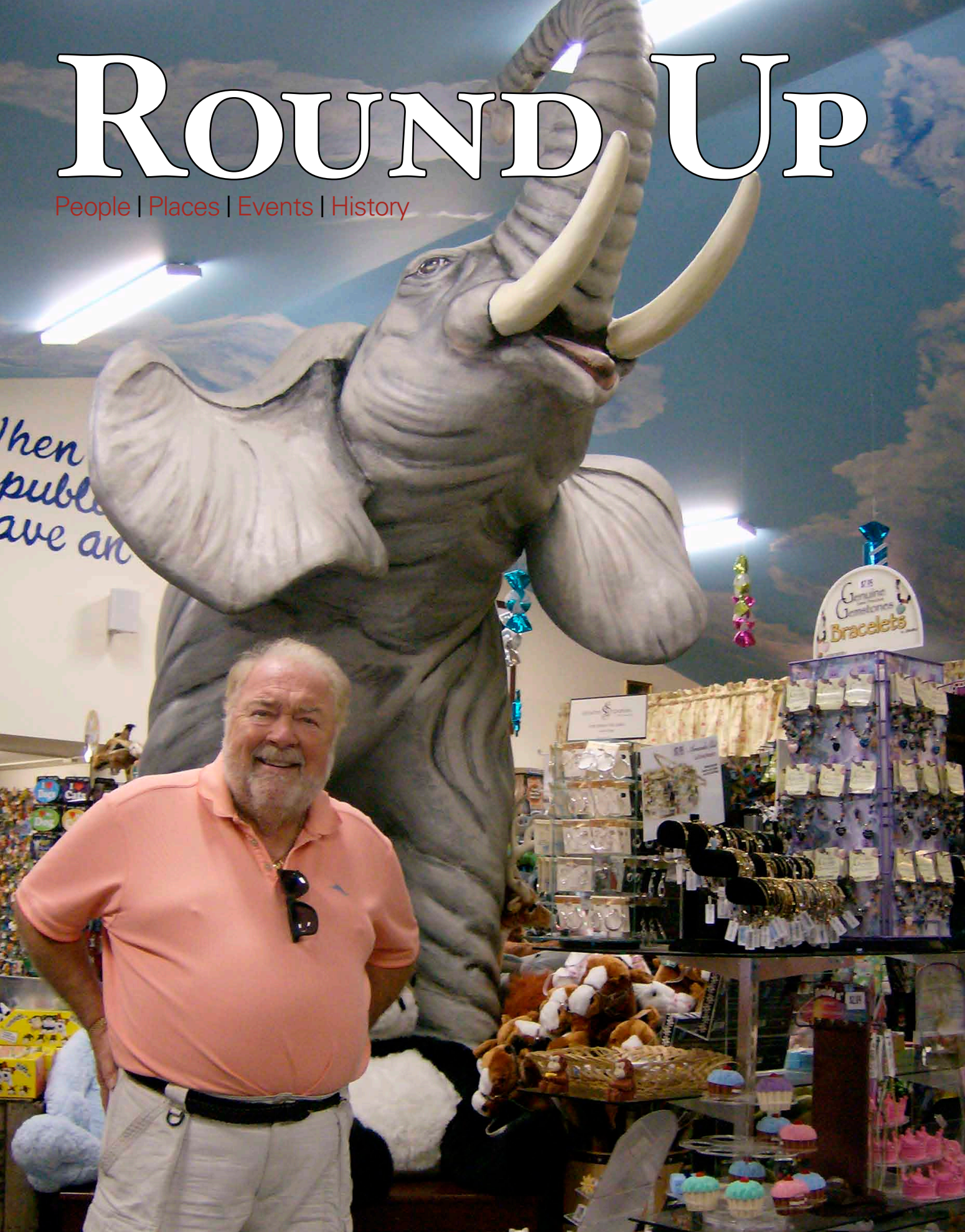


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Forget Talking Horses

Mr. Ed in Orrtanna is all about elephants

by James Rada Jr.

PT. BARNUM ONCE SAID, "WHEN entertaining the public, it's always best to have an elephant." Barnum would have surely been impressed by his kindred soul Ed Gotwald, commonly called Mr. Ed, who displays more than 10,000 elephants in his peanut and candy store in Orrtanna, Adams County. His elephants range in size from the life-size "Phoenix" to small jewelry pieces. Elephants are found on phones, videos, slippers, lamps and statues displayed throughout the store and are crafted from clay, wicker, cake and many more materials. In fact, if it's been made in an elephant form, Mr. Ed probably has it in what he feels is safe to call "the world's largest elephant museum."

It Started with a Wedding Gift

His collection began innocently enough when his sister-in-law gave him and his new wife a little wooden elephant as a wedding gift in 1967.

"What the hell is this for?" I asked," Mr. Ed admits.

She told him that it was for good luck, and he must have figured that it couldn't hurt since for no particular reason he bought four more elephant figurines while on his honeymoon.

"From there, things just got out of hand," he says.

He found elephant knick-knacks at flea markets. People gave them to him as gifts. And, whenever customers at the Giant Grocery Store that he managed in Richmond, Va., traveled, they would return with an elephant souvenir for Mr. Ed.

After he left Giant in 1975, Mr. Ed opened his own store in Orrtanna called the Territory's Most Unusual General Store. Looking for an attraction for the shop, he decided that the space would be perfect for displaying his continually growing elephant collection. His display proved popular among travelers on Route 30.

"I did not realize just how many elephants I had until I put them on display," Mr. Ed recalls.

In 1983, he closed up the general store and reopened as Mr. Ed's Elephant Museum and Candy Emporium. His business and collection continued to grow.

During his 37 years as a business owner, Mr. Ed has earned a reputation as a showman who is willing to do just about anything to promote his store. And he agrees, saying "I've done a lot of kooky things that people remember," he says.

From the Ashes

Even if his publicity stunts sometimes didn't work out the way he had planned, Mr. Ed's elephant luck still holds. Every year, he dresses as Santa Claus and makes an entrance on a different mode of transportation. One year, he decided to float

to the store in a hot air balloon. But, the balloon was caught in a tree on the way, and he had to be lowered to the ground in his Santa suit. A photographer snapped a picture, which ran in newspapers all over the world and added to his unique reputation.

Another time, a bear clawed his way onto the porch of the store looking for food.

"He sat there and ate half of a 25-pound bag of peanuts," Mr. Ed recalls.

Although a minor incident, the story was printed in newspapers around the country, bringing more publicity to Mr. Ed and his store.

But tragedy struck on July 5, 2010, when a neighbor pounded on Mr. Ed's door, waking him up and alerting him that his store was on fire. Fire crews worked

After the fire more than 100 people came from five different states to clean the surviving 8,000 elephants with toothbrushes.

to save it, but the store was a loss, and the museum partially burned.

"Everything in here was black with smoke," Mr. Ed says, "Everything that could melt melted. It was devastating, heart-wrenching to watch my creation burn to the ground."

He lost about 2,000 elephants in his collection, but the next day, people began sending him elephants, and he resolved to rebuild. The old store was bulldozed away, and a new one was built to take its place. In the center of the store, he placed a life-size elephant named "Phoenix" to symbolize the new store rising from the ashes of the old.

His granddaughter Nicole came up with the idea of "Save the Elephants Day." More than 100 people came from five different states to clean the surviving 8,000 elephants with toothbrushes. Meanwhile, elephants continued arriving from all over the world.

As for the 2,000 elephants that were lost in the fire, Mr. Ed commissioned an artist to use their surviving pieces and create an elephant mosaic that hangs over the fudge area of the store.

When Mr. Ed's Elephant Museum and Candy Emporium reopened in February 2011, the museum was larger than ever with more than 12,000 elephants on display, including one made for Mr. Ed's 75th birthday cake. In storage are another 5,000 elephants just waiting to bring Mr. Ed more luck. ▼

Mr. Ed, the elephant man, has been collecting and showing his elephants for some 37 years, ever since his wife gave him an elephant for a wedding gift.

WHEN YOU GO

Mister Ed's Elephant Museum and Candy Emporium

is located at 6019 Chambersburg Road in Orrtanna, Adams County. The store is open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Sunday through Thursday, and 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Friday and Saturday. Extended hours are in place Memorial Day through Labor Day, when the store opens at 9 a.m. every day and closes at 6 p.m. Monday through Thursday and 8 p.m. Friday through Sunday. Mistereds.com; 717-352-3792

