

Tour Yesterday in America, at the Strong Museum

By Lynn Wasnak

Plunge into a potpourri of history at the Strong Museum in Rochester, New York. Eat at a 1950's diner! Whirl on a classic handcarved carousel! Inspect whole armies of tin soldiers, marbles and miniatures, Victorian furniture, antique mechanical toys, household appliances and kitchen implements dating from 1820 to the present day...not to mention some 200 impressively-detailed dollhouses and literally thousands of dolls! It's a remarkable legacy of practical and pleasure-filled objects collected by visionary and benefactor Margaret Woodbury Strong.

Mrs. Strong, heir to her parent's fortune in Eastman Kodak stock, began collecting as a small child. Her parents, also collectors, are said to have given her a bag to carry on their numerous trips abroad. Whatever she could pack into the bag, she was allowed to take home. This may account for her lifelong fondness for miniatures...but as you'll see, miniatures are only one small facet of this museum-gem.

Tour groups of all ages put the Strong Museum at the top of their itinerary for good reason. Children and adults play as they learn through its interactive educational displays. Folks Boomer-age and beyond can't resist exploring the treasure trove of 500,000 objects which document the history of everyday life in America. It's convenient, too—sited in Rochester, a comfortably-sized city on Lake Ontario that's ideal for hub-and-spoke hops to Niagara Falls, the Finger Lakes, the best 100 miles of the Erie Canal, or Letchworth State Park, also known as the "Grand Canyon of the East."

You'll be well-hosted. Minutes after a coach pulls up near the new 4-story atrium of glittering glass, a professional museum staff member will embark to present a brief 6- to 10-minute orientation. "This gives groups the lay of the land. It's a big place," says Sandie Bartus, director of membership and audience development. When the museum first opened, staffers gave guided tours, but Bartus explains that "People could never stay long enough to see the whole place, so smaller groups would splinter off and do their own thing," thus self-guided touring became the norm.

Just for fun, tickle your imagination by taking a mind-walk through those atrium doors. What do you see? Not a bird, not a plane, but

The Skyliner Diner!

It's a genuine, fully-operating 1956 Fodero dining car built into a streetscape setting. Every detail is preserved: gleaming stainless steel, boomerang-patterned Formica counters, pink vinyl upholstered booths, and (youbetcha!) table-top juke boxes that play tunes from the 1940's and '50s! Formerly called the Mt. Top Diner, it served the driving public for 35 years from its perch on hilly US Rt. 15 in Williamsport, PA. The 54' diner reopened at Strong Museum in November, 1997, seating 72 diners inside, plus cafe seating for 60, outside.

The Skyliner's nostalgic look is complimented by the tastes and smells of yummy diner food: meat loaf and BLT sandwiches, burgers, macaroni and cheese or roast beef with real mashed potatoes. Health-conscious diners are wooed with modern menu items like vegetarian chili and fresh fruit with yoghurt. There's a kid's menu, too. But be sure to save room for the extra-thick milkshakes (four scoops of ice cream!) or for daintier appetites, the 2-scoop shake or a piece of all-American apple pie. Skyliner hours are planned with early-risers in mind: it opens at 7 a.m. Monday thru Saturday, and at 11 a.m. on Sunday, and offers a variety of breakfast items, including Belgian waffles and omelets. (The Atrium entrance opens early for diner access, prior to the museum opening at 10 a.m.) A more limited Skyliner menu is available for tour groups that want to prepay and eat together, and box lunches can also be prepared in advance.

Next—Take a Spin !

Vying with the diner in popularity for young and old is the newly restored Elaine Wilson Carousel, created in 1918 by Allan Herschell, and renamed for a major contributor to the Atrium construction. Herschell was a Scottish immigrant who originally manufactured steam engines and boilers. His first "riding gallery," built in 1883, was an instant success. By 1894, Herschell's company produced 300 carousels a year. (The Herschell Carousel Factory Museum is nearby, in North Tonawanda, NY.)

This particular carousel was designed as a durable, portable machine which travelled from one fair to another, all summer long. It was discovered in 1993—a jumbled heap of legs, heads, and tails—in a backyard trailer in Alabama. The carousel features 20 hand-carved jumping horses, three stationary ponies, and easy-to-enter chariots and whirling tubs. Lovingly restored by carousel aficionado William Manns and a team of experts, the Strong

Museum purchased it in 1996. Carousel Magic!, an Ohio restoration firm, added final touches and repainted the panels with scenes of upstate New York before its permanent installation in the atrium.

Senior groups have a lot of fun with this ride, says Bartus. Perhaps because it's in a museum, not an amusement park, very few hold back. "They all get on together. I hear many of them say 'I haven't ridden a carousel in 50 years!'" she adds.

The atrium also holds one of the Strong's newest and most popular interactive exhibits:

Can You Tell Me How to Get to Sesame Street

Here, visitors of all ages wander through the thirty-year history of this famous children's television series. The collaboration between the Strong Museum and the Children's Television Workshop offers loads of fun activities for kids, while adults learn how the program originated and developed. See yourself on TV as a part of the Sesame Street scene, or watch a video of the very first Sesame Street program, broadcast nationally in 1969!

Once in the first floor galleries, it's easy to be drawn into colorful sites like these:

Super Kids Market

An interactive supermarket, sponsored by Wegman's, features real supermarket scanners and scales, with plenty of fake foods for child-sized "shoppers" to drop in their carts. Adults smile as youngsters don aprons, run the checkout counters, and weigh the "meats." Scanned prices for items change electronically every week, just as they do in the real world. Learn about food and nutrition here. Then create a commercial or put on a cooking show, work the camera, see the results on TV, and take a video tape home!

Unearthing the Secret Life of Stuff

See towers of trash from the 1850s, 1920s and 1990s! Although this exhibit was intended for children, adults also enjoy learning in a no-fuss way about America's relationship with the environment, where our "stuff" comes from, where it goes, and how we have treated nature from pioneer days to the present.

When Barbie Dated GI Joe

Here's an exhibit the Boomers will really get into! Remember those gender-linked toys of the '40's through the '60s? Barbies and GI Joes, of course, but also the Kenner Easy-Bake Ovens, the cowboy outfits, metal trucks and toy weaponry of the Cold War era. This exhibit "carries you back in time" to recall and reexamine the role

expectations of yesteryear. Watch and see...has anything changed? Will children of the '90s gravitate to “girl toys” or “boy toys” according to their gender? Or do they simply play with whatever looks fun?

Between Two Worlds

A well-planned area of interest to all, especially those touring Rochester’s Underground Railroad memorials. Explore themes of identity, racism, and culture in this highly-participatory exhibit. It features more than 500 artifacts and images related to African- American experience. Audio and video recordings feature storytelling, dance and music traditions that influenced American society.

There's lots more to see and do on the first floor, but most adult tours move upstairs. Expect to be fascinated, as Margaret Strong was, by the vastness and diversity of these “study collections.” This floor is the destination for most specialized collector groups who travel to the Strong to view the magnificent collections of dolls, toys, miniatures, furnishings, landscape art and more. Here’s a sampling of what you can see:

Dolls, Dolls, Dolls!

Billed as the world's most comprehensive museum collection of dolls — over 5,000 of the 27,000 collected by Strong are on permanent public display. Variety abounds: antique bisque, French bebe and fashion dolls, rag dolls, multi-face and multi-head, paper, cloth, wood, and so much more! Changing exhibits highlight specific types, such as bride dolls, celebrity dolls, or national costume dolls. (An especially-charming photograph in the portraits collection shows the young Margaret Woodbury holding her favorite doll, Mabel. Its wig was handmade from Margaret’s own hair!)

Dollhouses and Miniatures

Men like this too! Some 200 dollhouses feature authentic architectural design, lighting, and intricate décor of gold, ivory, brass, and crystal. Complete to the Nth detail!

Men also enjoy checking out the older appliances in the furnishings collection. You’ll find everything for the home at the Strong Museum, including the kitchen sink! Also stoves, clocks, musical instruments, and plumbing devices. See the tools that Americans used everyday—old vacuum cleaners, lawnmowers, carpet beaters, axes, and planes — and a vast collection of housewares that trace the progression of kitchen technology.

Toys and More Toys!

You'll wish you were a kid again, browsing this collection of 25,000 toys, US-made or imported, dating from 1820s on. Here you'll find cast-iron fire trucks, toy soldiers, miniature circuses, trains, and mechanical wonders from days gone by.

Also of interest: 200 years of amateur sports in America, exhibited in a collection of ice skates, roller skates, golf clubs, fencing and bowling equipment, and even frisbees and skateboards.

The second floor also holds extensive exhibits of clothing, kitchen gadgets, china, paintings, Asian and decorative arts, as well as a collection of holiday artifacts: Christmas decorations, Halloween costumes, and more.

If your tootsies are tired at this point, maybe you're ready for a pick-me-up. Just go back downstairs to the museum lobby, and take a seat for...

A Cooling Treat!

Most everyone enjoys a taste of ice cream, and the Strong Museum is proud to present a new exhibit to satisfy that yearning. Louie's Sweet Shoppe is a recreated 1930's ice cream parlor, featuring the original marble-topped counter, cabinets, and fixtures used at the first "Louie's," a popular Rochester gathering-place for 72 years. "This is a real soda fountain, with the mirrors and spigots in a big curve," says Bartus. Here you'll find cones, banana splits, and thick creamy milkshakes. It's an afternoon delight! But there's still more...

Gifts Galore!

Before you depart, be sure to set aside time to check out the Strong Museum's expanded gift shop. Contents are educational, fun, and clever...and the price range is wide. Adult tour group visitors receive a 10 percent discount coupon for the shop, says Bartus. "We have a lot of kid-things that are very unusual, but also a big book section, a nice gift section." Several bins of small, clever, items priced under \$5 help parents and grandparents please their favorite youngsters without breaking the bank. That's because the people at the Strong Museum are dedicated to

Continuous Improvements

In recent years, attention focused on developing first-floor interactive exhibits for families. It's been an outstanding success. Now that the atrium area is complete, the Strong Museum planners are turning toward enhancements for the second floor. Refurbishment began this past summer with an opening up of view lines to the various collection areas. Over the next two years, expect the second floor areas to become even more interactive and appealing to people of all ages. "People want more information," says Bartus. New themed exhibits will feature

related items, so people will learn about the time they were made, how they were made, what they said about society. According to Bartus, the well-trained hosts who help families get the most out of the first-floor interactive exhibits, will soon be giving information on the second floor as well. Creature comforts will be enhanced, with even more places for visitors to sit down and think or talk with each other about what they're seeing. The Strong Museum is already 100% handicapped-accessible, but planners hope to make it even more user-friendly and physically comfortable. Bartus says the transformation process will be handled in sections, so collections should remain accessible throughout the renovation.

Normally groups call ahead. Reservations allow the museum to be prepared for your visit, with sufficient greeters for the coaches and other amenities. Gina , in the museum's Guest Information Services, is the person to contact. Reach her at The Strong Museum, One Manhattan Square, Rochester, NY 14607. (716) 263-2700 x202. Or visit the museum's outstanding web site at www.strongmuseum.org for an insider's peek at a place you will definitely want to experience first hand.