

## SABER AND SCROLL EXHIBITION REVIEW CONTEST - FIRST PRIZE

### Pexcho's American Dime Museum

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In an unassuming building at 216 6<sup>th</sup> St., in Augusta, Georgia, a collection of extraordinary wonders lives, begging to be explored. From shrunken heads to a vial of flatulence, Victorian medical devices to a live sword swallower, Pexcho's American Dime Museum is

a step back to a time of American curiosity and gullibility. Is Pexcho's a real museum? You bet! Is it also a possible scam? Probably! What is real and what is fake is left to the observer to decide, and that is just part of the fun!



Museum of the Strange and Weird Open! reads a colorful sign just inside the door. A caricature of a gangrenous hand, missing some flesh down to the bone, points to the entrance of the theater. Photo by Aisha Manus.

Dime museums were extremely popular attractions during the Progressive Era, 1890-1920, as a cheap way to entertain the laborers of major metropolitan cities, but their history began in the early 1800s. The most notable dime museums were owned by P.T. Barnum in New York in the 1840s, where he turned the museums into what they are known for—educational entertainment. This same type of educational entertainment is a constant at the American Dime Museum, as curator Peter Excho personally guides visitors through a two-hour tour where he not only gives a detailed history of dime museums and how they work, but also of his amazing exhibits on display.

The tour begins in his 127-seat theater, where Peter first details the initial history of Dime museums, focusing most of his stories on Barnum and his endeavors, as he is the father of zoos and entertainment. During this history lesson, Peter engages with the crowd, in particular the children, asking questions and inspiring curiosity. He consistently reminds the crowd that the children in the audience that day were probably more educated than the average dime museum attendee at the time, so it makes sense the only real thing guests of the past learned in a dime museum was how to lose their wallets and little else! Dime museums are, after all, where the phrase “to nickel and dime someone” comes from! After about 15 minutes of interesting lectures, he declares to the audience, “Let’s go look at some real fake stuff!”

Only about 40 percent of his collection is on display at the moment as

the building is not very large, but it is still an impressive collection of the rare, unique, and fake oddities of the world. An avid collector of oddities his whole life, he acquired some of his collection from the former Baltimore Dime Museum after it closed, while several of the pieces in his collection are on loan or donated by enthusiastic patrons. One particular patron of his museum donated an African wedding ring, which he claims only two other museums in the world, the Brooklyn and the Metropolitan, have in their collections—but only his is on display. He displays this ring that comes from the African Ivory Coast with toys from the Asian island of Borneo. Keeping with the theme of rare items most people would never get to see, next to this display are rare cubular spotted eggs of a bird found only in the Nevada desert, which I must confess were an exciting sight to see in person.

While we are in this first small room of the museum, Peter continues to give us a history of the dime museums of the past and in turn displays a collection of cabinet cards, which were cards given by performers people paid to see, such as the bearded lady or world’s fattest man. He also has an original slapstick on display, as the origin of slapstick comedy is in the dime museum, as is the origin of vaudeville. In this room, guests are encouraged to touch the real foot of a rhinoceros, and nearly everyone does! We then move onto the next small area which is a collection of local Augusta artifacts, such as elixir and snake oil bottles. Other delicate items, such as Victorian-era cat-shaped toys made with real cat teeth and a tie



Here curator Peter Excho educates the group on the history of dime museums in America from the stage of his 127-seat theater. The hall also serves as a venue for resident performers, as well as for traveling acts from time to time, and sword swallower “Red.” Photo by Aisha Manus.

made from the feathers of a pheasant decorate this room as well.

At this point, it appears as if the museum tour has ended as there is nowhere else to go until he opens a false wall, and we enter the part of the museum that is a little more grotesque but still incredibly kid-friendly. He has an original breast pump, where he gives the history of how they often killed babies due to the build-up of bacteria. There are also key chains and watch bands made from real human hair! Then he brings out a vintage electrode device and encourages his guests to shock themselves. Only one guest during my

visit was brave enough to do so, only to discover that while it may have looked and sounded scary, there was very little pain. He explains that these devices, while completely ineffective, are still in use to this day because medical offices, usually medical spas or dermatological offices, use words like “might” or “could” help with complaints, proving that people still can be duped out of their money just as they were in the nineteenth century?

The next section is the most macabre of his collection, where he has on display his most grotesque items. It is in this room where we learn that the



Guinness World Record holder John "Red" Stuart performing one of the seven deadly tortures of sword swallowing before an awestruck audience. Instead of his regular sword, Red is swallowing a 9-pound axle from a Ford Model T. Photo by Mr. Excho's eldest son.



Filed under “Weird” human hair trinkets from the Civil War era are on display. What better way to think of your loved one than to wear a bracelet made from their hair? So romantic. Photo by Aisha Manus.



A brave guest smelling the rancid, putrid smell of “Death.” The pungent odor is just as foul in the wintertime as it was in the summer, so guests year-round get the full experience. Photo by Aisha Manus.

body of famous American Outlaw Jesse James was moved around the U.S. to various dime museums to profit off the curiosities of people and our fascination with the dead. While he does not have a body in this room, he does have several heads! From regular human heads in jars to shrunken heads, these heads could be real, or they could fake—we don't know! He does, however, teach us how fake shrunken heads were created using goatskin to meet the demands for them during the height of their popularity; he never clarifies which kind he has! The most interesting shrunken head in his collection is fashioned into a musical instrument, allowing a person to play guitar with the dead! It is at this point in the tour when Peter then offers to turn you into a shrunken head when you die if you wish, letting his guests know that if they will him their body, he will happily provide the service to enact your last wishes. His own ex-wife is said to have willed her skeleton to the museum upon her death, requesting that she be displayed with a cigarette in hand. Though it might be some years until his ex-wife's skeleton is placed in the museum, Peter informs us that he is currently working on having the skeleton of a T-rex brought to the museum, thanks to one of his patrons. What makes this extra delightful is the fact that all dinosaur bones on display in any museum are always fake, so these fake bones would fit right in with this museum of real fake things!

We move onto the next section of the museum where we were treated with a glimpse of a living pigmy hippo

brought in by one of his children, but it was feeding time, so the hippo did not stay long. But that is a good thing as I do not think the hippo would have enjoyed the next portion of the tour, when Peter invited his guests to smell the scent of death. Having attended his museum in both summer and winter, even in the cold the smell is a putrid, rancid concoction only the brave dare smell. You've been warned! Interestingly, it is in this room, however, where Peter claims there is a body! Inside the pauper's coffin displayed in the room lies the body of a man (so we are told). Found on the street dead and disfigured in his features to make people consider him an oddity, the man was preserved and displayed for many years until he finally came to the American Dime Museum. Wanting to give the man a proper burial, Peters says that he is waiting for the world to truly open up again so that he can have the entertaining funeral that the man deserves, since "the first word found in funeral is fun, after all!" I eagerly await my invite!

Throughout the entire tour, upbeat ragtime piano music plays in the background, giving the tour just the right touch of additional entertainment while keeping to the allusion that one has stepped back in time. This is especially entertaining when he shows us his final oddity in his collection. In one vial, he claims the contents are the flatulence of Joesph Pujol, a famous French stage performer by the name of Le Pétomane, whose ability to control his abdominal and rectal muscles enabled him to fart on command and make multiple tones.



The front of Pexcho's American Dime Museum. The outside may be unassuming but don't judge a book by its cover for the inside is full of wonders and amazement. Photo by Aisha Manus

So gifted in his abilities to make music and other sounds with his gas, Le Pétomane performed for kings! To know his fart has been contained in that vial for at least a hundred years and sits just a few feet from me is truly magnificent.

After walking around for about an hour and a half the tour of his collection finishes by walking through a coffin and back into the theater where the audience is treated to a real-life "working act." John Stuart, who performs under the stage name "Red" for his once flaming red hair, and holds nine Guinness World Records in sword swallowing, gives the audience a joke-filled history lesson on the art of swallowing swords

and the other seven deadly tortures performed at these types of museums of the past. He then demonstrates a few of the tortures. First, he does the famous "block head" trick, in which he hammers a long nail directly into the center of his head. He then demonstrates his sword-swallowing abilities. Red may be the oldest active sword swallower, but has no trouble as he individually swallows a sword, a glowing lightsaber, a wire coat hanger, and a 9-pound axel from a Ford Model T. I will admit, reader, that I did not actually watch him perform his tricks as I was not keen to pass out, but the six other guests that were there with me seemed delighted by his amazing skills.

The cost of the museum is a mere \$14.28 for adults and just a dime for children nine and under; tours are currently by appointment only. The tour is wheelchair and handicapped accessible, and there are plenty of places to sit throughout, though a few places were a little difficult to maneuver. The lighting in the museum is low, to simulate the at-

mosphere of gas and oil lighting used in the past, so I consider it sensory-friendly for guests who need lower lighting. You can find more information about the museum on their Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/american-dimemuseum>, or by calling (225) 448-1453 or emailing Peter at [pexcho66@hotmail.com](mailto:pexcho66@hotmail.com).