

Grayson Enterprises Ltd. First North American Series Rights
' . Copyright Grayson Enterprises Ltd.
i Approximately 2,000 words 1 Page #
i

THE SEVEN AMERICAN MUSIUM

An American Success Story

Written by June Grayson

Photographs by Richard Grayson

Don't tell the Larry Donley family you can't make a fortune in
America today. They're doing it and they say that anyone can.
Moreover, they're doing it the good old American way - with hard
work, common sense, and integrity. Horatio Alger would be proud.

They've built a multi-million dollar antique business and entertainment complex in northern Illinois during the last 12 years and they make it all sound like fun and games.

If you like a three-ring circus, you'll love the Seven Acres Museum and its adjoining Antique Village and Village . . . Hal!. Open seven days a week from April 1st to November 1st,

Seven Acres, GEL,

page 2

it may be the only one of the hundred similar antique village reconstructions to offer a jam-packed entertainment schedule, especially on weekends.

Though the underlying theme is old America, you don't need to be into antiques to have fun. Indeed, their most popular yearly event is the 300-pound pig-wrestling contest held every July, with plenty of trophies for the volunteer participants.

Memorial Day weekends repeatedly attract the biggest crowds. Some out-of-state families return yearly and stay at a nearby trailer park. Armed and uniformed troops perform live on a

realistic outdoor battlefield during these "Military Days", there is an associated Military Collectibles Sale in the Village Hall, and the Museum features its outstanding permanent Military Relics exhibit. Kid games, fast foods, barbeques, and beverages abound. And if all of this patriotic fervor makes you want to enlist, the Illinois National Guard and the U. S. Army recruiters will be there to assist you.

Other featured recurrent events are an international Antique Phonograph and Music Box Show and Sale with 120 exhibitors, (some from Japan and Australia), an Antique Car Show, Civil War Days, a real midwest Corn Fest, and a Jesse James Bank Raid. Huge circus tents can be quickly erected to handle overflow crowds.

If you hate crowds, weekdays are the time to visit.

Seven Ac/page ..

Besides the military exhibit, the indoor Museum has an outstanding phonograph, music box, and music machine exhibit,
i
a Street of Yesteryear with old time stores and offices,
and - when you and the kids are tired - a free movie theater featuring old time films.

Walk out the Museum's back door into the courtyard of the Antique Village with its old time jailhouse, authentic hanging gallows, ice cream parlor, and more. Benches set amid colorful summer plantings invite you to enjoy a leisurely day of browsing and remembering. Ride the ponies and stagecoach. Whoop it up with the daily afternoon Wild West Show where the good guys always win. One modest admission fee covers all entertainment.

Obviously, this successful amusement park did not appear overnight one day in the northern Illinois cornfields. How did it get there and who are L. C. Donley & Sons, Inc., its promoters?

Though a slice of Americana, Seven Acres had its genesis when sturdy immigrants from Czechoslovakia and Ireland settled in Berwyn, a southwest suburb of Chicago, sometimes known as "little Bohemia", and carved the good life for themselves on the basis of love of church, family, and hard work. They passed these values on to the children and grandchildren who own Seven Acres.

Larry Donley says, "When I was young my Dad told me I

had to work 16 hours a day. One-third of the day was for working, one-third for sleeping, and one-third for playing - but the work came first. By the time I was smart enough to figure out that a day only has 24 hours I was hooked. I've been working 16 hours a day ever since."

When Larry, age 20, and Helene, age 16, married in 1951 they already had several jobs. He was a gas station attendant, janitor, and landscaper, and she was a waitress and bookkeeper. In two years they owned their first business - when Larry bought out the gas station owner. Helene did the bookkeeping and cared for their sons Mike, now 32, and Randy, now 30.

In the Fifties, every gas station had to have an antique car parked at the front curb as an advertising gimmick. Larry wanted one, too (a Model T Ford) but he couldn't afford to buy it. No problem - he just scrounged for it. Chicago still had Maxwell Street, one of the world's greatest flea markets, where anything was for sale if you looked long enough. Randy remembers, "Every Sunday Dad would wake us up before dawn and we'd be down on Maxwell Street by 6.00 a.m., in time for the best bargains." Soon Larry had all the parts to build his own Model T. Ford. This same Ford has a place of honor in their antique village today.

In retrospect, that may have been the start of what Larry's family fondly calls his "antique pox" - an incurable disease evidenced by an irresistible urge to collect.

Seven Acres, GEL, pag 5

Larry remembers his second acquisition vividly because it was the start of their present world-famous music and phonograph collection: an Edison turntable and horn. It cost \$5.00 because it was broken. Again no problem - Larry could repair anything.

Soon his gas station customers discovered that Larry would trade their attic items for his car repairs. In those days, people were still throwing gorgeous Victorian lamps out in the trash.

Randy remembers, "He didn't have any long range plans, he never dreamed we would have what we have here today, he just liked to buy and fix things - but there was one thing he would never do! He would never sell."

When there was no more storage room in the gas station, Larry bought old trucks and parked them behind his building.

The city fathers objected. They said the trucks were an eyesore. Eventually Larry and Helene bought their own warehouse.

Mike grew up to become a movie projectionist and Randy won a college football scholarship. He ruined his ankle the first year. "My folks would have paid my way but why would I want to go to college if I couldn't play football? For sure I didn't want to study."

With Randy home again, Larry, Helene, Mike, and Randy held family conferences. "We wanted to start a small family

Seven Acres, GEL, page 6

business with growth potential. The most successful businesses we knew were those where families stuck together and worked for a common goal," Randy explains.

After visiting an antique village in Wisconsin, they decided to start a similar business with their warehouse inventory. They formed L. C. Donley & Sons Amusement Enterprises Inc. and in 1973 bought seven acres of farm land west of Chicago just off

the I-90 to!!way. Though they !ater added more !and, they kept the origina! name. They hoped that enough Chicago area families wou!d drive one# hour to a new amusement attraction to make their business successfu!.

They started immediate construction of the main bui!ding, first finishing off a small apartment where RAndy cou!d !ive to supervise the work. To keep all of their options open, Mike kept his job and Helene and Larry continued to live in Berwyn and run the gas station. But they all spent their spare time at the new location.

The museum opened in August, 1974, stocked with the treasures Larry had collected and repaired over the preceding 20 years. Eight thousand peop!e attended the first month. Laughs Randy, "We cou###'t believe it. None of us knew what we were doing. We made so many mistakes and wasted so much money, especially on advertising, that many times we almost quit."

Now they know that their most effective advertising is their w#n 6,000 customer mailing list, supplemented by news-

--
Seven Acres, GEL, page 7

paper and magazine articles.

That winter they worked non-stop to ready the Antique Village for the 1975 season. They close every year during December and January since then.

All of their exhibits came from Larry's eclectic hoards. They bought only one outside collection - to stock the blacksmith shop.

In 1979, finally confident of the success of Seven Acres, Larry and Helene sold the service station and their Berwyn home. They now live in a nearby farmhouse.

Since they still had antiques that did not fit their museum format, they remodeled a building

adjacent to the Union for an antique mall in 1980. They keep one shop and rent to six other antique dealers. They also sell at area antique shows.

Larry and Randy are qualified antique appraisers, gaining all of their knowledge of antiques through their on-the-job training. "Surprisingly," Randy says, "our greatest profits now come from the antique business."

Observing that they needed another building for meetings and antique

shows, they built the Village Hall in 1981, with bar, dance floor, and seating for 400. Local organizations can rent it for conventions, Randy schedules Friday night polka or rock-and-roll dances, and some lucky families can even snare a free Saturday night for their wedding receptions -

Seven Acres, GEL, page 8

if they plan a year in advance.

Randy attributes their success to their good reputations.

"Since we don't live on a tourist path, we can't operate a rip-off. We depend on repeat business and some of our families come several times a year, year after year. As for our antiques, we always give honest appraisals, consistent with a fair profit for us later on." They are proud that they get many referrals from satisfied customers.

They are no pushovers, though, as one Wisconsin tavern owner found out. "We bought his old Bursen's Band Organ (a huge automatic music machine simulating band instruments and manufactured around 1930) for \$1,500 cash and carry. Larry paid

him the cash but then we discovered we couldn't get the darn thing out - they had built an addition around it. Larry told the owner - we paid for it and we're taking it. Dad just tore out of that tavern and in ten minutes came back with a borrowed electric saw and cut that organ into a zillion pieces! We found out later that the owner had "sold# the same organ that way several times. He went into bankruptcy the next week but we got our organ."

Though they have achieved their goal of creating a successful family business, they still think that America is the land of opportunity and that the antique business is a good way to go. "I am convinced that anyone can start today and make a million dollars in antiques over the next ten years and not even have to quit his regular job to do it," Randy says.

Seven Acres, GEL, page 9

Every year they add new attractions. "Dad would die if he had to stop building. And he's still scrounging. Last year he built

a log cabin from some old telephone poles he bought for \$5.00 each. He also added a replica of a gold mine behind the Village where a real old-time "prospector" demonstrates how to pan for gold. And the kids can try it too.

Even their pet burro got into the act by producing the subject of the "Name the New Baby Burro Contest".

They still work seven days a week, sixteen hours a day. Only Kelly, Mike's wife and a cancer patient nurse, is not active in the business. Randy's wife, Chris, a United Airlines flight attendant, works wherever needed on her days off.

Three full-time employees assist them all year. April is try-out time for the seasonal employees, usually high school and college students with acting, athletic, or gymnastic skills to feature in the Wild West shows and to work in the ticket booth, gift shop, and food booths. Last year Jim

Rossow, a high school drama teacher, created the winning character of "Tin Can" and won a summer job as an old western "geezer" sharing master of ceremony duties with Randy.

Don't look to the Donleys for those usual symbols of success - the foreign cars, designer labels, Harvard MBA's, nervous breakdowns, broken homes, and exotic vacation plans. They drive well-used cars from their favorite American manu-

Seven Acres, GEL, page 10

facturer, their jeans are washed and worn, and their respect and affection for each other is readily apparent. This may be one business where the owners have as much fun as the patrons.

As for vacations, Mike and Randy finally talked Larry and Helene into visiting California last year - but they had to call it a buying trip before they'd go.

Don't ask Randy to take a vacation either. "Where would I have more fun than right here?"

#####