

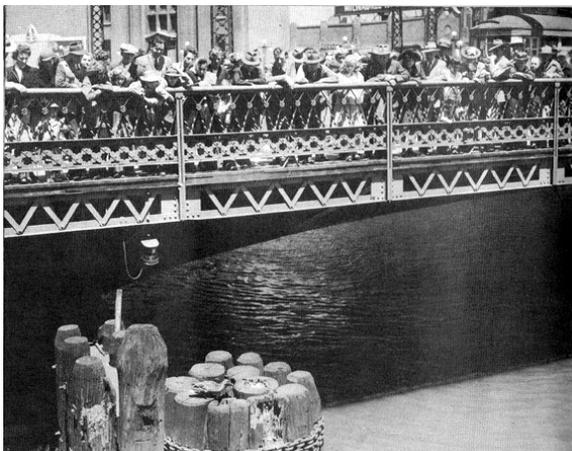
Gertie the Duck



The little push puppet Talking Gertie and Sassy Black Bill is the creation of the Merry Line Toy Co. The head of this Milwaukee, Wisconsin toy company was Earl F. Wendt. Gertie was being manufactured by April, 1947.

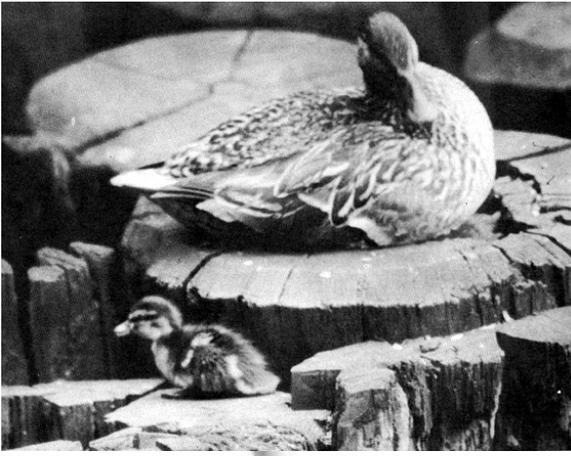
The toy was inspired by a true story of a mama duck, her eggs, and a town in April of 1945. Gertie became famous due to a number of events including the world being war-weary, a Milwaukee city electrician being shown the eggs and his call to the Milwaukee Journal, prompt response by the Journal to cover a human interest story, a town of caring people, a piling replacement job being held up, and lastly Gertie's own perseverance.

The bridge tenders had seen a Mallard duck pair nesting on top of a piling near the southwestern corner of Wisconsin's busiest bridge, the Wisconsin Avenue bridge. Gertie and her green headed mate choose an odd location for their nesting site. The pier was in a very noisy location with a lot of foot and vehicle traffic overhead, a streetcar crossing daily, air hammers were heard from downstream, and of course ship traffic and the bridge openings. The top of the pier was ten feet above the water. Gertie did not add nesting material to the piling. Rather, she used the punky wood to hold the eggs, working hard to hollow out enough room to use as her nest. One of the bridge operators, Fred Schulz, discovered the first eggs in a hollow of the piling about April 27, 1945. Sure enough, more eggs followed and so did the community's interest.



Thousands of people stopped daily to watch the Mallard Duck pair's progress. Nine eggs were laid before Gertie started incubating the eggs. She sat on six of them almost continuously for the next month. Gertie endured pestering from people tossing coins at her (prompting Milwaukee's citizens to demand police protection for her), a fire on a nearby piling from a tossed cigarette (put out by the bridge tenders), and the noise of the busy bridge (parade bands were silent as they crossed the bridge).

The first little ducklings were hatched on the eve of Memorial Day, May 30th. Black Bill was the first. And he was a trial to Gertie. He did not want to stay under her wing but instead would pop out from under his mother and run around on the pilings. He seemed to be a show-off! And on Thursday night, May 31st, he fell off, straight into the water, ten feet below. Gertie jumped in after Black Bill but could not carry him back up to the nest. The bridge tenders went to the rescue in a rowboat, chased him all over the river and finally scooped him up into a net and returned him to the nest and his siblings and mother. Black



Bill fell off again that night, in the rain and the cold with the river running fast. Gertie, good mother that she was, went looking for Black Bill again. The other ducklings started looking for her and began to fall in as well. Black Bill went over the edge a third time! The madness of May 31st/June 1st ended with the bridge tenders once again coming to the rescue. This night's adventure did not end all good as one duckling swam away and was never reunited with the family. Not wanting to need to rescue the family

yet again, the rescuers let the four ducklings spend the night in a carton, warm and safe. That accounts for five of the six eggs/ducklings. What of the last? He was still in the nest, unhatched. Larry Hautz and the bridge tenders brought him into the bridge shanty, too, as a tiny bill was poking out. Mr. Hautz helped him (maybe Pee Wee?) escape the shell and warmed the duckling in his hat, stuffed with cotton, in front of the shanty's coal fire. He also rolled him in cornmeal to dry him out!

Gertie and her five children, were moved to the local Gimbel's store window until the weather improved and the tiniest duck could get stronger. This was a huge attraction for the town. Nurses were on site around the clock for these few days. Sunday, June 3rd, a parade featuring the Mallard duck family, ended at the Juneau park lagoon where the family lived happily ever after.

This little brown Mallard duck known as Gertie inspired the world and left remembrances behind. The darling push puppet Talking Gertie and Sassy Black Bill was made in 1949 and a lovely children's book was written by Nicholas P. Georgiady and Louis G. Romano in 1959. Today there is a river walk exhibit with a 4-foot bronze statue of Gertie plus ones of her five ducklings, Black Bill, Dee Dee, Freddie, Millie, Pee Wee, and Rosie near the Wisconsin Avenue bridge to serve as a reminder of Gertie the duck and the preciousness of life. They were created by sculptor Gwendolyn Gillen and dedicated in 1997 and 1999. It has been said the city of Milwaukee has the Gertie's nesting piling in a museum, but that isn't true.

This article was written by C.L. Umbowers and used several sources including [The Story of Gertie](#) (written by Gordon MacQuarrie of the Journal) and newspaper articles published by the Milwaukee Journal, Visitor Tips by Mark Bertieri, 03/02/2008 from Roadside America.com, and Wikipedia. Pictures used are from [The Story of Gertie](#) which were taken by Harris Nowell, Journal photographer.

