

Too Close To Home

Crazy night here last night!!

Our 6-year-old, Samantha was up late, and since she was the only one of our 4 kids still awake, we decided to spend some 'just parents with Sammie' time and play a game. Dad had sunk one of our ships in Battleship when we heard a series of pops from outside. Following our instincts to take cover, we went into the interior of the house away from windows, where we discussed what we heard. Had we spaced on the date, was it New Year's already and someone was lighting off fireworks in celebration? No, my husband said, there is only one thing that sounds like that, and when he put it that way, I had to agree – it was gunfire. After we decided that it couldn't really have been anything else, we called the police, who told us there were already officers on scene. We got our police scanner hooked up (who said I don't need a police scanner to keep tabs on small town action?), and we continued to sit in the hallway and listen to it. Soon we heard the unmistakable churning of the LifeFlight helicopter (we live blocks from the hospital), and we wondered if it was related – we would have more info in the morning. The police scanner just had mild chatter about officers responding and trying to find the "suspect's ID". They found his cell phone, and an officer was told to see who the suspect had called. Not getting any useful info, we went to bed, and my husband woke me this morning with the info that he had heard on the big city Toledo news – a shootout had occurred in our small town, only blocks from our house, mere feet from our friends' house.

Turns out, a man had shot at the police station and then drove down to the park, where he shot at the police who chased him. The police returned fire, which explains the series of 6-8 pops we heard. The man was then LifeFlighted to a bigger hospital with life-threatening injuries. That was all the info in the newspaper, but when I did a google search this

morning on the man's name, something interesting came up: a memory page for his daughter who died in a motorcycle accident in our town (this family was from a town 25 miles away) last spring. I remember that case: a man was driving a speeding motorcycle, and when police tried to pull him over, he gave chase. He eventually lost control of the motorcycle, and it crashed, killing his passenger when she was ejected from the motorcycle. From the research I did on the internet this morning, it seems that the suspect from last night's shooting incident was the father of the victim in the motorcycle chase case. Perhaps he was upset with the way police handled things last spring, so he shot up the police station and led them back to where his daughter was killed – the shootout took place at the same scene.

Tragic case all around, and we are reeling from yet another so-called 'big city' incident that seems quite out of place here in our small Utopian town. I went to the shooting suspect's Facebook page, and there are several Christian activities on it. Perhaps in his grief for his daughter, the man lost faith in letting God handle things, and that is another aspect of the tragedy. Thank God that no officers or bystanders were injured, and I'm going to pray for the recovery and physical and emotional healing of the man and his family.

[Here's a link to the news story.](#)

More Beautiful Than Ever

My husband was in bed last night waiting for me to come up because I was putting some finishing touches on my daughter's school fundraiser and picture forms when we both heard a bunch

of sirens. We live pretty close to the fire station, so we didn't think much of it, even if it was odd that they were allowing them to wail so loudly just before midnight. This morning a friend emailed me with the bad news, and I went to the local newspaper's website to see the details: our beloved community park, Imagination Station, burnt last night.

We still don't know how it happened, but it's obvious that this was not a natural cause – it was not lightning, and there is no electricity capable of sparking such a blaze at the park. Unfortunately, this seems to be the work of people, and whether it was intentional or an accident remains to be seen. At least no one was hurt physically in the blaze. But many in the community are emotionally distraught, for Imagination Station was a wonderful park where citizens from throughout the area would spend warm summer nights, cool autumn evenings, and many a Saturday afternoon with their families and friends. Funded by private donations and built by the hands of thousands of volunteers in 1994, it was a source of community pride. Everyone came together to create Imagination Station; kids volunteered their cool playground ideas, while adults physically built the play equipment and still others provided thousands of meals for the builders. The community worked together day and night, rain and shine for 6 days until it was finished. The final product was amazing, impressing locals and out of town visitors alike. And now much of it is gone.



Many people came out tonight to walk past the charred ruins. In a way, it was like paying one's respects, and many people stared at the blackened splinters in stunned silence. There were whispers, "Who would do such a thing?" and "How did this happen?", and one woman walked by slowly, saying quietly, "We will build it again. And it will be more beautiful than ever." I believe her to be right. People came together in 1994 and built an amazing park, and people will come together again to replace the one we lost yesterday.

"The Greeks built an Acropolis – And Noah built an Ark
The Russians built a Sputnik But Bryan built a Park"
(Bryan Times, 1957)



****UPDATE****

There was an update in today's (9/17/10) newspaper saying that tons of people have stepped forward and created a volunteer organization to rebuild. It was insured, and [Spangler Candy Company](#) has stepped forward to cover any costs not paid for by insurance. There is a [Facebook page dedicated to the rebuilding of Imagination Station](#) where people can share their memories of the park or volunteer for the rebuilding. Unfortunately the fire investigation and the insurance company's investigation will both take awhile, and nothing can be done until they are finished. They hope to have the playground replaced by Spring, but that is still a long time, especially for those of us with kids. Sure there are other parks in town, but Imagination Station was the favorite. □ The little town made the big Toledo news though, they had a nice story:

Exporting Fun

Here in 2010, everyone knows that it's becoming more and more common for the United States to export jobs to countries where the labor is cheaper in cost.

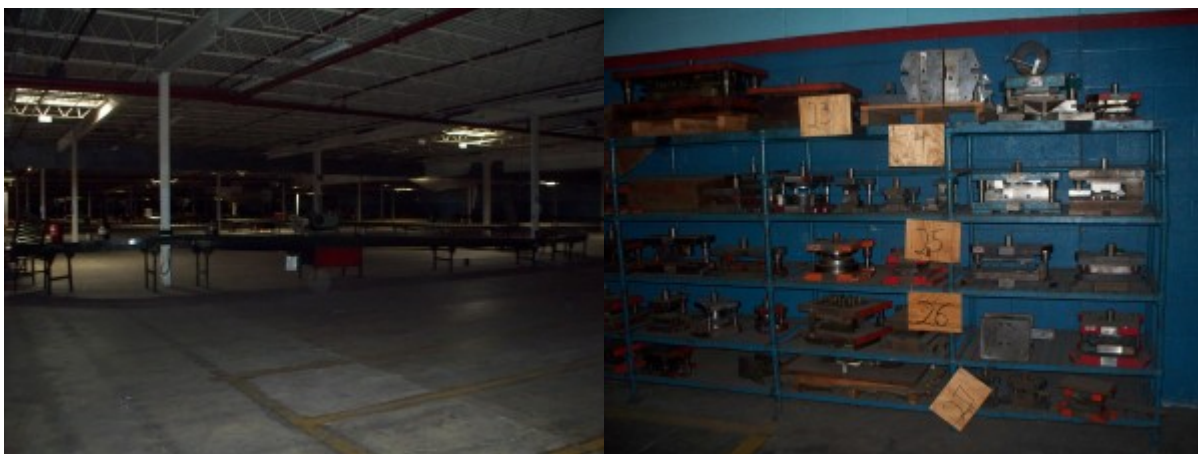
Locally, my area used to be well known for producing no less than three types of goods: automotive products, toys, and candy. Because of the free-falling economy and other things, the demand in the automotive industry has plummeted, and I don't have a desire to go into further detail about that in this blog post. Fortunately, all seems to be well in our local candy factory, and the sugary sweet aromas still float upon our breezes every day. But much like many of our automotive-oriented factories, business at the local toy factory is not going so well. What once was a thriving complex of bustling office buildings, manufacturing facilities, and distribution warehouses crisscrossed with train tracks and semi trailers for shipping has become an almost ghostly graveyard of quiet emptiness.

Recently, I had the opportunity to glimpse the inside of one of the old manufacturing facilities for a company called Ohio Art, who is probably best known for creating the timeless toy (or so it was once thought to be) – the Etch-A-Sketch.



Who can blame a struggling company for trying to cut costs just to stay above water, and Ohio Art cut its costs (and

almost a hundred jobs) about 10 years ago when they moved their production lines to China. Now the sprawling complex, split down the middle by the aptly named "Toy Street", sits mostly empty with the company leasing some of the large space to other companies while other areas are used by local organizations. I couldn't resist the opportunity to snap a few pictures, especially for those of you who are ghost hunters. I'm not really inclined to believe in paranormal phenomena, but for the two days I worked in the abandoned Ohio Art warehouse, I could have convinced myself that we humans were not alone. Beyond the creepiness that comes from being in a humongous (and I mean HUMONGOUS) abandoned manufacturing facility, there were plenty of strange noises: creaking, clanking, dripping, whooshing, you name it. There were random tickles on my arm, brushes on my back, and taps on my shoulders (many of which were later attributed to rogue cobwebs and the like, but those explanations ruin my ghost story don't they). Not only that, but when production was moved across the globe to China, many old machines, mechanical parts, and things like employee safety signs were left behind, seemingly testaments to the millions of toys that were birthed here and long forgotten.





The emptiness of Ohio Art is a sad thing; not only for the surrounding community who lost all those jobs and for the executives who had to make those tough decisions, but also as a sign of our country's fledgling economy. If you'd like to read more about how Ohio Art's production line was moved to China (and about how conditions aren't always what they seem for Chinese workers), I found [the following article](#) pretty interesting, and you might also:

Ruse in Toyland: Chinese Workers' Hidden Woe

By JOSEPH KAHN

Published: December 7, 2003

SHENZHEN, China— Workers at Kin Ki Industrial, a leading Chinese toy maker, make a decent salary, rarely work nights or weekends and often "hang out along the street, play Ping-Pong and watch TV."

They all have work contracts, pensions and medical benefits. The factory canteen offers tasty food. The dormitories are comfortable.

These are the official working conditions at Kin Ki as they are described on paper – crib sheets – handed to workers just before inspections.

Those occur when big American clients, like the Ohio company that uses Kin Ki to produce the iconic toy Etch A Sketch, visit to make sure that the factory has good labor standards.

Real-world Kin Ki employees, mostly teenage migrants from internal provinces, say they work many more hours and earn about 40 percent less than the company claims. They sleep head-to-toe in tiny rooms. They staged two strikes recently demanding they get paid closer to the legal minimum wage.

Most do not have pensions, medical insurance or work contracts. The company's crib sheet recommends if inspectors press to see such documents, workers should "intentionally waste time and then say they can't find them," according to company memos provided to The New York Times by employees.

After first saying that Kin Ki strictly abides by all Chinese labor laws, Johnson Tao, a senior executive with the privately owned company, acknowledged that Kin Ki's wages and benefits fell short of legal levels and vowed to address the issue soon.

He said that the memos might have reflected attempts by factory managers to deceive inspectors, but that such behavior "did not have the support of senior management."

William C. Killgallon, the chief executive of Ohio Art Company, the owner of Etch A Sketch, said that he considered Kin Ki executives honest and that he had no knowledge of labor problems there. But he said he intended to visit China soon to "make sure they understand what we expect."

Etch A Sketch is the same child's drawing toy today that it was in 1960, when Ohio Art first produced it in Bryan, Ohio. But efforts to keep its selling price below \$10 on shelves at Wal-Mart and Toys "R" Us forced the company to move production to China three years ago.

Today the same toy is made not just for lower wages, but also under significantly harsher working conditions. Kin Ki's workers, in fact, are struggling to obtain rights that their American predecessors at Ohio Art won early in the last century, though the workers are without the aid of

independent unions, which remain illegal in China.

China now makes 80 percent of the toys sold in America, according to United States government figures, and no industry here has come under greater pressure to adhere to global labor codes. Kin Ki and most other big producers open their doors to foreign inspectors to assuage concerns that products used to entertain children in rich countries are not made under oppressive conditions in poor ones.

But that goal conflicts with price pressures in commodity industries like toys, where manufacturers command no premium for good labor practices. China alone has 8,000 toy makers competing fiercely for contracts by shaving pennies off production costs.

Kin Ki stays competitive, workers say, by paying them 24 cents an hour in Shenzhen, where the legal minimum wage is 33 cents. When the Etch A Sketch line shut down in Ohio just after the Christmas rush in 2000, wages for the unionized work force there had reached \$9 an hour.

Chinese workers say the company also denies them legally required nonsalary benefits and compels them to work 84 hours a week, far more than the legal maximum, without required overtime pay.

"I keep this job because my parents and my daughter depend on the money I earn," said one migrant worker, who if named could lose her position for talking about the company. "No one likes to work in these conditions, but I have no choice."

Etch A Sketch has had rare longevity in the toy world. Baby Boomers used them as children and now buy them for their own families by the millions.

The toy survived into the electronic age because of nostalgia and clever promotions. But its appeal has continued, in part, because it keeps getting cheaper to own. It sold for \$3.99

when it was introduced. If it had kept pace with the consumer price index over its 43 years, it would retail for \$23.69 today instead of \$9.99.

Mr. Killgallon and his brother, Larry, who is president of Ohio Art, said in an interview that their efforts to reduce costs ran out of steam by the late 1990's, in part because of soaring health care expenses.

The logic of overseas production grew irresistible, as wage rates and shipping costs fell and quality improved, they said. An Etch A Sketch made in China and delivered to the company's warehouse in Bryan was found to cost 20 percent to 30 percent less than making it in Bryan. Moving the full line to China meant laying off about 100 people.

"We tried hard to make this work in Bryan," Larry Killgallon said. "But we looked at the numbers and we realized that we had to move."

Since early 2001, Etch A Sketches have been made in the village of Da Kang, a dusty enclave on the outskirts of Shenzhen, near Hong Kong. Once a farm region, the area has been overtaken by white-tiled factories and itinerant laborers. Landlords scrawl their phone numbers on the walls of old farm homes, like commercial graffiti, for workers who want to rent rooms. The village planted roses and marigolds to beautify the roadside, but the fallout from factories and construction sites has colored them gray.

High walls surround Kin Ki's production lines and warehouses. Dormitory windows are covered in chicken wire. Workers must enter and leave through the guarded front gate.

The factory, workers say, operates with the intensity of a military campaign. Production starts at 7:30 a.m., and, breaking only for lunch and dinner, continues until 10 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays are treated as normal workdays, so a work week consists of seven 12-hour days.

That far exceeds Shenzhen's regulations. The authorities have set a 40-hour, five-day work week, like the United States. Local rules allow no more than 32 hours of overtime per month, which must be compensated by paying time and a half on weekdays and double time on weekends.

Kin Ki set a much lower pay scale, workers said. It pays just 1.3 times pay base for any overtime, weekday or weekend. Workers say their monthly paychecks would more than double, to about \$200 from around \$85, if the company paid legal wages.

The work itself can be draining and tedious. Unlike Ohio Art's factory, Kin Ki uses few machines to offset manual labor, and it needs three or four times the number of workers casting plastic molds, painting parts, and attaching the strings and rods that operate the drawing mechanism of the Etch A Sketch. But Kin Ki workers say it is the pay, not the task, that upsets them.

"Most of us would work long hours willingly if we were paid according to the law," said one employee. "The way things are now, we can shut up or leave."

Some workers took action against the factory last June and July, refusing to work unless the company raised wages. They also demanded that the daily diet of boiled vegetables, beans and rice be improved and supplemented more often with pork, fish or some other meat, which they say is served just twice a month.

The company responded by raising wages by a few cents a day, workers said. The canteen allotted each worker an extra dish each day, though no more meat.

But managers made "fried squid" of two workers they singled out as strike leaders, workers said, using a popular term for dismissals.

The company acknowledged having significant labor problems. "I know that I need to increase wages and to comply with the law," Mr. Tao said. "I have the intention of doing this and will raise all wages in 2004."

He also acknowledged that workers had gone on strike. But he denied that Kin Ki had dismissed the two ringleaders. He said they "were well known troublemakers" who left the factory of their own accord.

Whatever Kin Ki's intentions are now, company documents show that it has been paying below-regulation wages – and seeking to fool foreign clients – for years.

One memo preparing workers and supervisors for an inspection in September 2001, urged workers to help the factory "cope with clients."

"Foreign clients made unattainable demands during previous inspections, including on limiting overtime," the memo said. "But when you think about it, you come from all over the country to make money, not to rest."

A more recent memo, issued to prepare for an inspection that took place on Nov. 26, urged workers to memorize false numbers for wages and working hours to reflect Shenzhen's regulations. The memo promised bonuses to workers who responded as directed when approached by inspectors.

Workers said the elaborate ruse had one happy result. Because few of the employees have legal work contracts on file, the factory must pretend that its work force is smaller than it is when inspectors visit. On such days most of the factory's 850 workers get a rare treat: a day off.

On Nov. 26, with an inspection under way inside the plant, workers congregated in their rented homes or food stalls to eat, chat, smoke and gossip.

"I thank the inspectors for one thing," said a Kin Ki worker from rural Sichuan. She was crouching over a bucket of cold water in the warm afternoon sun, washing her hair. "I needed a rest," she said.

Dinner And A Show

Tonight was Williams County Community Theatre's second performance of *Murder with a Silver Spoon* at Rita's Family Dining in Bryan, Ohio. It was a very different venue than the country club where we presented it last weekend. Rita's had a very cramped banquet room in which the audience enjoyed a three course meal between acts. Although space was extremely limited, it lent itself even more to drawing the audience into the action and allowed for even more audience/cast interaction. Because the space was so small, the number of audience members was extremely limited. However, the event was sold out which was great for our group and the theatre-goers all seemed to enjoy themselves tremendously. For those poor, unfortunates who did not get tickets for whatever reason (trouble finding a sitter :), etc), tentative plans are being made to again perform the show at a venue near you.

Silver Spoon

Ok.... so there are 10 days until Williams County Community Theatre presents an evening of MURDER and dinner, too. Our first show is for a group of Kiwanis members at Orchatd Hills

Country Club on March 1st. We also have two performances at Rita's on the Square in Bryan, OH for the general public on March 7th and 8th.

I have never before been cast in a dinner theatre performance. I saw a performance of *Nunsense* in which the actors interacted with the audience between dinner courses while on my high school senior trip and it was fun. The performers kept picking on ME?!. That may have been because I called attention to myself and was sitting in the front row.

Murder with a Silver Spoon was written by one of our own community theatre members. It is just a fun, very light bit of theatre. It involves a 3rd rate (or maybe 4th rate) novelist who comes to a small town in order to promote her new book, *Murder with a Silver Spoon* (ironic, isn't it?). During the course of the play and meal, there is a murder and everyone is a suspect. The bumbling sergeant and his ever-reliable, very intelligent, and quite dashing deputy attempt to solve the case.

SO.... for an evening of dining, murder, singing, and comedy be sure to call for reservations: 1-888-569-9228.