

MILWAUKEE NEWS

# Chudnow Museum a little-known local gem



The Union Depot display at the Chudnow Museum of Yesteryear shows former Wisconsin Gov. Robert M. LaFollette Sr. giving a whistle stop speech during his candidacy as a third-party candidate in 1924. Credit: Michael Sears

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As museums go, this one is small and comes with an old-timey name. The Chudnow Museum of Yesteryear.

The yesteryears we're talking about are the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, the era when Avrum Chudnow was growing up in Milwaukee and becoming a nostalgia buff and relentless collector of everyday objects.

He didn't live long enough to see his downtown museum go public, and I missed the 2012 grand opening by four years. But this month I finally popped in to see what the fulfillment of one man's dream looks like.

The collection is housed in a 147-year-old building at 839 N. 11th St. The former private residence was purchased in 1966 by Avrum, or Abe as he was known to friends, and he used the space as offices to practice law and run his property management and construction business.

Now you can walk the creaky floors from room to room, each one with a different theme. There's an ice cream parlor, hardware store, grocery, pharmacy, toy store, dress studio and a barber shop with a secret door that leads to a speak-easy from the time of Prohibition.

There are rooms devoted to politics of that time, and you can step into the office and X-ray room of Joseph Eisenberg, a doctor who used the building as a clinic in the 1920s and 1930s.

It's the streets of not-quite-so-old Milwaukee, picking up on the popular turn-of-the-century exhibit at the Milwaukee Public Museum. But here the shops are unlocked, and you get a close look at the products of the time — bulk grocery goods; electric gadgets of the modernizing times; an early gas stove; funky hair tonics; and feel-good elixirs containing alcohol, cocaine and heroin.

"Especially the young people can't believe what they could sell across the counter back then," said Steve Daily, the museum's executive director, who led me and two friends on a tour. He took the job after 20 years as a research archivist at the Milwaukee County Historical Society.

Visitors are often older, and they share their own stories about life in the first half of the 20th century. If you're looking for a place to take a parent or grandparent who grew up at that time, you could do worse than the Chudnow Museum.

"We had a group from a senior facility," said Dan Chudnow, one of Abe's sons. "This one woman in the tour group couldn't stop talking. One of the staff people afterward came up to us and said, 'You know, those are the first words this woman has said in a really long time, like months.' We were so thankful that seeing our collection had stimulated

her."

I asked Steve about attendance. "It's been climbing each year. I'd say this year we're hoping to reach about 5,000," he said, adding that online travel magazine Atlas Obscura this year called the Chudnow one of 12 quirky treasures of Milwaukee.

Abe was born in 1913 and died in 2005. His parents, Max and Sarah, were immigrants from Russia.

"His father was a junk peddler," Steve told us. "He used to ride around with his father on an old junk wagon through neighborhoods. It's our guess that he saw these great things laying on the curb and he thought, 'Wow, that's a beautiful gumball machine. Why would anybody throw that away. Dad, can I have that?'"

Married in 1940, Abe and the former Anita Grafman had four children. Abe served in the Army in World War II and was at Normandy on D-Day. In 1943, in one of his letters to his wife, he vowed he would "certainly have a museum after the war."

Dan said his dad often took his kids along on treasure hunts, sometimes buying big items like cars and a corn thresher.

"Every Sunday was flea market day, or we'd go antique shopping. When we would take vacations, we would drive. We would never fly. My dad had to load the car with antiques. Sometimes, by the time we got home, there was no place to sit," he said.

Over the years, items began filling the Chudnows' Fox Point home, sometimes more than Anita wanted. Abe didn't just store the stuff. He built exhibits and invited friends to have a look. He later moved the stuff to the 11th St. building. And in 1991, he set up his museum, then a private operation, as a nonprofit organization, sometimes loaning his treasures to other museums.

Fresh out of college, Joel Willems came to work for Abe in 2000 and

helped him create the Chudnow Museum. He is now the curator.

"He viewed himself as a preservationist," Joel said. "He was preserving these items for the future so other people can enjoy them."

Executive director Steve said Abe's collection is estimated at a quarter million items, and it's mostly in storage at several sites waiting to be rotated into the museum.

"We're still counting. What's on display is less than 5% of his total. So we have a lot to play with," he said.

I expected the museum to be more ragtag, given that it was the result of one man's hobby gone wild. Or maybe Milwaukee's version of the eclectic House on the Rock. But it has a professional sheen, including text signs, audio buttons to push, a theater and excellent tour guides.

It's open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday and noon to 4 p.m. Sunday, but people calling or stopping at other times have been known to get in. Admission is \$5, with a buck off for kids and seniors. Memberships and donations help keep the doors open. The website is [ChudnowMuseum.org](http://ChudnowMuseum.org).

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