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Historical Museums - Final

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A Museum Containing "The Wonderful Leaps of Sam Patch"

Although contemplating a book as a museum object might seem misguided - a book is usually thought of as belonging in a library not a museum - an unusual or rare book can stimulate a museum viewer to reflect on any number of historical periods or events. Despite its rather young age as a printed object, "The Wonderful Leaps of Sam Patch" (1992?) allows the viewer of the object to reflect on an oft forgotten period of American history, as well as learn about an event that remained part of American folklore for nearly a century.

"The Wonderful Leaps of Sam Patch" is a facsimile reprint of an illustrated children's book from the 1870's that depicts the legendary feats of daring of 1820's entertainer Sam Patch. The historical Sam Patch grew up as a worker in several mill towns in the northeastern United States in the early nineteenth century and quickly realized he could make more money by entertaining crowds leaping off the waterfalls which powered the mills of the era, as opposed to actually working in the mills. After several successful jumps in Rhode Island and New Jersey, Patch was eventually invited to leap at the falls of Niagara. There he performed two successful jumps from an installed platform near the falls and into the Niagara River to the delight of both Americans, and Canadians under British rule, barely a decade after the War of 1812. Patch's leaps continued and in 1829 both he and a pet bear cub he adopted in Buffalo, New York leapt successfully from the one hundred foot high Genesee Falls in Rochester, New York. Not satisfied with the purse from the first jump, Patch elected to jump again at Genesee Falls from a

platform twenty five feet higher on Friday November 13, 1829. And although the bear survived the second jump, Patch did not. His body was found down river at Charlotte Beach on the shores of Lake Ontario the following spring.

Nevertheless, the legend of Sam Patch became large and rumors of his appearance in towns across the northeast became frequent, often spreading from tavern to tavern, with one even placing him on a schooner in the South Pacific. Many a swindler also claimed to be Patch and many others claimed that a bear cub they possessed was Patch's. The exploits of Sam Patch were so popular that several writers including Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote briefly about Patch in the ensuing years. Fifty years after the death of Sam Patch, the McLoughlin Brothers published an illustrated children's book of a poem by Frederick Gardner further embellishing the life of Sam Patch. In the text and illustrations in the book, Patch not only jumps from Niagara and Genesee Falls, but also from his mother's lap as a newborn, from the chicken coop, the barn, church steeples, the rebuilt capital in Washington D.C., from New York to Boston, and around Europe for monarchs, before his demise on the Genesee. The illustrations in the book allow the viewer to transport themselves back to early industrial America, depicting Patch jumping in small towns recently carved from the wilderness complete with men in top hats and numerous American flags. The 1870's book had long since been largely forgotten in popular lore, but sometime in the early 1990's the Rochester City Historian Ruth Rosenberg-Naparsteck organized a smaller reprint of an original held by Len Rosenberg.

While visiting extended family in Rochester shortly after the birth of my daughter in 2006, my mother, wife and I were in a gift shop adjacent to Genesee Falls. I noticed a small book and said "Look, a Sam Patch book!". After my mother and wife wondered who Sam Patch was, I explained that I had written a book report on Sam Patch in the early 1980's while in elementary

school and my mother then purchased the reprint and gave it to me. The reprint contains no information on its date of publication and WorldCat lists its publication date as "1992?" Likewise, the original edition also has a dubious publication date in WorldCat of "187?". Both books appear to be quite rare as only seven libraries hold the original edition while only four hold the reprint. The original is listed for sale by several rare book dealers with prices ranging from ninety to over eight hundred U.S. dollars depending on the condition, while the reprint does not seem to be for sale anywhere, perhaps not even at the gift shop from which I obtained it half a decade ago. Thus both editions contain elements of the historical ambiguities, unusualness and folkloric oral traditions of the story of Sam Patch himself.

In imagining an ideal museum for the display of "The Wonderful Leaps of Sam Patch" facsimile, I believe it would be best to try and understand the story and the object and place it in a museum which evokes both in a manner befitting both the nature of the object and the story behind it. As the reprinted book might be as rare or rarer than the 1870's original and the illustrations evoke the experience of early 19th century America, I suppose it could probably be displayed in a large history museum like Austin, Texas' Bob Bullock. Perhaps an exhibit on early 19th century American entertainment would be an appropriate venue for the book along with items and information depicting traveling circuses and fairs complete with a recreation of entertainment spectacles in early towns from the original "American West".

However, as the legend of Sam Patch seems to be largely transferred via oral histories and folkloric tales, it would seem more appropriate to include it in a museum with an oral storyteller such as Austin's O'Henry House or Jourdan-Bachman Pioneer Farms. Inns and taverns often displayed posters and broadsides promoting Sam Patch's leaps, and his actual historic leaps seem to correspond roughly to towns along the primary "Gateway to the West" of the era - the

Erie Canal. Likewise, the legend of Sam Patch seems to be related to travelers' tales told in inns and taverns, and stories of wagers on the success or failure of Patch's jumps also occurred in taverns. Therefore, a historic "house" museum in an inn or tavern from the 1820's along the Erie Canal would seem to be the ideal place to "display" "The Wonderful Leaps of Sam Patch".

Visitors to this "house" museum would first be transported by a canal barge pulled by a mule on the towpath. And the mule's name would of course be "Sal" just as it is in the "The Erie Canal" folksong. The barge operator would be a gruff man with a worker cap who would tell embellished stories of his exploits on the canal and a young boy would prod the mule along the towpath. Upon docking, the museum visitor would then disembark from the barge and would be greeted on the dock by a docent with an oil lantern in period clothing who would then guide them to the inn. Inside the inn, the visitors would be confronted by posters and broadsides on the wooden walls and on structural wooden posts advertising circuses, feats of daring, and "freaks of nature" such as the bearded lady. Just beyond the walls of the entryway would be a period bar with glassware reproduced in 19th century styles, complete with a bartender donning a waxed handlebar mustache. A "seedy gentleman with a top hat" would attempt to convince the visitor to give him money for some worthless trinket, while a "woman of ill-repute" would ask the visitor to buy her a drink. Finally, as these other actors exit, a weathered old man at the end of the bar would invite the visitor to sit down by reciting "The Wonderful Leaps of Sam Patch" poem which begins "Come and hear the story told, of the feats of Sam the Bold...". At the end of the poem, a minister would come in the room and condemn the patrons for drinking and explain that they were just like the crowds who encouraged Patch's reckless and fatal behavior by cheering him on. The mustached bar tender could then throw the minister out and the wait staff in period costume would then serve pints of ale and shots of whiskey, all while telling many fantastic folk

and travelers' tales from early 19th century America. After about half an hour or an hour, the docents would then explain to the visitors that the museum was the idea of a Rochester native who did a book report on Sam Patch in elementary school and rediscovered this Sam Patch book while traveling through region long ago. Copies of the reprinted book would then be sold by the "seedy gentleman with the top hat" and the "woman of ill-repute" in an auction type style forcing the museum visitors to bargain for its cost. Visitors might therefore be "taken" by the "hustlers", just as they might have been in the early 19th century.

The exploits of Sam Patch occurred in a particular time and place, and the Folklore Museum on the Erie Canal described above is an attempt to recreate that time and place while dramatizing life and travel along the canal before the railroad era. Although the museum could also be placed at or near the Genesee Falls along the Genesee River where Patch met his end, the majority of travelers of the era arrived via stagecoach or canal barge. Also, the Genesee flows south to north, rather than east to west where the majority of towns were located at the time of Patch and into the present, and moreover the Genesee is un-navigable at many points to this day. Further, no museum would want the liability of any watercraft near the falls, particularly if museum patrons have been drinking alcohol¹. The canal by contrast is safer, and also somewhat more of a unique experience than the river, particularly in North America as there are many river boats but few if any canal barges. And everyone loves mules! Especially a mule named Sal. It would thus be an interesting and educational experience for many people in learning more about or even being introduced to early American folklore and life along the Erie Canal.

¹ A live model of Patch's bear cub would have to be excluded for similar reasons.

The audience would certainly consist of history buffs and lovers of early Americana, but with the mules and tall tales, visitors could also include children as long as the performances of the docents remained "family friendly" and the children were not around alcohol. Perhaps the museum could have performances in the afternoons for families with sarsaparilla and root beer and later in the evenings for adults as described. The museum could even have a dinner serving and if the inn had a few rooms above, perhaps some patrons with enough "bucks" could spend the night. Although all of these suggestions are somewhat "un-museum like", the museum would familiarize viewers with actual historical events and an era that is rather under documented at present. The museum as described documents and re-enacts several themes from Patch's era including - 1) the numerous tensions between the religiously pious and many members of the working class, 2) the role of the Erie Canal in opening commerce and travel to the west prior to the railroad, 3) the nature of history at the time as largely oral with abundant folk tales, and 4) entertainment of the period revolving around spectacles such as the one's Patch and others provided. The dramatizations and tall tales told by the docents might also allow viewers to contemplate how actual historical events can become mythologized and turned into folk legend for both entertainment and nefarious purposes. And also of no small importance, this "un-museum" style might also allow the museum to fund itself with larger fees for the unique experience of visitation as the museum would also represent a legendary spectacle in and of itself.

A good historical museum should not only educate its patrons, but also stir their imaginations to explore history and its many intricacies and tales. Although "The Wonderful Leaps of Sam Patch" as a book could be "displayed" in many ways, I believe the Folklore Museum on the Erie Canal would embody the spirit of the Sam Patch era of early 19th century

America and demonstrate some of its possible experiences. As a long term traveler, I have created a museum based on historic travel methods and incorporated an object that dramatizes the era from which it's inspiration came just as the object itself dramatized the era. Ultimately, I believe the un-museum like museum would not only awaken my own childhood fantasies of visiting other historical eras, but might also speak to many people and awaken childhood historical dramas of their own. And although this style of museum might not conform to standard scientific or methodological conventions displaying endless rows of labeled objects, it could perhaps arouse long dormant historical interests within older patrons and create a new interest in history for the young, which in the end should be a primary goal of any historical museum.

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