

## Donation of the Month

**Object: Schoenhut Circus Toys**  
**Catalog #: 1997.54.3.1 & 3-7**  
**Donor: Geneva Wyant**



Elsa Juhre, circa 1918. N015728. Courtesy of Elsa Juhre Schmitz.

Peanuts and cotton candy. Sawdust and colorful banners. Flying acrobats and roaring lions. Once upon a time children of all ages thrilled to the energy and excitement of the traveling circus. But once the show left town, how could a youngster recreate its magic and wonder? By staging a miniature circus in their front parlor! Around 1918 young Elsa Juhre of Rogers was able to do just that when she received several pieces to a Schoenhut circus set for her birthday. Local photographer George H. Bingham captured the memories with several sweet images of Elsa and her toys.



Albert Schoenhut (1848-1912) was born in Wurtemberg, Germany, to a toy-making family. His father and grandfather made wooden dolls, rocking horses, and wagons. Recognizing young Albert's talents, John Dahl, a buyer for Wanamaker's department store, brought the 17-year old to Philadelphia where he soon made an important contribution. At the time the hammers in toy pianos struck a sounding bar made of glass instead of strings as in a real piano. Albert exchanged the glass bars for those made of metal, making the instrument more durable and giving it a better sound.

In 1872 Albert branched out on his own, making toy pianos in his home. But these pianos were more than playthings. Not only did they stay in tune, but they also came with their own sheet music to encourage music playing and help develop the child's ear. Also, the width of the keys were similar to the keys on a real piano, allowing youngsters to learn proper finger spacing. With the success of his pianos, the A. Schoenhut Company made other instruments including a ukelele-banjo, a xylophone, and a glockenspiele. The Museum is fortunate to have early examples of a Schoenhut piano and toy chimes in its collections.

Albert and Marie Schoenhut had eight children who happily served as “product testers.” As the company grew, so did the need for a proper manufacturing space. After moving from one location to another, a modern, automated factory was built in 1912. During six decades of business Schoenhut made a myriad of wonderful toys such as sailboats, games, dollhouses, blocks, bassinets, stick horses, and toy shooting galleries. But in addition to its pianos, the company is best known for its “Humpty-Dumpty Circus.”



In 1902 Schoenhut bought the rights to a jointed clown from Fritz Meinecke, the figure’s designer. Albert named the clown Humpty-Dumpty after a popular 19th-century play of the same name by George Washington Lafayette Fox, who played a white-faced clown during the performance. The first pieces in the series made their debut in 1903 and included Humpty-Dumpty, a ladder, a barrel, and a chair. Over the years many more pieces were added including a “Negro dude” (minstrel), a camel, a lion tamer, a giraffe, a lady rider, a buffalo, a Chinese acrobat, a gorilla, a polar bear, and even a poodle. Of course tents were available, along with wagons, chariots, and other accessories like whips, barrels, and pedestals.

An early ad called the toys “the funniest thing you ever saw. The elephant can do tricks you never heard of. The donkey is better than any animal Barnum ever had. The clowns can make grown-up people, as well as children, laugh for hours.” The solid-wood figures were decorated in oil paint, allowing them to

“stand the roughest kind of treatment.”

The best thing about the toys was that the figures were fully jointed with elastic cord, allowing the performers' and animals' heads and limbs to be positioned. Cupped hands and notches in the feet allowed the pieces to be balanced on ladders, chairs, and tightropes. As an ad said, “There's no end to the fun-new tricks, each more grotesque than the last, are constantly discovered.” A 1903 illustration depicted a donkey sitting on a chair perched on an elephant's back. Nearby a clown rode another donkey while holding two chairs over his head; a second clown did the splits atop the upturned chairs.

Sets ranged in price from 50 cents to \$6 and were sold all over America, Europe, and even Australia and South Africa. Because of the popularity of the Humpty-Dumpty Circus, Schoenhut made other play sets including a farm set, a Noah's Ark set, and the Teddy Roosevelt African Safari set, featuring wild animals, natives, and a guide.

After Albert died in 1912 his six sons took over the business, making toys in the same fashion as before and adding new figures to the circus. But one change did occur because of World War I - instead of sporting German-made glass eyes, which most of the circus figures did, in 1918 all of the figures' eyes were painted on (as are the ones in the Museum's collection). Following the war, smaller versions of the circus toys were made in order to compete with lower-cost toys produced by Japan and Germany. Even with these cost-cutting measures, sales gradually began to fall. The Great Depression took its toll on the company, which closed its doors in 1935.

But the circus continued. In the late 1940s Harry Delavan of New York purchased the rights to the Schoenhut name and the reissue of the circus set, making new toys for a few years in the early 1950s. Other manufacturers jumped on the Schoenhut circus bandwagon, including the B. Shackman Company in New York in the mid-1970s and toy makers in China. In addition, new pieces were commissioned by the Schoenhut Collectors Club.



Among today's collectors, Schoenhut's original circus toys can command high dollars. But the toys in the Museum's collections have more of a historical and sentimental value than monetary. These toys have been played with and loved, as can be seen by their worn paint, tattered clothing, and missing or replaced parts.

The Museum's elephant is a sturdy fellow, featuring leather ears and a contoured back, a later improvement on the company's first elephant which had a simple arced back. Unfortunately, our elephant is missing his tightly twisted twine tail, one leather tusk, and the hard rubber tip at the end of his trunk. The monkey sports a jaunty red felt one-piece suit trimmed in gold fringe; his hat is new. Although his tail and mane are gone, the donkey's leather ears are still intact, if a bit floppy.

The Museum's clown, known as "Cracker-Jack," has seen the most wear and tear. His hat is new but he still wears the remnants of his costume, which collectors call the "cards" suit because of the clubs, diamonds, spades, and hearts decorating the cotton fabric. With his raised eyebrows and an impish grin, Cracker-Jack is one of the brethren of white-faced clowns, which in circus tradition are played as clever clowns. They set up schemes and pull pranks on the foolish or clumsy "Auguste" clowns (German for "fool"). Schoenhut didn't make any Auguste-type clowns, with their big red noses and wild hair, but the company did make a third type of clown - the character clown - such as the hobo.

Shortly after her 90th birthday in 2005, Elsa Juhre Schmitz reminisced about her old toys. She believes her mother ordered them from a catalog and remembers playing with them on the carpet of her grandfather's house on Fourth Street in Rogers. Her dad owned the Juhre Meat Market on the corner of Second and Walnut where photographer George Bingham had an upstairs studio. Sometimes when money was tight Bingham would exchange portraits for a portion of his rent. Mrs. Schmitz remembers that

he would occasionally borrow her circus toys “to use as an attraction” when he photographed other children.



Sometime in the 1970s Mrs. Schmitz gave her circus toys to Geneva & Clyde Wyant, antique collectors and restorers in the War Eagle area. The Wyants replaced missing parts, installed new elastic in the joints and fashioned felt hats for the clown and monkey. In 1992 Mrs. Wyant generously donated the toys to the Museum, where they've been a favorite with young and old alike. Peanuts, anyone?

#### **CREDITS**

Sybill McFadden, “Dolls and Toys by Schoenhut: Pride of American Collectors” (unattributed & undated article); Eileen Barton Secor, “Can’t Top the Big Top,” *The (Eugene, Oregon) Register-Guard* (6-26-2003) ( [www.registerguard.com](http://www.registerguard.com) ); Judith Lile & Jim Sneed, “Schoenhut’s HUMPTY-DUMPTY Circus and the Great American Circus,” “Schoenhut Company History,” “Schoenhut Toys,” “The Eyes of the Schoenhut Circus,” “Schoenhut’s Elephants,” “Schoenhut Circus Reproductions,” “Schoenhut’s Catalogs and Ads,” and “The Clowns of the Schoenhut Circus,” Judy’s Old World Toys ( [www.oldwoodtoys.com/american\\_circus\\_toys.htm](http://www.oldwoodtoys.com/american_circus_toys.htm) ); and personal conversation with Elsa Juhre Schmitz (March 2005).