

Chudnow museum transports viewers to the past

By Stephanie Wagner

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The Grafman's Grocery Store display in the Chudnow Museum of Yesteryear. Photo by Aaron Larry/Eye Life Photo, provided by the Chudnow Museum.

Tucked between the Marquette University campus and Aurora Sinai Medical Center, the Chudnow Museum of Yesteryear looks like an ordinary house in an unexpected location. Yet from the moment we stepped inside, my 12-year-old daughter, Laura, and I realized there's nothing ordinary about this building. Built as a single-family residence in 1869, the three-story home changed hands over the years until it became the offices of real estate developer Avrum Chudnow (1913-2005), an avid collector of 20th century Americana. "My father started his collection in the basement of his home in Fox Point. When he ran out of room, he started bringing things to his office," said Avrum's son Dan Chudnow. "His dream was to have a museum that's open to the public."



The Augusta Hart Shoe Store display in the Chudnow Museum of Yesteryear. Photo provided by the Chudnow Museum.

Dan made his father's dream a reality by converting the building into the Chudnow Museum of

Yesteryear. With the help of professional set designers, each room of the building has been transformed into a shop or an exhibit from the 1920s and 1930s. Laura and I received a guided tour of the museum — a perk that’s offered to all visitors — by executive director Steve Daily. One of our first stops was Grafman’s Grocery Store, which depicts a typical turn-of-the-century shop where visitors can step back in time. A 19th century wood-burning stove, period food tins and supplies, an antique cash register and a scale for weighing food — used in the Grafman’s store at 603 W. Vliet St. — bring the exhibit to life.



The Dr. Eisenberg Clinic exhibit in the Chudnow Museum of Yesteryear. Photo by Aaron Larry/Eye Life Photo, provided by the Chudnow Museum.

The Dr. Eisenberg Clinic recreates the clinic waiting room of Dr. Joseph Eisenberg, one of the early owners of the building. The doctor used the house as his family residence, a clinic and an infirmary. On display are Eisenberg’s books, x-ray films and original waiting room furniture. The Saxe Theater is named after Saxe Amusement Enterprises, which owned a chain of 42 movie theaters throughout Wisconsin. A bronze statue, named “The Bronze Lady” by the Chudnow family, occupies a niche on one side of the theater. This statue was salvaged from the Chudnow Iron and Metal Company scrapyard, and its image now serves as the logo for the museum. Laura and I watched a movie about Milwaukee in the 1920s, which was created for the museum by a Marquette University student. We sat in theater seats that were acquired from an antique dealer in Tennessee. Their original home: Milwaukee’s Congregation Emanu-El B’ne Jeshurun on Kenwood Avenue.



A group of Girl Scouts last April visited the Chudnow Museum of Yesteryear, and are shown here in the

World War I Recruitment Room display. Photo provided by the Chudnow Museum.

The movie included a photo of men gathered for the Sholom Aleichem Circle, a Jewish men's social club founded in 1920. We also saw a photo of a contingent of Jews who represented Milwaukee's ethnic diversity at the time. One of the first floor rooms is dedicated to political memorabilia from the late-19th century to the mid-20th century. The collectibles in this room belong to Dan Chudnow, who specializes in items related to Robert "Fighting Bob" La Follette, a prominent Wisconsin Progressive movement politician during the early 1900s. One wall is covered with display cases, each containing campaign buttons from every U.S. presidential campaign from 1896 to recent years.



People dressed in 1920s costume for the "Bootleggers' Bash" May 16 at the Chudnow Museum of Yesteryear. Photo provided by the Chudnow Museum.

Our favorite piece is a toy bank in the shape of William "Boss" Tweed, the infamously corrupt boss of New York City's old Democratic political party machine known as Tammany Hall. Chudnow removed the bank from its display case to show us what happens when we put a penny in "Boss" Tweed's metal hand: it's automatically deposited into his vest pocket. Laura and I felt as if we were experiencing the exhibits, not just observing them, because of the many interactive features. Every room is outfitted with an audio recording — either an explanation of the exhibit, a period advertisement or a representative piece of music from the era. In the grocery store, Laura picked up the old-fashioned wall phone to hear a recording. In the pharmacy, she weighed herself on an old penny scale, and she listened to the history of the Pullman porters from within the Union Depot. The Chudnow Museum of Yesteryear is a fun place to visit, but it's also an experiential educational resource that's ideal for children. They can learn about the role of Liberty Bonds in the museum's Army Recruitment Center exhibit and the issues associated with Prohibition in the museum's hidden Speakeasy. Schools frequently bring students for tours, and Boy Scouts and Girls Scouts can earn badges there.



The author's daughter Laura Wagner at the entrance of the Chudnow Museum of Yesteryear. Photo by Stephanie Wagner.

Off limits to visitors are the basement and the third floor, which, according to Daily, contain so many collectibles that it's virtually impossible to navigate through the space. Fortunately the museum has engaged interns from Marquette University and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee to begin inventorying the items, an endeavor that Daily projects will take at least ten years to complete.

The Chudnow Museum of Yesteryear, located at 839 N. 11th Street in Milwaukee, is open Wednesday through Saturdays (10 a.m. to 4 p.m.) and Sundays (noon to 4 p.m.). Admission is \$5 for adults and \$4 for children (7-17), seniors (62) and college students (with a valid ID). On Sundays, families are admitted for \$10. For more information, visit ChudnowMuseum.org or call 414-273-1680.

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