



Kansas City businesswoman brings puppet making to America.

BY MARTIN W. SCHWARTZ

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STARTING A COMMERCIAL venture during the Great Depression is not something a business professional would advise. But twenty-five-year-old Hazelle Hedges wasn't a student of business. She was an artist.

In 1929, while still a student at the University of Kansas, Hazelle was approached by her eleven-year-old neighbor, who asked if she would lend her artistic talents to construct a companion to the Italian marionette he had received as a gift. The boy wanted to do puppet shows and found that impossible with the single marionette.

Not only did Hazelle create a marionette for the boy, she remembered why he wanted it in the first place. The application of that function to the marionette's form would help Hazelle create the world's largest company specializing in the manufacture of puppets.

CHILD'S PLAY

After earning a bachelor's degree in fine arts from the University of Kansas, Hazelle taught arts and crafts to unemployed women while attending classes at the Kansas City Art Institute. In 1934, she began to teach puppet-making at the Nelson-Atkins Museum and once again found herself working with children. She was constantly experimenting with marionette design, looking for ways to make the

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movement more lifelike and believable.

That same year, Hazelle spent the summer studying with New York marionette artist Tony Sarg. With no formal business plan, Hazelle returned to Kansas City and began Hazelle's Marionettes in a basement rec room at her parents' home. She eventually named the company Hazelle's Inc.

From 1935 to 1946, Hazelle's would move four times, each time into a larger factory. The first American manufacturer of marionettes—until 1935, the only factories manufacturing marionettes were in Czechoslovakia, France, Italy, and Germany—Hazelle also secured four patents for her puppet-making innovations. In 1941, she married John Woddson Rollins, an industrial engineer who helped Hazelle apply assembly-line techniques to puppet construction.

One device invented by Hazelle prevented all of her creations from being perpetual "mouth-breathers," says Anitra Steele, puppeteer and founding member of the Puppetry Arts Institute in Independence. "Hazelle created a spring device that would hold the marionette's mouth closed until it was opened by the puppeteer." Before that simple addition, all marionettes with moving mouths had jaws that hung open until closed by the puppeteer.

That device, along with intersecting bars Hazelle called "airplane controls" that kept strings from getting tangled

Hazelle's creations ran the spectrum from lifelike to storybook to full-blown fantasy. If you look closely inside the puppet theater, you'll see comic strip icons Blondie and Dagwood sitting next to Miss Muffet and Little Boy Blue.



THE PUPPETRY ARTS INSTITUTE

The Puppetry Arts Institute is a not-for-profit organization designed to preserve and promote puppetry through education and entertainment for all ages. In the early 1990s, PAI received the remaining inventory of Hazelle's Incorporated, including some 22,000 vinyl puppet heads.

Located in the Englewood neighborhood of Independence, PAI regularly holds puppet-making workshops for elementary school children who get to paint, assemble, and keep their own piece of Kansas City history.

The Puppetry Arts Institute also has an extensive collection of Hazelle's marionettes and puppets, as well as marionettes and puppets from all over the world. The institute is open 10 AM to 4 PM Tuesday through Saturday and Sunday, and Monday by appointment only.

11025 East Winner Road • 816-833-9777 • Hazelle.org



One of the Puppetry Arts Institute's prized possessions is a marionette of Hazelle Rollins, which actually operates a smaller marionette of Hazelle's most popular creation, Teto.

and made the marionettes easier to control in performances, made Hazelle's marionettes a favorite among children.

TV PLAYS A HAND

On December 27, 1947, Bob Smith appeared on NBC's *Puppet Playhouse* with a new sidekick named Howdy Doody. Demand for puppets by children who had seen the NBC debut and the subsequent *Howdy Doody Show* sent puppet sales through the roof. Hazelle's Inc. grew to more than fifty full-time employees and eleven independent sales reps. In the 1950s, Hazelle added hand puppets to her catalog of marionettes, and in the early 1960s, the company began selling finger puppets.

Most of the puppets Hazelle designed were storybook favorites. Her Tin Woodman from the *Wizard of Oz* started as a can of pork and beans. Anitra says she was delighted to acquire one of the marionettes for the Puppetry Arts Institute's collection. "When John Rollins, Hazelle's son, saw we had it, he laughed and said, 'I'm sure my mother fed us the beans that came in that can,' she says. "She was that kind of business person."

In addition to storybook creations, Hazelle was ahead of her time in the creation of ethnically authentic marionettes. "Hazelle was very active with People to People International," says Anitra. PTPI was a project of President Dwight D. Eisenhower designed to promote understanding

among people of different cultures. As Eisenhower neared the end of his term in office, he reached out to his friend Joyce C. Hall, founder of Hallmark Cards, and the national offices of the nonprofit organization moved to Kansas City.

Hazelle took the mission of PTPI very seriously. "Her puppets represented different cultures and ethnicities at a time when children's toys often didn't," Anitra says. "She was sensitive to that."

SECRET TO SUCCESS

By the time Hazelle sold her business in 1975, Hazelle's Inc. was producing 250,000 puppets every year and had a catalog of more than 500 different items. But the biggest secret to Hazelle's success goes back to the very first puppet she created for her eleven-year-old neighbor.

"One of the unique things about Hazelle as an entrepreneur is that every puppet came with a printed play," says Anitra. "If you have a play, you want to perform it. And in order to perform it, you need at least two puppets. So by including the play, Hazelle would encourage the sale of more puppets."

Success, it seemed, was just one puppet more.

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HARRY KATZ, COURTESY PUPPETRY ARTS INSTITUTE



THE MAGIC OF HAZELLE

I was only about six years old, so the memory is more pastels than vivid temperas. My sister's Bluebird group was taking a tour of Hazelle's Marionettes in downtown Kansas City. Since my mother was the group leader, I got to tag along on all of Big Sis's extracurricular outings. I'm sure it was a subject of annoyance for her, but it meant I got to do some really cool things in those in-between years before I'd be old enough to join the Cub Scouts.

I remember the factory. It may have been all technology and mechanics, but at the time I was convinced it had something to do with magic.

The puppets were in various stages of construction throughout the factory. The only completed puppet I remember seeing was one carried by a woman who appeared from one of the many doors along the walls. She introduced the clown marionette she carried as Teto and then proceeded to bring him to life, having him climb imaginary stairs and pause at the top to catch his breath. His performance was mute, but to a six-year-old, it was riveting.

I'm a little sorry I didn't pay as much attention to the performer as I did to the performance. This was Hazelle Rollins in her element—bringing her creations to life for all the children who would tour her Kansas City factory for more than forty years.

I got my own Teto as a Christmas gift later that year. Though I practiced for hours, I could never make him come alive the same way Hazelle had.

I still think it has something to do with magic.

—Martin W. Schwartz