

Among the falsehoods: he never said 'there's a sucker born every minute.'

Correcting the Barnum humbug



By MEG BARONE
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Phineas Taylor Barnum believed "The noblest art is that of making others happy."
The Renaissance man of the 19th century — entrepreneur, museum owner, politician, journalist, publisher, impresario,

focus on:
THE BARNUM MUSEUM

A weekly portrait of distinctive people, events and places around our region.

philanthropist, temperance leader, abolitionist and one of America's first millionaires — spent his life practicing that philosophy, and would be ecstatic to know the museum that bears his name has continued his tradition for more than a century after

his death in 1891.

The World's Greatest Showman, Father of Modern Advertising and self-proclaimed Prince of Humbugs never got to see the eponymous institution, which opened at 820 Main St. in Bridgeport in 1893 as the Barnum Institute of Science and History. It would also please him no end to know the museum serves as "the cultural heartbeat of downtown Bridgeport," according to Barnum Executive Director Kathy Maher.

"It has always been an urban museum," she said of the world's only museum dedicated to the life and times of Barnum.

Maher, who came to the museum in 1998 as a consultant, calls it "one of the state's national treasures," for its unique collections and distinctive architecture.

"We have a double story to tell," Maher said.

The museum chronicles Barnum's life from his birth on July 5, 1810, through his humble upbringing on a Bethel farm to the world stage.

"Everything is arranged from his autobiography. It follows his life," said docent Karl Lurix.

The exhibits feature letters, books, sheet music, photographs, furniture, clothing, memorabilia and other artifacts from Barnum's extraordinary life and those of the performers he immortalized, both real — diminutive star General Tom Thumb, a native of Bridgeport, Swedish Nightingale Jenny Lind, Jumbo the Elephant, and fabricated from Barnum's creative and marketing genius — the Fejee Mermaid, Barnum's biggest hoax.

There is a room replicating the library from Barnum's waterfront mansion Iranistan and an exhibit titled Grand Adventure, which chronicles the industrial age in Bridgeport.

The permanent collection includes a miniature hand-carved five-ring circus, created by Meriden artist William Brinley.

Since her arrival, Maher said they have worked to increase the museum storage and make better use of exhibition space.

Eleven major rooms of exhibits on three floors provide insight into Barnum's mind and help debunk many myths about the man, who adopted Bridgeport as his home and served as its mayor.

"The 20th century created a mythology about Barnum that's not accurate," Maher said.

For example, according to a museum brochure, Barnum never said, "There's a sucker born every minute." He didn't make fun of people who were different and, in fact, was well respected by the giants, midgets, thin men and bearded ladies in his shows.

Past museum exhibits highlighted "Artful Deception," the craft of the forger; "Clowning Around," the history and artistry of clowns; "Catching the Brass Ring," carousel art, and a display of Currier and Ives prints.

But, perhaps one of the most distinctive of the permanent "exhibits" is the building itself.

"The building is the most unique artifact. People identify with the architectural character of this landmark," Maher said.

"There's an extremely overly ornate look to it," city historian Mary Witkowski said of the museum building. "I don't know how much Barnum contributed to the architectural plans, but but he saw the plans before he died," she said.

Much like Barnum's life, the building is an eclectic mix of architectural styles — Romanesque, Byzantine and Gothic. Its unique architecture, red tile dome and ruddy color make it stand out in the corridor of modern corporate downtown structures.

Terra-cotta friezes tell the story of Connecticut's early settlement, Native Americans, the Civil War and industry "before you even walk through the doors. It's a tribute to American history on a national level," Maher said.

That, in part, led the museum to its listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Its designation as a National Historic Landmark is pending before the National Park Service and federal Department of the Interior.

"It's paperwork at this point, but there's great support for it," Maher said.

The designation would allow the Barnum Museum to compete



DID YOU KNOW?

About the Barnum Museum:

- The Barnum Museum is owned by the city of Bridgeport and operated by a nonprofit foundation.

- Actor Beau Bridges portrayed P.T. Barnum in the 1999 A&E movie "America's Greatest Showman," and he visited the museum while in Bridgeport that September for a local preview of the film.

- In 1986, the museum was refurbished. The \$8.5 million project included a 7,000-square-foot addition funded by People's Bank.

- The gold-leaf eagle with a six-foot wing span atop the museum is a replica mounted in 1988 to replace the original, which was mysteriously lost sometime in the early 20th century.

- In 1972, the museum was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

- About 25,000 people visit the museum each year.

- The museum hosts children's birthday parties, corporate and community events for a fee.



Top: The Barnum Museum's Main Street home.

Above: Kathy Maher, executive director and curator of the Barnum Museum in Bridgeport, with the original 1920s Billy Brinley circus model on the museum's third floor.

Left: Maher discusses the trompe l'oeil ceiling that is copied from the library of Barnum's home.

PHOTOS BY BRIAN A. POUNDS

Green by sponsoring a two-week summer program for children called "Circus Minimus."

The museum is also working to create reciprocal relationships with other museums, including the Discovery Museum in Bridgeport and Stepping Stones in Norwalk.

Meanwhile, Maher wants to make the back gallery on the first floor a functional and revenue-generating space for the museum, so it can serve a variety of purposes. "I want that People's Bank Gallery to be alive with activity," she said.

"We're trying to create a room within a room so we can have exhibitions that we can rotate more regularly. The scale of the room right now is so big that it's impossible to pay for an exhibition that would cover 5,000 square feet of space," Maher said.

The plan is to segment the room, keep two-thirds of it for ongoing events — school programs and lecture series, and then have another 1,800-2,000 square feet, described as "a very affordable size," to use to introduce photography and art displays. Maher has in mind an exhibit of work by artists living in lofts converted from the former Read's department store downtown.

"This can be the place where we're vital to the community. The Bridgeport Public Library has a historical collection which is unbelievable. We've got a very strong relationship with the library. It would be wonderful to bring in a selection of their Corbits, a photography studio here in town," she said.

And before the hot weather kicks in, Maher assures potential visitors the air-conditioning problem has been rectified.

The chiller, or main unit, shut down in July 2004, forcing the museum to close.

"It got so hot we had to close the building because it wasn't safe for the public or the staff. It hurt our numbers but we got through it," Maher said.

The collection of more than 100,000 items was not threatened. Only a chair of Tom Thumb's sustained minor damage, she said.

"The big concern was the mummy, but he was OK," Maher said.

For information, call the Barnum Museum, 820 Main St., at 331-1104 or visit the Web site at www.barnum-museum.org.

for public and private funds and would give it greater national attention.

There are only 2,800 National Historic Landmarks throughout the nation, Maher said.

In keeping with Barnum's mission of instructional entertainment, Maher has a grand scheme for the Barnum. She is trying to raise funding for a permanent exhibit there on the annual Barnum Festival.

And she envisions an exhibit of carousel horses from the Beardsley Zoo, and other ties to Bridgeport to help anchor the museum in the community.

Also under consideration is offering lunchtime programs and staying open late one night a week.

Maher is also working to revamp the membership package and broaden the museum's program base.

"Up until last year we didn't offer a lot of diverse programs. We focused primarily on children, but we realized we had another audience we weren't tapping into — adults," she said.

"We want the museum to be a place of engagement, intellectual exchange and entertainment," Maher said, thinking in Barnum's three-ring concept. "We want people to leave enriched. I want people to leave with a sense of awe."

Museum staff introduced a continuing poetry workshop in December. A workshop scheduled for 1 p.m. today will examine the works of 19th century women poets.

Maher will lead a program at 6:30 p.m. July 17, in collaboration with the Fairfield Historical Society, on the evolution of fashion during the 19th century.

Barnum's Birthday Bash — his 196th — will be celebrated there from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. July 5.

And for the first time the museum is collaborating with the Music and Arts Center for Humanity and the Playhouse on the

The Barnum Museum's own building is perhaps its most interesting 'exhibit.'