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Big fun in a small town

Visitors can see even more lore at the newly expanded Ohio's Small-Town Museum in Ashville

Story and photos by BRIAN ALBRIGHT

It has no real budget and no paid staff, it is miles from the nearest highway and its most celebrated exhibit is the world's oldest working traffic light, but Ohio's Small-Town Museum in Ashville has thrived for more than 30 years, attracting visitors from across the U.S. and around the world. Its eclectic mix of exhibits has earned listings in numerous travel books (including *New Roadside America*) and even an appearance on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*.

And after a lengthy hiatus in 2007 and 2008, the museum is open for business again, with a brand-new annex that has allowed the Ashville Area Heritage Society (AAHS) to expand the number of exhibits on display, make the research library more accessible and provide a lot more room to accommodate the groups of local school children and Boy Scouts that periodically stam-pede through the building.

"There were so many things packed into the museum that you couldn't see anything,"

says Bob Hines, one of the museum's founders and a walking encyclopedia of Ashville lore. With the help of a small group of dedicated volunteers and support from a number of local civic organizations, the AAHS was able to remodel the building and reopen the museum in 16 months, just in time for Ashville's Fourth of July celebration last year.

The idea for a museum began in the mid-1970s when Hines and former mayor and city council member Charlie Morrison began gathering Ashville-related memorabilia. Many of these items were displayed in Morrison's grocery store until the museum found a permanent home in 1978 in a building that had previously served as the Dreamland Theater and as a cold-storage locker.

"We want children growing up in the community to know that just because they're from a small town, they don't have to feel like they're second-class citizens," Hines says. "There are a lot of connections to world history in small towns, but they are often lost or forgotten."

In keeping with that mission, the exhibits are a mix of the exceptional and the everyday, intermingling common items from the town's past (bottles,

the first city directory) with the accomplishments of the town's most famous sons and daughters.

The older part of the museum is lined with glass cases stuffed with items from local schools and theaters, uniforms from both World Wars and oddly shaped marching band instruments. There is a small lobby in the front where Morrison continues to hold court every morning along with various members of the AAHS and whoever else wanders in.

The new annex, which more than doubled the size of the museum, is brightly lit and much more open, with neatly framed displays covering everything from the local mop factory to the nearly famous country-rock band McGuffey Lane.

Of course, many visitors are drawn by the more peculiar exhibits, like the display dedicated to Buster, "The Dog Who Voted Republican." The favored pet of local confectionary owner Clyde Brinkers, Buster would yelp enthusiastically at the mention of Republican President Herbert Hoover and growl when anyone said the name of his 1928 Democratic opponent, Al

Smith. (It is unknown if Buster changed his mind about Hoover after the onset of the Great Depression, "but he still didn't like Al Smith," Hines says.) Brinkers also played a role in the story of Chic-Chic, "The King of Ashville," a tiny rooster who each day would take a dime in his beak and strut to Brinkers's store to pay for his own corn. You'll see a model of the six-inch Chic-Chic, who died in the 1950s.

There also is a hair-curling contraption dating from the 1920s that looks like a cross between a medieval torture device and an electric chair, and a cardboard figure of cowboy/actor Roy Rogers, who, according to legend, may have worked at the local canning factory.

And then there's that traffic light, the oldest working example in the U.S., which is suspended prominently over the entrance to the new annex. Designed by local inventor Teddy Boor in the 1930s, the light resembles a cross between a rocket and an artillery shell, making it seem like a weird artifact from a future that never quite arrived. It was taken down in 1982 after a service of nearly 50 years,



One of the prize exhibits at the Small Town Museum in Ashville is this model of Chic-Chic, a tiny rooster who each day would take a dime in his beak and strut to a nearby store to pay for his daily allotment of corn.

although it used to make appearances at the intersection of Main and Long streets on the Fourth of July.

Of more interest to the locals are the racks of class photos from the high school, and the long green couch from the office of physician and philanthropist Dr. R. S. Hosler, where many residents of a certain age presented their posteriors to receive a shot. The family of Dr. George Gardner, who owned the first automobile in town (a 1904 Oldsmobile), donated the doctor's collection of license plates (he saved all of them).

But some of the most fascinating displays are those in which local and national history intersect. Take puppetry pioneer Vivian Michael, who served as the editor of the *Puppetry Journal* and was a friend of *Sesame Street* creator Jim Henson. Or John Bear, the "Buckeye Blacksmith," a fiery orator who was plucked from obscurity in South Bloomfield to become a sought-after speaker at Whig Party rallies in 1840.

You can also see exhibits dedicated to diminutive James R. Hulse, who was recruited at the Circleville Pumpkin Show by members of the Harvey Williams Midget Troupe for a role as a Munchkin in *The Wizard of Oz*; actress Sally Kellerman, whose ancestors helped found Ashville; Perry Stoltz, who invented an early version of skee ball called "Go Ball," and who built the Fleetwood Hotel in Miami; and Charles Ward, whose sonic sifter was used by NASA to separate moon dust into its components.

Visitors can also learn about the driverless car, a 1965 Plymouth that navigated 4.5 miles of Circleville-Lockbourne Road as part of a test by researchers from the Ohio State University and the Department of Transportation. For the more literary-minded, the museum includes a library's worth of books by local authors, including cookbook guru Florence Brobeck and poet/journalist Gale Warner.

"We are always looking for connections, even if they're tenuous," says Hines, standing in front of a display that includes material on the Mingo Chief Logan, whose famous "Lament," mourning massacred family members, was quoted on the TV program *Star Trek: Deep Space 9*, and a scale model of

the Starship U.S.S. Tecumseh suspended over a collection of arrowheads.

Some of the other "tenuous" exhibits reference famous visitors to Ashville (William Jennings Bryan, Gen. John J. "Black Jack" Pershing), a meeting between two local sisters and Elvis Presley, and photographs of the town taken by Depression-era artist Ben Shahn.

Probably the most stunning item in the museum is the "transitional flag" found in a local attic that dates from the 1800s and is thought to have been created to signify Ohio's acceptance as a state. "It's the oldest flag like this known to exist," Hines says. "We don't know who made it or why." The handmade flag, which features 16 stars in a circle with a 17th star in the middle to represent Ohio, traveled the state during the Ohio Bicentennial celebration in 2003 and serves as the centerpiece of the new annex.

New discoveries are always being made, which keeps the exhibits dynamic. The museum recently turned up material on "The Fat Woman of Ohio," Catharine Scholey (or Schooley), a 761-pound sideshow performer who was laid to rest in a piano case in nearby Walker Road Cemetery in 1855. "We are constantly finding out about another author or inventor who lived in Ashville," says Hines, who hopes that the museum can help inspire other communities to preserve their histories.

"All small towns have a wealth of history that's hidden," he adds. "If they don't start saving this sort of stuff, all of it could be lost." □

Brian Albright is a freelance writer in Columbus.



The world's first traffic light, in use until 1982, resembles a cross between a rocket and an artillery shell.

Ohio's Small-Town Museum is located at 34 Long Street, Ashville, Ohio 43130, several miles east of U.S. 23 on St. Rte. 316. The museum is open Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., and on Saturdays from 9 a.m. to noon. Admission is free, but the museum does accept donations. For more information, call 740-983-9864 or visit the Web site www.ohiosmalltownmuseum.org.