The Griggs County Museum is fortunate to have a unique object which is rooted in the history of our county and state. The crown jewel of the museum, the Busy Little Farm, is popular by young and old but seems to be almost taken for granted. Sadly it needs restoration.

First of all what is the Busy Little Farm? It’s a little difficult to describe It is a table about 60 inches wide and 15 feet long. It portrays an animated farmyard with about 64 five- inch figures performing a variety of farming activities of a typical farm around 1900. The centerpiece is a beautifully detailed threshing machine. We call it the Busy Little Farm but earlier it was called the Rhodes Mechanical Show Collection when it was first put on full display in the museum in 1996.

It is unique so it’s hard to find a category for it. It seems to be one of the few remaining folk art animations from the difficult period of the Great Depression and World War II. In fact we at the museum can’t seem to find another surviving example.

The Farm’s story is actually two amazing stories: the story of its creation and the story of its return to Griggs County. Its creation involves a family’s survival, great inventiveness, work, and savvy business enterprise. Its return to Griggs County and its restoration involved the hard work of many museum volunteers during the 90s.

Of course older residents recall the story of Orion Rhodes who began making the animations in the late 1930s in his workshop behind his home. His parents lost their farm near Sutton following the stock market crash 1929,. Oddly his home and workshop were located on the lot of my mother, Helen Sayer’s house on the SW corner of Burell Ave and 12th street. Gary Cowdrey who now owns the house recalls as a boy visiting Orion in his workshop and that Orion kept a pet monkey which would grab hair your hair if you stepped to close and give it a good yank. Perhaps this monkey was a souvenir of his carnival tours.

Orion had seen animation attempts of others to make mechanical shows and he was convinced he could do better. Searching through dump grounds and scrap piles he first constructs his tools, a turning lathe and then pulleys, drive shafts. Using leather from worn out shoes he made drive belts to power the figures. He carved the figures out of scrap wood. His wife, Francis, made clothing for the figures out of scrap cloth. Over the years he would add on to it more to it.

First he loaded it onto a truck frame and on Saturday nights in the summer he would display it in Binford, Hannaford and Cooperstown. Later he teamed up with a carnival, probably the Wm. T. Collins which toured ND, MN and SD county fairs and with his wife and his three daughters, Betty, Ruth and Eldora. In 1954 he became ill. He broke up the farm into three parts giving each of his daughters a section. He passed away in 1957. The mechanisms beneath the farm can be looked at if you get on your hands and knees and just peek under the table. Or to get an idea of the mechanics just look at the ceiling of the museum’s black smith shop to see a large version of the animating mechanics.

The story of how the farm returned to Griggs is a wonderful tale of a community coming together. In 1991 Ruth and Eldora donated their sections of the farm to Griggs county Museum. Willmar Haerter and Dale Steffen “worked many, many hours” to restore these two sections. The farm was a very popular exhibit. In 1996 Betty donated her section making the farm complete. July 14, 1996 the ‘Rhodes Mechanical Farm’ was dedicated in its own room with some from Rhodes family attending. For more detailed information including photos of the Rhodes, Jan Steffen pulled together newspaper reports and other sources now displayed on the walls of the farm’s display room.

We would love to learn more about the carnival tours of the farm and how it was displayed in various locations throughout Griggs County! Orion’s three girls said they loved going to the county fairs and that they felt very special in doing that. Perhaps the Collins Carnival has an archive where we could find out more about these tours. Perhaps we can find another example of these folk art animations.

For a great series of close up photos of the farm please google “busy little farm Griggs County” and follow the first link.

For finding out more about modern animations visit: Cabaret Mechanical Theatre http://www.cabaret.co.uk/