

## Our Trip Takes Us

By Becky Hirn

Nine hundred miles from home, with more than 100 museums under our belts, and we met Mary, the first curator to take us into a museum's "back room." From the guest log at the museum I could see the museum doesn't get a lot of visitors. I could tell by Mary's eagerness to show us around too. The back room was filled with items, in waiting, not yet on display. We spotted tattered buggies and ancient farm implements and tools scattered throughout. Along with the new cement block wall (she said the last wall almost fell on her), Mary was proud to show us an old oil can. Across the front of the can in yellow letters it read "Delphos Manufacturing, Delphos, Ohio."

She took it from atop a metal shelf and showed us how the hand pump worked. She also told us how this piece was acquired. A local resident brought it back from a trip east. He liked the idea of putting it on display in his hometown museum in Delphos, Kansas.

Other than the quirkiness of seeing the Delphos Lion's varsity sweater and a pen used by a little girl to write a letter to President Lincoln asking him to grow a beard, the small museum offered little entertainment. While we were grateful for Mary's guidance, the tour only lasted 15 minutes.

A day later we strolled through another museum in Hastings, Nebraska, the Kool-Aid capital. This three story structure housed a planetarium, a theatre, dynamic animal displays and the Kool-Aid exhibit. We spent the whole day there.

While driving farther into Nebraska that evening, I asked Dan what I've been wondering for months. What makes a great museum? Of all the displays and exhibits I've seen this year, what really works? Does it have to be unique, rare, or cost a lot of money?

First Dan and I discussed what doesn't work. Case after case of old things, pictures of artifacts printed off the Internet and broken exhibits made the list. So did sleeping museum volunteers and a chicken bone used to point at William Shatner at the local diner. Strange enough we encountered all of these things. But besides maybe a bigger budget, what's the difference between a museum that makes people yawn and another one that makes people wish it was open for just one more hour?

We settled on a few requirements including quality video presentations, lifelike animal displays and interactive exhibits. One of our favorites was a huge room with full-scale recreations of Da Vinci's inventions called "Machines in Motion." We also like light up maps, because who doesn't like to press buttons? We enjoy games that teach a concept. The replica SPAM production line had us racing against the clock to package the meat as fast as the real production line. We found Abby and Carter's favorite interactive twice, once in a San Antonio museum and another time in a Wyoming library. It's an animation station. The kids spent hours creating stop-motion films with plastic dinosaurs and stuffed animals.

I know there are plenty of reasons people visit museums. There's nostalgia, like watching Kool-Aid commercials from the 1960s. And there's seeing toys we had as kids. There are also the educational

reasons, so we can learn about the past and see how things were done before computers or even electricity. I just think it would be tricky to come up with the right mix of movies, artifacts and hands-on displays that also document history and don't crowd the space or bore the visitor.

Luckily, we had Mary at the Delphos, Kansas museum. She was knowledgeable, friendly and willing to spend time with us, which is how I finally figured out how a museum goes from dusty to dazzling. When it comes to museums the most valuable asset is the dedication and creativity of the people running them.

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