



Tommy Bartlett Show Timeline

- 1949 During a performance of his show “Welcome Travelers,” popular Chicago radio and television host Tommy Bartlett witnesses a Cypress Gardens water-ski show performing at the Railroad Festival in Chicago. He immediately recognizes its entertainment value for attracting large audiences.
- 1952 The “Tommy Bartlett Water Ski & Jumping Boat Thrill Show,” in conjunction with Carl Kiekhaefer’s Mercury Marine, begins performing in Chicago. It is Tommy’s insurance policy against the unpredictable broadcasting industry.
- The first stop for Tommy’s initial road show is the Edgewater Hotel in Madison, Wisconsin. The second stop is Wisconsin Dells, where a crew of 12 skiers and boat drivers wow 1,500 spectators. The Wisconsin Dells Chamber of Commerce is so impressed by the show that they ask Bartlett and his crew to stick around...for good.
- 1952-1960 Tommy Bartlett’s traveling water-ski shows (up to five separate units per year) tour North America performing to capacity crowds in over 60 cities.
- 1953 Tommy Bartlett secures a location on scenic Lake Delton and makes the Wisconsin Dells the permanent site for his water-ski and boat show. During its first season, the show performs four times a day. Ticket prices are a dollar for adults and 25 cents for children.
- 1954 During its second season in Wisconsin Dells, the Thrill Show’s business doubles.
- 1955 The man-carrying kite makes its maiden flight in Wisconsin Dells. A large kite is attached to a ski rope and towed by a Mercury outboard motorboat.
- 1957 A new stage and lighting system are installed. One daytime performance is eliminated and is moved to later in the evening. Show times are now 1:00, 5:00 and 8:30 p.m. This is the first time in the world a ski show has ever been performed at night under lights. Special legislation is passed to allow skiing after dark.
- The “Dancing Waters,” a musically choreographed production using special lighted fountains, is added. Tommy first saw this German-produced show at the Radio City Music Hall in New York City.
- 1958 Tommy Bartlett organizes a water-ski U.S.O. Tour to the South Pacific and to Southeast Asia. The show visits Hawaii, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Guam and Okinawa.
- 1959 Tommy Bartlett brings the first authentic Polynesian Drum Dancer Troupe to perform in the United States for his Wisconsin Dells show.

- 1960 As part of President Eisenhower's "People-to-People Exchange Program," the Tommy Bartlett Thrill Show travels to Thailand and Burma where crowds see water-skiing for the very first time.
- 1961 & 1962 The Chicago Association of Commerce invites the show to perform at Navy Pier before a half-million visitors at the Chicago Trade Exposition.
- 1962 Stars of the "Lawrence Welk Show" perform on a rotating basis, for the entire summer, in Wisconsin Dells. The Lennon Sisters' appearance draws the largest crowds (to date) for the show.
- The Tommy Bartlett skiers are featured at the Seattle World's Fair. A first-of-its-kind, million-gallon circular water tank is constructed at a cost of \$75,000.
- 1964 A standing-room-only crowd sees the Tommy Bartlett water-skiers at the New York World's Fair. More than 4.8 million people attend the water show performances.
- 1966 The first covered grandstands are erected at the Wisconsin Dells show site making it possible for guests to view the show, even during inclement weather. "Three shows daily, rain or shine" becomes a popular phrase that still rings true today.
- A thrilling skydiving exhibition opens each performance in Wisconsin Dells. This is the first regularly scheduled skydiving display in the world. Tommy himself often pilots the Cessna 195 plane that carries the parachute team.
- 1970 The *Chicago Tribune* "commissions" a bumper sticker survey to predict the winner of the next Chicago mayoral election, Mayor Daly or his republican opponent. Final results have Tommy Bartlett by a landslide due to the vast number of his water show bumper stickers in and around metropolitan Chicago.
- 1971 Sea World of Ohio invites the Thrill Show to perform at the world's largest water-ski stadium. Organizers are so impressed they ask the show to stay on for another two years.
- 1973 The Tommy Bartlett Thrill Show is featured on "The Mike Douglas Show" live from Sea World Ohio.
- Tommy Bartlett commits to a \$1 million expansion of the Wisconsin Dells show. A new entrance, parking lot, restroom facility, office complex and concessions and seating areas are constructed, tripling the capacity of the show site.
- 1975 The Tommy Bartlett skiers open a six-month engagement at the International Ocean Exposition in Okinawa, Japan for Expo '75.
- 1976 The Thrill Show is invited back to Navy Pier to perform again for the large crowds attending the Chicago Trade Exposition.
- Wes Harrison, "Mr. Sound Effects," first performs as a featured headliner at The Tommy Bartlett Ski, Sky and Stage Show.
- 1977 The Nerveless Nocks and Dieter Tasso first perform in Wisconsin Dells. This begins what will become a long-term relationship with the Tommy Bartlett Show.
- Tommy Bartlett opens his second permanent water-ski, sky and stage show facility in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee.

- 1982 Tommy Bartlett opens his \$2.2 million “Tommy Bartlett’s Robot World & Exploratory.” The attraction is expanded several times with the addition of the Russian Space Station MIR in 1997.
- 1984 In celebration of his 70th birthday, Tommy Bartlett water-skis for the first and only time of his life, in front of a Thrill Show crowd of 5,000.
- 1987 The “Laserama” laser-light show is added to the finale of the 8:30 p.m. performance.
- 1993 Tommy Bartlett receives the industry’s most prestigious award when he is inducted into the Water Ski Hall of Fame in Cypress Gardens, Florida.
- 1998 The Tommy Bartlett Thrill Show breaks attendance records during its 1998 season. Sadly, the man behind the show, Tommy Bartlett, passes away during the season’s final performances over Labor Day weekend.
- 2002 The Tommy Bartlett Thrill Show celebrates 50 years as “The Greatest Show on H₂O!” One of the longest-running, live outdoor entertainment shows of its kind in the world, the Thrill Show, has played to over 20 million spectators worldwide.
- 2003 World-renowned Nerveless Nocks’ stunt team creates an 18-foot steel ball cage especially for their daring “Globe of Thunder” act at the Tommy Bartlett Show. It is the largest such globe in the world inside of which the Nocks’ stunt riders race motorcycles at speeds of 60 miles per hour.
- 2003 Recognizing Tommy Bartlett’s contribution to the sport of water-skiing, the Wisconsin Sports Development Corporation posthumously inducts Bartlett into the Wisconsin Athletic Hall of Fame on June 12, 2003.
- 2004 Comic juggler Dieter Tasso sets aside the idea of retirement and returns to the Bartlett stage for another run.
- The World’s Youngest Stunt Rider premieres at the Tommy Bartlett Show. Six-year-old Cyrus Nock joins his family, the Nerveless Nocks, as he races on his stunt cycle inside the Globe of Thunder steel ball cage. Cyrus is a ninth generation Nock family performer and the third generation to perform in the Bartlett show.
- 2005 Comedic juggler and unicyclist T.J. Howell joins the Tommy Bartlett Show lineup. Howell a longtime, world-class performer entertains audiences with his unique juggling and invites his two young sons – Hunter and Carson – to get in the act.
- 2006 The new “King of the One-Liners,” Geechy Guy, joins Tommy Bartlett’s cast of characters. A unique jokester, Geechy once rattled off 676 funnies in one hour, earning him a Guinness World-Record title.
- The Pirates of Bartlett Bay, an all-new pirate-themed adventure, debuts and features swashbuckling fun throughout the entire show.
- The Nerveless Nocks present the “Wheel of Destiny,” a 65-foot-high double wheel that rotates end over end as the stunt artists perform tricks on its outer rims. Young daredevil Cyrus Nock marks his third season with the show performing on the wheel.
- 2007 Carolina Nock brings her Cirque-style contortion and aerial trapeze act to the Bartlett stage. With a combination of style, grace and beautiful costuming, audiences are treated to Carolina’s brand of elite circus acrobatics on stage and suspended from the Aerial Sky Ring 20 feet in the air.

- 2008 The Tommy Bartlett Show honors 55 years with celebrations in mind, but the mood turns to anguish just two weeks into the season. Major storms dump torrential rains on the region, temporarily closing the Show and eventually resulting in the unexpected June 9 draining of Lake Delton due to a shoreline breach. With no lake, the water-ski portion of the Show can no longer perform. However, just four days after the breach, the Tommy Bartlett Show reopens with a revised onshore show featuring an expanded stage lineup of performers. Longtime Bartlett stage entertainers, comedic juggler Dieter Tasso and Mr. Sound Effects Wes Harrison, come out of retirement to help the Show. The stage show performs two times daily through Labor Day weekend. The year also marks the 10-year anniversary of Tommy Bartlett's death.
- 2009 After months of planning and repair work, the Tommy Bartlett Show is set to get back on the water for the summer season. Since the breach of Lake Delton on June 9, 2008, state and local leaders along with dedicated construction crews, work around the clock to repair the breach so that the lake will refill in time for the 2009 summer season and the return of the famous Tommy Bartlett water-skiers.
- Dave the Horn Guy joins the Bartlett lineup. As seen on "America's Got Talent" TV show, this unique performer squeaks out a myriad of tunes from bulb horns strapped all over his body.
- 2010 The Anastasini Brothers debut on the Bartlett stage with their high-energy foot-juggling routine. The young acrobats are ninth generation circus performers who travel the world. Older brother Giuliano is the anchor, using his feet to propel his younger brother Fabio into the air to perform flips and twists.
- Dieter Tasso once again returns to the Bartlett summer lineup with his unique comedic juggling and balancing act.
- 2011 The year commemorates the 60th Anniversary of the first time the Show performed in Wisconsin Dells. It all started in 1952 when Tommy Bartlett's travelling ski show made a stop in the Dells. The following summer it became the Show's permanent site.
- Foot-juggling family, The Fausto Scorpions, returns to the Bartlett stage to perform.
- 2012 The 60-year celebration continues by honoring six decades of skiing at the Show's exclusive water stage on Lake Delton. Top water-skiers from around the country help celebrate Tommy Bartlett water-ski history and the sport of waterskiing today.
- Over 650 current and former Tommy Bartlett performers and employees return to the site for an Alumni Reunion Weekend to celebrate the milestone.
- 2013 The new FlyBoard, a water-propelled stunt apparatus debuts as part of the water-ski show. The jet-pack-type machine, powered by a jet-ski, allows a performer to dive in and out of the water and execute precision flips and twists high in the air.
- The Nerveless Nocks bring back the daring Globe of Thunder motorcycle stunt act, racing inside, around and upside down the 18-foot steel globe. Cyrus Nock, now age 15, first performed this act at the Show in 2004 at age six.
- Tom Diehl is inducted into the Wisconsin Water Ski Federation's Hall of Fame, honoring his more than 45 years of leadership in the sport of waterskiing. Tom has inspired hundreds of young people over the years to pursue their waterskiing dreams.
- 2014 Comedic juggler and unicyclist T.J. Howell and his two sons, Hunter and Carson, celebrate their 10th Anniversary performing with the Show.

- 2016 Acrobatic performer Christian Stoinev and his Chihuahua Scooby join the show as the summer's newest act. The balancing duo gained national fame with NBC's "America's Got Talent" competition show before coming to Wisconsin Dells.
- 2017 The Nerveless Nocks bring back the Wheel of Destiny, a 65-foot-tall double-wheel that swings end-over-end while they perform tricks inside and outside of the wheels.
- Extreme jet ski rider Evan Krefski makes his debut performing back flips, barrel rolls and other tricks in the Ski Show.
- 2018 The Tommy Bartlett Show reaches a remarkable milestone – 15 million total visitors!
- 2019 The Nerveless Nocks return to the stage with The Globe of Thunder, featuring stunt motorcycles racing around inside the steel ball cage.
- 2020 In early May, the Tommy Bartlett Show cancels its 69th summer season amid business shutdown orders and concerns over the COVID-19 pandemic. Plans are to reopen for the Show's 70th season the following summer.
- By September 2020, the difficult decision is made to permanently shutter the Show due to pandemic gathering limitations and uncertainty over future travel.
- 2021 Plans begin to find a buyer for the Tommy Bartlett properties with a focus on maintaining an amusement attraction presence at the prime Wisconsin Dells Parkway location.
- 2024 After an honorable 57-year career, Tom Diehl passes away on August 29, 2024, at the age of 79. His daughter, Jill Diehl, transitions from executive vice president to president of Tommy Bartlett Inc.
- 2025 On May 5, the Tommy Bartlett Show site, Tommy Bartlett Exploratory, and extended property along the Wisconsin Dells Parkway and Lake Delton, are sold to Ripley's Believe It or Not! World Entertainment.