinky's Fun Club" entertained at least three generations of Coloradans, many of whom celebrated their own children's birthdays on the show years after they had appeared as kids themselves on the club.

What is thought to have been the longest-running local TV show in the state's history began in 1960 on Colorado Springs' KKTU and moved to Denver's KWGN in 1965. There, the "Fun Club" survived for an astounding 33 years and some 10,000 episodes, outliving countless shifts in TV trends, popular culture and entertainment mores.

Scott lasted the decades despite the host's steadfast reluctance — some say stubbornness — to update the program. Amazingly, the format remained principally the same for all of its nearly four decades in Colorado.

According to Dusty Saunders, the longtime television critic for the Rocky Mountain News, Denver's Blinky can be tied to a larger trend that occurred during the early days of television. Necessity was the mother of invention when independent TV stations across the country were struggling to fill their broadcast days without benefit of network programming.

The gaps in schedule resulted in a slew of locally produced talk shows, teen dance programs, "Dialing for Dollars" and "Creature Feature" host-oriented movie showcases, the "Romper Room" franchise and the classic clown show, as exemplified by the Bozo franchise.

"When TV first went on the air in the '40s, a kids' clown was a staple on at least one station in each market," Saunders said. "Blinky had a great image and appealed to parents because in those days parents were much more mindful of what their kids were watching."

Most such local offerings had vanished by the early 1980s, a casualty of cable and syndication — but not so Scott, who held onto his local TV mantle longer than Johnny Carson hosted "The Tonight Show."

At his peak, Scott welcomed the likes of Red Skelton and Liberace to the "Fun Club." When Cathy Rigby came to town on a "Peter Pan" tour, he was invited to fly around the Denver Coliseum stage on wires with the Olympic gymnast.

"I wish I had that tape," Scott said.

The former clown attributes his longevity to his easy-going style — a small-screen presence that was never burdened by the constraints of script and seemingly came naturally to the man who still answers to the name Blinky.

"I don't think I ever found a child who was scared of me," the retired clown said with a gleam of self-

satisfaction. "I came across very gentle. I didn't rush at 'em. I made them come to me."

Scott is not one to wax philosophic about the clown's place in culture or discuss the ironic melancholy of the opera "Pagliacci." Still, Denver's most famous clown is not above finding a spiritual connection when it comes to his more famous alter-ego.

"Back then, I would not have said this, but I'll tell you this right now," Scott said. "The good Lord put me here for a reason. I think he likes clowns."

If so, their red noses and baggy pants have given way in recent years to the more self-consciously clever SpongeBob and the high-tech wizardry of interactive computer games and Web sites. "Blinky's Fun Club" is the kind of low-key format that nary exists, locally or nationally, in today's world of more flashy offerings.

But in the 1960s and '70s, in particular, children could still be riveted by a simple clown meandering across a low-budget set, ad-libbing with the cameraman, offering daily safety advice, drawing trees on a sketch board and taking an occasional pie in his mug.

A quarter-century ago, that was enough for the now 33-year-old Mandi Stevens, who recently approached Scott in the Breakfast Queen.

"I used to go over to my grandmother's," she said. "She'd wrap us up in blankets and give us toast and we'd watch Blinky. It's a really neat memory. It was before TV became so corrupt, I guess."

Blinkymania

Scott first became enamored of clowns as a child growing up in Enid, Okla., when he and his father would go to the circus together.

"He'd get me up early in the morning," Scott said. "We'd watch 'em unload. I'd see the old-time wagons coming off the ramp. We saw the clowns make people laugh. Something told me, that's for me."

Before long, Scott was donning clown make-up in local parades and endeavoring to cheer up hospital patients. By the time, Blinky had made his television debut in Colorado, Scott had become an old hand in the world of spraying water bottles and falling prey to clothing mishaps.

Still, Scott was convinced that Blinky should be different from the standard-issue circus clown. He could do better than pratfalls, he thought. This special clown required more than oversized footwear — Blinky needed a safety message.

"I knew when parents talked to their kids about 'don't do this, don't do that,' it would go in one ear and out the other," Scott explained. "But they would listen to me because I'm their friend."

In an era of three network affiliates, an independent station and no cable or Internet, a Denver TV clown could become an icon for area children. It was partly due to the nature of the television climate at the time, but according to Saunders, it was also because Scott was a natural.

"With most TV clowns, you could see they were pretending. This wasn't their real thing," Saunders said. "But Russ always covered that very well. On the screen, he never had a false note."

Scott tells the story of two missing girls from Colorado Springs. They were later found safe, hitchhiking alongside I-25 en route to where they thought the TV station was located.

"They wanted to go see Blinky," Scott said.

A youthful fascination with Denver's TV clown sometimes survived the good-natured naivete of childhood. Scott remembers a large group of teenagers serenading him one day with a chorus of "Happy Berf-day" outside his antique store.

"They sang it the way I sang it," Scott recalled.

The former clown also remembers an odd note he received from a mysterious character who had earlier dropped by his antique store inexplicably wearing a long coat on a hot summer's day.

"I came in with the intention of robbing you at gunpoint," Scott recalled the note reading. "Hell, I sat on your lap when I was 6 years old and you sang 'Happy Birthday.' I can't rob you!"

Tears of a clown

Blinky has left the building.

In 1998, amid little fanfare, KWGN canceled "Blinky's Fun Club." For the first time in 38 years, Scott was out of job — a casualty of changing television trends and the rising costs of local production.

"There was so much other programming out there that was less expensive to produce," Saunders said. "A station could make much more money syndicating an hour-long adventure show or a national talk show."

Scott eventually hired prominent Denver attorney Walter Gerash and sued KWGN for an undisclosed sum. The former clown and the station are legally prevented from discussing details of the settlement.

Scott last donned clown make-up more than a year ago and says he has no intention of doing so ever again.

"Enough's enough. Too much work. It takes an hour and a half to put it on," he scoffed.

The former clown has had his share of other difficulties since hanging up his red nose, plaid shirt and black derby. His wife of 60 years filed for divorce in 2001. Then, Scott's oldest and estranged daughter died of brain cancer.

"I didn't go to her funeral, but I said a prayer for her," he said.

Although Scott remains close to his youngest daughter, he says he was unable to develop strong relationships with his other two children. He concedes there is irony in a clown who gave joy to generations of kids, but was never close to his own family.

"I'm kind of like an old shoe," he said. "They love me. I know they did, but they had a strange way. My son loves me, but he doesn't come to see me. He doesn't call me. My father never said, 'I love you,' either."

Scott bides his time these days with his Breakfast Queen family. Although the longtime Englewood resident moved to a Glendale retirement home several years ago and has voluntarily given up his driver's license, he takes busses at least three or four times a week to this hang-out where everyone knows his name.

"Anything you'd like to tell this reporter about you and I?" he asks a woman passing by his table.

"You said you wouldn't tell about you and I," she jokes.

"I said I wouldn't kiss and tell, but I got loose lips," Scott replies with a smile.

As he pushes 90, the onetime local TV icon is prone to reflect on life and death from time to time. He says he would get a kick out of attending his own funeral, just for the sake of curiosity.

"I'd just want to come back and see who showed up. I'd look down and say, 'What the hell is he doing here?' He didn't like me," Scott said.

As for the tombstone — when the ex-clown meets his final cancellation, Blinky does not hesitate when asked what inscription he would like to read on his final resting place.

"He was sincere," Scott said. "He was no fake."

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