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If history is a collection of stories, telling Toledo's has been an uphill battle for the city's history museum.

Founded by a group of history buffs who wanted to create a home for the city's physical artifacts, the THM is the latest in a decades-long attempt to rescue curios from precarious personal collections to a safe repository available for public viewing.

"I tend to like the word story more than history, because history is a word that seems to turn people off," said Toledo History Museum board president Donna Christian Rehfeldt. "Toledo is a rich repository of stories."

Formed and incorporated in 2006, the museum was granted non-profit status in 2007. Before its founding, Toledo was the only city in Ohio's 10 largest to lack a museum dedicated to its history.

In 2011, the Toledo History Museum opened to the public at the Milmine-Stewart House, where it stayed until moving to the St. Clair Street side of the Valentine Building in 2018.

The museum timed its post-pandemic reopening with Jeep Fest to highlight an automotive exhibit. Visitors can still explore Toledo's history with Willys-Overland Motors, Champion Spark Plug, and the factory workers who brought those businesses to life through the car parts, newspaper clippings, and memorabilia that formed the backdrop of their daily lives.

A former archival librarian for the Toledo Lucas County Public Library, Rehfeldt compared history to silt in a river.

"When something happens, you've got that generation it happens to that remembers. The next generation hears about it, so in a sense, they remember. That next generation starts losing that," she said.

"I see the job of a historian as going down and stirring up that silt and getting it back up to the surface."

In March, the Toledo History Museum received a grant of \$3,700 from a government organization called America 250-Ohio in partnership with the non-profit Ohio Humanities.

In honor of the United States' 250th anniversary, the museum will develop a digital and physical exhibit called "Made in Toledo," to explore ways the city pushed American industry forward.

A new, generalist permanent exhibit that will better allow periodic alterations is in the works.

"There's a role for a museum to play in education," said London Mitchell, a former longtime Toledo newscaster and vice-president of the museum's board.

When locals criticize the Toledo area, it's often because they don't have the context to appreciate the city's history, culture, and their heritage within it. When they do, a "sense of pride in what Toledo has been" grows, Mitchell said.

Whether it's the early settler Peter Navarre exploring the swampland of the Maumee River or Jesup Wakeman Scott's decision to found the University of Toledo, individuals have shaped the city we live in today.

The museum's first job is to reach out to the community with that information, he said.

Looking back teaches locals how the city's best assets — its parks, museums, and zoo — came to be so high-quality in a population of Toledo's size.

Today's movers and shakers can also learn from mistakes. Past city leaders often lacked the foresight that could have led the city's growth, Mitchell said, preferring to rely on their laurels than seek out innovation or opportunity.

"History is more than nostalgia," he said. "It's what we know about ourselves and what we can predict about the future."

Operating on a shoestring budget, the Toledo History Museum's collections are largely comprised of donations from its board members or the community.

Admission is free. The museum is open 12 to 5 p.m. on Saturday and 1 to 5 p.m. on Sunday. Paid membership to support the museum has risen above 200 over the years, and ranges from \$10 for students to \$35 for families. Higher tiers are available for donors interested in further supporting the institution.

"Eventually I want to have the same number of members as the zoo has, which I believe is 57,000," Rehfeldt said, laughing.

Benefits include free admission to behind-the-scenes tours, special ticketing on events, ten percent discounts on items from the store, and reciprocal membership with Time Travelers, a network for historical museums.

Rehfeldt is optimistic that numbers will rise as the museum's profile grows.

Eventually, Rehfeldt and Mitchell hope to move THM into a larger space, as its small floor plan limits how much it can display.

Most of TMH's collections remain in storage — including A Glass Act, one of over a hundred frogs commissioned for the 2001 public arts project It's Reigning Frogs, inherited from Main Library after it closed for major renovations in 2018.

The Toledo History Museum recently returned Lily Leaper, the other frog in the Toledo History Museum's possession to the Boys & Girls Clubs of Toledo after The Blade's retrospective series unearthed that the Clubs had only loaned, not given, the frog to the library.

A historical artifact signed by then-presidents George W. Bush and Vicente Fox of Mexico, Lily Leaper is now the honorary lifeguard role at the Homer Hanham Club's C.O. Miniger pool.

"What hurts me the most is to know that we have so much in storage, so many stories to tell that we just don't have the space or the time to do it yet," Mitchell said.

The museum's most popular offering is its two-hour bus tour, Garters, Gambling, Gangsters and Gin. Recently covered by retired Blade food editor and continuing columnist Mary Alice Powell, the tour narrates the gangsters and gambling of Toledo's prohibition era, complete with bootlegging and gun battles.

Sharing a subject means there's some overlap with Tedd Long's Unholy Toledo tour, Rehfeldt said, but each provides its own take on the drama and deaths of the 1920s and '30s.

This is especially true with Long's recent focus on been self-guided driving tours available for purchase online rather than the directed bus tours offered by the Toledo History Museum.

The tours are \$35 for non-members and \$30 for members. Money raised from the tours directly benefits the museum.

"Anybody who walks in here and really takes a look around and asks a few questions, can walk out with an understanding that there's some vibrancy in the history of our town," Mitchell said.

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1. **Comment by Anonymous038126.**

7 days ago

How do you donate, buy a membership, or financially support these historical museums? Would have appreciated some contact information on both the Toledo and Oregon museums. Website? Phone numbers?

2. Comment by Janice Flahiff.

9 days ago

Thanks! Great reporting.

For anyone wanting to view Toledo Civil War historical artifacts...the Oregon-Jerusalem Society has many of these artifacts at their museum complex, 1133 Grasser Street.

Somehow these artifacts "made their way" to The Toledo Zoo, where they were stored in a basement away from public view.

This historical society kinda rescued them.

I don't know the full story, only what I remember from a tour a few months back.

My hubby is a member of the East Toledo Historical Society and through an understanding is in the process of transferring its historical items to the Oregon-Jerusalem Society museum complex.

(I welcome corrections, additions to this post!, this is what I recall to the best of my knowledge!)

Visit their Web site for hours and how to arrange group tours.