

“Toys are a caricature of reality.”

—play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith

Toycland

TAKE A PEEK INTO SOME OF MISSOURI'S BIGGEST TOY BOXES.

STORY *Martin W. Schwartz*

Every passing holiday season brings more elaborate toys to be unwrapped and shared with wide-eyed children on Christmas morning. Toys and games surge onto the shelves and airwaves as children petition Santa and parents alike for the latest must-have gizmos. In 2016, toy sales in the United States rose to \$26.5 billion, according to data released by the NPD Group's Retail Tracking Service. Toy trends—from Furby to fidget spinners—can come and go as fast as a commercial break, but what happens to the toys most beloved by generations of kids?

Often dented and scratched, left musty and forgotten in a basement, some of those once-loved novelties have their own Valhalla where they are honored, revered, and immortalized for their service to childhoods and their place in our collective memory. Three museums in Missouri offer the ultimate trip down memory lane with rows of toys, games, and memorabilia from decades past. “It brings out the kid in you and opens your mind to a simpler time,” says Tom Beck, museum curator of The World's Largest Toy Museum Complex in Branson.

Take a trip back to your childhood—and your parents' and grandparents' childhoods—at these toy museums around the state.



ILLUSTRATION BY ANDREW BARTON

“A long, heavy, red wrapped package marked ‘To Ralphie, From Santa’ had been left somehow behind the curtains. In an instant the wrappings were off, and there it was! A Red Ryder carbine action range model BB gun lay in its crinkly white packing, blue steel barrel graceful and taut, its dark, polished stock gleaming like all the treasures of the Western world. And there, burned into the walnut, his level gaze unmistakable, his jaw clean and hard, was Red Ryder himself coolly watching my every move.”

—Jean Shepherd, from the short story, *Duel in the Snow*, or *Red Ryder Nails the Cleveland Street Kid*, the basis for the holiday film, *A Christmas Story*

MATCHBOX CARS



THE MEMORY BARN BUS



FLYING HERO BARBIE HORSE

SPOCK



HOWDY DOODY

BARBIE

world's largest toy museum

BRANSON

The genesis of the World's Largest Toy Museum Complex on Branson's Route 76 would make a good episode of *American Pickers*. After retiring from the retail clothing business 20 years ago, Museum Curator Tom Beck and his wife, Wendy, left their home in Texas and traveled the country collecting.

"Wendy and I would get in the Land Rover or the pickup, and I'd say, 'Which way do you want to go today?'" Tom says. "We'd get out the road atlas and decide if we were going north, south, east, or west. Sometimes we'd be gone for a couple of weeks at a time, ending up in Canada, or way out east, or far out west. That 3½ years we spent collecting and traveling was probably some of the best times of our lives."

The traveling paid off. Today, the World's Largest Toy Museum

Complex is spread out over 26,000 square feet with more than one million toys on display.

The museum has purchased collections from other toy museums that, for one reason or another, closed their doors to the public. Traveling across the country also allowed Tom and Wendy to purchase some toys that were only available in certain regions. Their discoveries give an archeologist's perspective of time and location in the development of playthings.

"What's nice about being the curator of the World's Largest Toy Museum is that it gives you a different perspective on different generations," Tom says.

The eclectic collection ranges from political and war toys to Barbie sets to superheroes and science-fiction oddities. Western fans will love

perusing the museum's extensive collection of items from Roy Rogers, Hopalong Cassidy, the Lone Ranger, and more.

The World's Largest Toy Museum also features a massive collection of toy prizes, such as those that used to come packaged in Cracker Jack or accompanying a cheeseburger and fries in a McDonald's Happy Meal.

Visitors of all ages enjoy the exhibits at the toy museum, and Tom says it's not unusual to host a group that spans four generations. "We also get a lot of newlyweds and couples that come through here together and end up learning a lot about each other, especially how they grew up," Tom says. "And many times kids will start to see Dad or Grandpa in a different way. Sometimes I'll tell the little ones, 'Did you know your dad was once this tall and used to get

"Prepare to be overwhelmed."—Tom Beck, museum curator

down on his hands and knees to play with trucks?' When you explain to a 5-year-old that their dad used to be little, it hits them for the first time."

Tom says he finds many older visitors become emotional, not so much at coming face-to-face with the toys of their childhood, but because of the memories that such an encounter evokes. That's one of the reasons you'll find scriptures scattered throughout the exhibits. "We're a ministry disguised as the World's Largest Toy Complex," Tom says.

The Branson attraction encompasses many museums in one location for one admission price. Check out the Harold Bell Wright Museum, where the original handwritten manuscript of *Shepherd of the Hills* is on display. There's also a World of Checkers Museum, a Stearns Bear Museum, the Paul Harvey Museum,

and the National BB Gun Museum (yes, there is a Red Ryder BB gun!).

Until the New Year, the complex will display classic Christmas and holiday toys from generations past to complement Branson's Ozark Mountain Christmas celebration.

A one-day admission gets you an armband that is good until closing, but Tom suggests repeat visits. "When people are here a couple of hours, it's like they're overwhelmed. When they leave, have some lunch or a cup of coffee and a piece of pie, they can come back refreshed and renewed," Tom says.

The World's Largest Toy Museum Complex is easy to find. Look for the building that looks like a spilled toy box. The large teddy bear out front used to be in the FAO Schwarz toy store in New York City. And two huge toy soldiers guard the door.

Hours and Info

3609 West 76 Country Boulevard • 417-332-1499
WorldsLargestToyMuseum.com

Open 9 AM to 6 PM through winter; closed Sundays & Christmas

\$18.92 adults; \$14.45 children 7 to 17; free for children 6 and younger; \$55.74 family pass (two adults and two children)



COURTESY WORLD'S LARGEST TOY MUSEUM

COURTESY WORLD'S LARGEST TOY MUSEUM



CRANK-POWERED ANIMATION MACHINE

the national museum of toys and miniatures

KANSAS CITY

Hours and Info

5235 Oak Street • 816-235-8006
ToyAndMiniatureMuseum.org

Open 10 AM to 4 PM daily; closed Tuesdays & major holidays

\$5 ages 5 and older; free for kids 4 and younger; free with ID for museum members, active service members, and UMKC faculty, staff, and students

Two women had complementary hobbies. Mary Harris-Francis collected old toys, and Barbara Marshall liked fine-scale miniatures.

"The two ladies were friends, and they could go on collecting trips together because they weren't competing for the same things," says Cassie Pikarsky, senior manager of marketing and development for The National Museum of Toys and Miniatures.

In 1982, Barbara and Mary opened their first museum in a residential home on the campus of the University of Missouri in Kansas City. The museum currently has 33,000 square feet with more than 72,000 objects on display.

In the first 25 years that Barbara and Mary were building up the museum, more than 30 toy, doll, and miniature museums opened and closed throughout the country, explains Cassie, so Barbara and Mary tracked down the collections and toys that would have been discarded by the other museums. "They did a lot of work to make sure that their collection and their institution would be available long into the future," Cassie says.

The toy section of the museum gives visitors an indication of what

was happening at a certain point in history. "Toys are a wonderful snapshot of history," Cassie says. "If there was a war going on, you might see a lot of war toys. Homemaking and women in the home and cooking were really important, so you'll see that in dolls and dollhouses. Whatever we held as values, what we wanted our children to learn, will turn up in the toys they played with."

The "toy-tisserie," a rotating display of popular character toys and games of the 20th century, is located near the entrance of the museum. This display often sparks a lot of conversation, particularly when older visitors bring younger ones.

"The museum is best experienced in a multigenerational group," Cassie says. "There are fabulous conversations that happen between parents and kids and even grandparents and grandchildren because the experience really does invoke those stories that you might not talk about otherwise."

In addition to the toys, the museum houses the world's largest collection of intricate, fine-scale miniatures. Many visitors who come to see the toy exhibits end up spending hours enthralled by the detail and craftsmanship of the miniatures, Cassie says.

You won't find Ralphie's Red Ryder BB Gun at the museum yet. Cassie says an original model of the prized present was donated last year but is not ready for display. You will see Orphan Annie's decoder, though. And every Christmas, the museum decorates its Education Programming space with a functional leg lamp.

field house museum ST. LOUIS

In one of its many previous lives, the building at 634 South Broadway was known as the Eugene Field House and St. Louis Toy Museum. Today, the Field House Museum celebrates many aspects of its long life, and though toys are no longer featured in the title, the museum's collection of toys is still prominently displayed in exhibits throughout the house. A 4,000-square-foot expansion to the original home opened last year, and museum tours continue to introduce visitors to the house's unique history.

Built in 1845 in a group of similar houses called Walsh's Row, the structure was once home to Roswell Martin Field, who represented Dred Scott *pro bono* in the landmark US Supreme Court case, *Scott v Sanford*. Roswell's son, writer Eugene Field, was said to have been born in the house, though at the time of the house's dedication as Field's birthplace, Eugene's brother supposedly told Mark Twain that Eugene had actually been born elsewhere. "Officially and for the purposes of the future," Twain purportedly said, "your brother was born here."

"Eugene Field had a love of toys, and while his original collection did not survive, we have been collecting toys over the years," says Stephanie Bliss, assistant director of the museum. "We display the toy collection throughout the house in different ways."

Stephanie says the toy collection ranges from the 18th century to the late 20th century, and the best time to see them is at Christmastime. "For the holidays, we decorate the historic house, and we put our toys on display more than we would during other times of the year," she says. "We put up our historic feather tree in the front parlor, and we put all kinds of different toys throughout the first and second floors."

One of the oldest items in the collection is a Snake in the Box from 1780. "You would tell your friends that you couldn't get the box open and ask them to pull on the lid as hard as they could," Stephanie explains. "When the lid opens, the snake pops out. There's a tack on the tip of the mouth that would actually give you a 'snakebite.'"



HOLIDAY TOY DISPLAY

COURTESY THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF TOYS AND MINIATURES

COURTESY FIELD HOUSE MUSEUM

Joyland

Hours and Info

634 South Broadway
314-421-4689
FieldHouseMuseum.org

Open 10 AM to 4 PM, Wednesday through Saturday; noon to 4 PM Sunday

\$10 adults; \$5 children 7 to 16; free for children 6 and younger

find your own collectibles

What started as a group of toy fans getting together to buy, sell, and swap their collections has grown into one of the largest toy shows in the country. The Toyman Toy Show takes place seven times a year at the Machinists Hall in Bridgeton, bringing together more than 100 vendors on two floors in 13,000 square feet of sales space. To read more about the Toyman Toy Show, go to MissouriLife.com.

"We're not just a toy museum. We are a historic house, and we have so many stories."

—Stephanie Bliss, assistant director

COLEMAN DOLLHOUSE



"It's a beautiful picture of our society, but through a child's eyes."

—Cassie Pikarsky, senior manager of marketing and development