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A storehouse of memories

Ashville's Small Town Museum has drawn national attention to its small-town treasures

By JEFF LOUDERBACK

Except for when a train thunders down the tracks near the center of town, Ashville's streets are mostly quiet.

Locals still gather in the coffee shop where Clyde Brinker served sandwiches and sodas for more than half a century. Across the street, the apothecary still sells medicine and gifts. An antique mall occupies the preserved century-old building, once used by the Scioto Canning Factory, that served as the village's main employer until it closed in the 1950s. The Scioto Valley Traction Company Station, once a bustling departure point for the inter-urban line that traveled to Columbus, is restored and now home to a beauty salon.

Although suburban sprawl is approaching this community of 4,000 located 15 miles south of Columbus, Ashville maintains its small town identity. Stories of the village's colorful past are preserved in detail through the relics at Ohio's Small Town Museum, housed in a building that originally was a silent movie theater. Within these walls, stories about Ashville's connection with Roy Rogers and Apollo 11, and true tales of a chicken that paid for his lunch and a dog that voted Republican, are among the visions of yesteryear brought to life by volunteer tour

An Ashville native designed the sonic sifter used by NASA.

guides who are longtime residents of the village.

"One way or another, everything in here has a connection to Ashville," said Charlie Morrison, who operated a grocery store in Ashville for 25 years and served as the village's mayor. "We have so many items to display that we rotate many of the exhibits every few months."

Called one of the country's best off-the-beaten-path museums by editors of *The New Roadside America*, a guidebook that features interesting places on America's back roads, Ohio's Small Town Museum's centerpiece is what is believed to be the nation's oldest working traffic light. Invented by Ashville's Teddy Boor, the teardrop-shaped device hung at Long and Main streets in the village from 1937 to 1981. The one-of-a-kind light has one lens on each of its four sides. An electric motor powers a gear mechanism that changes the color from red to green and operates a clock hand that indicates when the light will change.

"We never had an accident there in



This light, which directed downtown traffic for more than 40 years, now directs pedestrians in the museum.

all the years that light was in service," said 84-year-old Jack Lemon, one of the museum's tour guides. "It was taken down and repaired after someone shot a hole through it."

The light was repaired, and a permit was filed to rehang it. The Ohio Department of Transportation denied the request, insisting that the village install a standard traffic light. Since 1982, the light has directed foot traffic inside the museum.

Many of the artifacts displayed at the museum belong to Mr. Morrison, who exhibited his collection in a back room at his grocery store until heirs of the Dreamland Theater's owner donated the building to the village. Ohio's Small Town Museum opened in 1978 in the same space that housed a filling



Roy Rogers was fired from an Ashville cannery.



Photos by John Howley



Many items depicting everyday life from days past are on display in the museum.

station and then a meat locker after the theater closed in 1929. The slide projector remains.

The museum's walls are covered with Ashville High School class photos dating back to 1896 and tributes to the area's most heralded residents, such as James Hulse, who portrayed a munchkin in *The Wizard of Oz*, and Vivian Michael, who created the hand-and-rod style of puppets made famous by Jim Henson and Frank Oz. Charles Ward's sonic sifter is the most renowned modern invention by an Ashville resident. In 1969, Mr. Ward's creation was selected by NASA to examine the lunar particles brought back to Earth by Apollo 11 astronauts.

The museum's oldest relic is a candle lantern made in the early 1750s and brought to Ashville from Connecticut in the mid-1800s. Tall glass display cases contain an array of World War I and II uniforms and artifacts, and exhibits relating to more than a century of doctors' offices, general stores and schools in the village. Ol' Doc Hosler's weight scale and green examining room bed are just as he remembers them. Half-full medicine bottles, surgical tools and medical bags are showcased in the doctor's office exhibit. Cigar boxes, coffee tins and an egg scale are among the items in the general store display.

Standing 5-foot-6 and supported by his cane, the affable and bespectacled Mr. Lemon spins the colorful tales behind the museum's exhibits. Near the candle lantern stands a life-size cutout of Roy Rogers, a six-shooter in each

hand and a wide grin on his face.

"At one time, he worked in the canning plant here," Mr. Lemon explained. "They fired him because he'd play his guitar and sing during work time, and the people would stop what they were doing so they could listen to him."

Perhaps Mr. Lemon's most intriguing story is the tale of Chic-Chic, a rooster that roamed the streets of Ashville in the 1950s. "Mrs. A.B. Cooper, who lived in town, would drop a dime on her kitchen floor and tell Chic-Chic to get him something to eat," Mr. Lemon said with a laugh. "That rooster would pick up the dime with his beak, walk down to Clyde Brinker's place, drop the dime on the step and peck on the door. Sure enough, Mr. Brinker would answer the door, see Chic-Chic and feed him."

"Before Chic-Chic went home, he would stand by the bus stop and greet the passengers," Mr. Lemon added. "Chic-Chic walked the street like he owned the village. We called him the King of Ashville."

Buster, a dog that belonged to Mr. Brinker, is another Ashville animal legend. The canine was serious about his politics, according to Mr. Lemon. "He would bark when Herbert Hoover's name was mentioned, and he would growl when he heard the name of Al Smith, who was Mr. Hoover's opponent," Mr. Lemon said. "They say that Buster's paw actually pushed the lever that cast Mr. Brinker's vote for Mr. Hoover." □

Jeff Louderback is a freelance writer from Xenia.



The museum proudly displays the village's contributions to our nation's military.

Ohio's Small Town Museum is located about 15 miles south of Columbus in the village of Ashville. The museum has received national attention on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* and in the book *The New Roadside America* for the nation's oldest working traffic light, invented by Ashville native Teddy Boor. The museum has an expansive collection of 19th-century small-town memorabilia and modern artifacts, including a moon dust sifter invented by Ashville's Charles Ward and used by NASA to analyze moon rocks brought back from Apollo 11 astronauts in 1969.

Hours/Admission: Monday-Friday, 1-3 p.m.; Saturday, 9 a.m.-noon; closed Sunday. Admission is free; donations are accepted.

For more information, call 740-983-9864 or visit www.ashvilleohio.net.

Beware promise of free power

Recently, an Ohio electric Cooperative became aware of a group that is inviting customers to pay to become involved in a program promising free electricity; the generation of power and energy from ordinary household liquids, such as pickle juice and soda pop; and the wireless transmission and distribution of electricity, among other things.

This same organization also is believed to be marketing a device that it claims will cause electric meters to run backwards.

We are not aware of any technology that would enable consumers to generate electricity without any cost, to generate power and energy from ordinary household liquids, or to transmit and distribute electricity wirelessly. Additionally, you should be aware that tampering or otherwise manipulating an electric meter is a crime.

If you have questions about these or any other claims, please do not hesitate to contact your local Co-op or Ohio Rural Electric Cooperatives. □

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