Preserving Local History: The Important Role of the Small Museum, "Unofficial" McDonald’s Museum and Original Store Site

Jennifer Ferguson

CSUSB
Preserving Local History: The Important Role of the Small Museum
"Unofficial" McDonald’s Museum and Original Store Site.

Albert Okura, owner and director, San Bernardino, California
Route 66 Museum. Paul Chassey, board of directors, Victorville, California.

The proliferation of historical museums attests to human fascination with the past and the desire to be in the physical presence of history. In Southern California, one has access to numerous large, world-class institutions where stunning collections are abundant, artfully displayed, and arranged in such a fashion that a visit feels more like a profound experience. Often overlooked in the search for cultural experience and historical preservation is the small museum, which plays a role in the community that a larger institution cannot attempt. In the area of

1 All photos of the McDonald's Museum taken by the author and printed with permission from Jack Markus.
greater San Bernardino, California, a handful of these little attractions are working to diligently preserve and promote local history, providing a common ground for the surrounding communities to come together, and greatly enhancing the cultural landscape.

One such institution engaged in this noble pursuit is the Unofficial McDonald’s Museum on E Street in downtown San Bernardino. Built on the site of the original McDonald’s Hamburgers restaurant, which opened in 1948, the unassuming building boasts the large sign that drew customers into the first drive-through establishment beginning in 1953. Though the building itself is not original, as the restaurant was torn down in 1972, it marks the very spot where the birth of a pop culture icon and the fast food industry took place. Inside, visitors find a veritable mountain of material, including photos, retired playground equipment, advertising signage, Happy Meal toys, and literature. As is often the case with small institutions such as this, every available corner and surface is utilized to display the abundant artifacts.

"Unofficial" McDonald’s Museum (personal photo by author)

The site was purchased in 1998 by Albert Okura, owner of the local chicken restaurant chain, Juan Pollo. According to Jack Marcus, the Juan Pollo product developer and animator who runs the museum part-time, Okura admired the tenacity and business
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plans of the restaurant’s founders, the McDonald brothers, and Ray Kroc, who purchased the chain and created the corporation that remains in place today. However, Okura’s museum must be careful to make clear that it is not associated or affiliated with the McDonald’s Corporation, and it is actually regularly monitored to make sure this condition is upheld. In spite of this restriction, there is no denying the importance of the site to the history of San Bernardino, and Markus is actively involved in keeping that history alive. He listens intently to the personal stories of people who remember the original restaurant and then relates those same stories to other visitors to the museum, displaying the characteristic back and forth exchange of culture and information distinctive of a small, local institution. He states that, in this way, he is able to impart information that many people have never heard and may find surprising, such as the fact that the original McDonald's BBQ restaurant of 1948 was staffed by carhops who were always attractive, young females that carried bottles of white shoe polish with them to keep their work boots looking spotless.

Signage outside the Route 66 Museum in Victorville, California (personal photo by author)

The birthplace of the iconic fast food giant draws visitors from all over the world on a regular basis, showing that the museum is much more than a simple piece of kitschy Americana.

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5 All photos of the Route 66 Museum taken by the author and printed with permission from Paul Chassey.
As well, its simultaneous popularity with locals belies its function as a source of local history, pride, and community. Markus notes the institution’s “open-door policy” despite its residence in a part of the city known for a fairly high level of crime, and states that Okura would not charge a fee for admission “out of respect” for both the community and the men who made the location famous. It is this level of bravery and esteem for one's neighbors that makes the “unofficial” McDonald’s museum a local treasure and provides a cultural “common ground” on which the diverse populations of the greater San Bernardino area can come together and celebrate that which has shaped the area and its residents.

The growth of the first McDonald’s restaurant was partially contingent upon its location on Route 66, which channeled travelers through downtown San Bernardino, and this connection is evident in the small section in the museum’s rear that showcases Route 66 memorabilia as part of its permanent collection. One cannot escape the influence of the Mother Road in San Bernardino and the surrounding communities, and a short trip north into the High Desert warrants a visit to the Route 66 Museum in Victorville, California. This small institution is also a free attraction filled with local artifacts, though its focus is entirely on the influence and legacy of Route 66.

Celebrating its fifteenth anniversary this year (2010), the Route 66 Museum boasts a diverse, eclectic collection and a clientele that travels from all over the world to learn about the history of the famous route. Board of Directors member Paul Chassey estimates that around ninety percent of the total visitors are non-locals, with fifty to sixty percent of those non-locals coming from outside the United States. When they arrive, patrons are treated to a visual representation of the Mother Road and how it shaped the greater San Bernardino area, particularly the High Desert. Road and advertising signs adorn all available wall spaces, numerous artifacts sit neatly in glass cases, and many larger items are unencumbered by enclosures and thus available for closer scrutiny.

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7 Personal Communication, Paul Chassey to Jennifer Ferguson, May 13, 2010.
In a place such as California, which Chassey feels is "notorious for tearing things down," he states that the museum's main goal is to save whatever it can for the benefit of future generations. When there are large historical pieces they are unable to save, such as buildings, the museum endeavors to document such artifacts in pictures and written descriptions. In this way, they are preserving as much history as they possibly can, and providing the community with a sense of its origins and its importance. It is likely that, in their absence, much of the cultural artifacts and knowledge that they have accumulated would have been lost forever. Despite their considerable contribution to the community, the Victorville Route 66 Museum faces several challenges with regard to finances, community support, and adequate numbers of volunteers. Hopefully the museum can continue to achieve its goal and survive, as its presence in the High Deserts constitutes fully half of the area's museums.

Both the Route 66 Museum and the McDonald's Museum boast a relaxed and friendly atmosphere that is common to small institutions of local history. The experiences of visitors are more personal and individual than is usually possible at a larger, for-profit museum thanks to passionate staff members and self-proclaimed goals of community service and education. What these institutions may lack in polish and prestige is more than compensated for by their distinctiveness and personality. Their

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Efforts are preserving local history, both for residents and visitors, and give the residents of the greater San Bernardino area a cultural anchor to strengthen their senses of self and their relationships with each other. If you are searching for something fulfilling, interesting, and inexpensive to do close to home, consider patronizing one of the small, local museums in your area. You never know what you might discover.

Jennifer Ferguson
California State University, San Bernardino
### Greater San Bernardino Area Museums

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Museum Name</th>
<th>Address</th>
<th>Phone Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Unofficial&quot; McDonald’s Museum and Original Restaurant Site</td>
<td>1398 North E Street, San Bernardino, CA 92405</td>
<td>(909) 885-6324</td>
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<tr>
<td>Route 66 Museum</td>
<td>16825 South D Street, Victorville, CA 92393</td>
<td>(760) 951-0436</td>
<td><a href="http://www.califrt66museum.org">www.califrt66museum.org</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Robert V. Fullerton Art Museum</td>
<td>5500 University Parkway, San Bernardino, CA 92407</td>
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<td>museum.csusb.edu</td>
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<tr>
<td>A Special Place Children's Museum</td>
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<tr>
<td>Redlands Historical Glass Museum</td>
<td>1157 Orange Street, Redlands, CA 92373</td>
<td>(909) 798-0868</td>
<td><a href="http://www.historicalglassmuseum.com">www.historicalglassmuseum.com</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lincoln Memorial Shrine</td>
<td>125 West Vine Street, Redlands, CA 92373</td>
<td>(909) 798-7636</td>
<td><a href="http://www.lincolnshrine.org">www.lincolnshrine.org</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>California Museum of Photography</td>
<td>University of California, Riverside, CA 92501</td>
<td>(951) 827-4787</td>
<td><a href="http://www.cmp.ucr.edu">www.cmp.ucr.edu</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Harrison Exhibit Center</td>
<td>16367 Main Street, Hesperia, CA 92345</td>
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<td>San Bernardino History &amp; Railroad Museum</td>
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<tr>
<td>Victor Valley Museum &amp; Art Gallery</td>
<td>11873 Apple Valley Road, Apple Valley, CA 92307</td>
<td>(760) 240-2111</td>
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