

# 10 American Museums

## You Won't Be Visiting on a School Field Trip

BY LAUREL MILLS

10

[the\_ten\_list]



### 1. The SPAM® Museum

If the on-site “wall of SPAM” is any indication, a tour through the SPAM Museum in Austin, Minn., is guaranteed fun for the whole canned-pork-loving family. SPAM’s parent company, Hormel Foods, opened the establishment in 2001 to the tune of almost 5,000 cans of SPAM. *One of the main attractions is a scale model of a SPAM plant, where visitors can don white coats and hairnets while pretending to produce America’s favorite tinned meat.* But vacationers be warned: In addition to major holidays, the museum will be closed on June 16 to prepare for the much hoopla-ed SPAM Museum Jam 2006.

### 2. National Museum of Funeral History

It’s pretty hard to argue with the motto “Any Day Above Ground is a Good One.” So goes the backhanded optimism of the National Museum of Funeral History, a Houston facility that opened in 1992.

Visitors are treated to exhibits that include a Civil War embalming display and a replica of a turn-of-the-century casket factory. In addition, the museum boasts an exhibit of “fantasy coffins” designed by Ghanaian artist Kane Quaye. These moribund masterpieces include a casket shaped like a chicken, a Mercedes-Benz, a shallot, and an out-board motor. According to Quaye, his creations are based on the dreams and last wishes of his clients, which—let’s be honest—really makes you wonder about the guy buried in the shallot.

### 3. THE HOBO MUSEUM

If you’re bumming around but looking for a good time, be sure to take a load off in Britt, Iowa, at The Hobo Museum, which details the history and culture of tramps. Bear in mind, though, that the museum kind of, well, slacks on hours and is only open to the public during the annual Hobo Convention. Luckily, tours can be arranged by appointment any time of year. Of course, if you’re interested in the Hobo Convention, lodging is available all over the area, but it’s a safe bet that most of your compatriots will be resting their floppy hats at the “hobo jungle,” located by the railroad tracks. Both the event and the museum are operated by the Hobo Foundation, which—incidentally—also oversees the nearby Hobo Cemetery, where those who have “caught the westbound” are laid to rest.

### 4. THE MÜTTER MUSEUM

Originally, the College of Physicians of Philadelphia erected the Mütter Museum as a creative way to inform medical students and practicing physicians about some of the more unusual medical phenomena. (You know, babies with two heads, that sort of thing.) But today, it primarily serves as a popular spot for anyone interested in the grotesque. There, you’ll find the world’s largest colon, removed from a man who died—not surprisingly—of constipation. Also on display: an OB-GYN instrument collection, thousands of fluid-preserved anatomical and pathological specimens, and a large wall dedicated entirely to swallowed objects.

### 5. The Barnum Museum

What better way to honor “Greatest Show on Earth” founder P.T. Barnum than with a mediocre museum in Bridgeport, Connecticut? Some visitors will appreciate the museum’s ridiculously detailed miniature model of a five-ring circus. But only circus freaks (and by that we mean “enthusiasts”) will get a kick out of seeing a stale piece of cake from the wedding of Barnum’s 40-inch-tall sidekick, General Tom Thumb.



## 6. THE CONSPIRACY MUSEUM

There's more than one theory about the assassination of John F. Kennedy, so why not have more than one museum devoted to it as well? Most JFK buffs are familiar with the Sixth Floor Museum housed in the former Texas School Book Depository, which recounts all those boring "mainstream" details of the late president's life leading up to his death at the hands of Lee Harvey Oswald. But just down the street, the Conspiracy Museum offers fodder for those less apt to buy into The Man's propaganda. For the most part, the museum specializes in showings of the Zapruder film and explanations of contrary assassination theories, including other gunmen on the grassy knoll and possible mafia involvement.

## 7. THE MUSEUM OF QUESTIONABLE MEDICAL DEVICES

Take two trips to the Museum of Questionable Medical Devices and call us when you've lost all faith in the medical profession. Thanks to curator Bob McCoy (who recently donated the collection to the Science Museum of Minnesota), those in search of history's quack science can find what they're looking for in the St. Paul tourist attraction, whether it's a collection of 19th-century phrenology machines or some 1970s breast enlargers. If you make the trip, be sure to check out the 1930s McGregor Rejuvenator. This clever device required patrons to enclose their bodies, sans head, in a large tube where they were pounded with magnetic and radio waves in attempts to reverse the aging process.



## 8. Cook's Natural Science Museum

What began as a training facility for Cook's Pest Control exterminators blossomed into one of the few museums in the country willing to tell the tale of the pest. At Cook's Natural Science Museum in Decatur, Ala., visitors can learn everything they ever wanted to know about rats, cockroaches, mice, spiders, and termites ... all for free. And while most people would rather step on the live specimens than learn about them, museum exhibits such as the crowd-pleasing Pest of the Month keep reeling in patrons.

## 9. VENT HAVEN VENTRILOQUIST MUSEUM

So, what do you get when you combine the loneliness of a pet cemetery with the creepy flair of vaudeville? The Vent Haven Ventriloquist Museum, of course—where dummies go to die. The Fort Mitchell, Ky., museum was the brainchild of the late William

Shakespeare Berger, who founded the site as a home for retired wooden puppets. In fact, he collected figures from some of the country's most famous ventriloquist acts. And with more than 700 dummies stacked from floor to ceiling, you're bound to feel like you're stuck inside a 1970s horror flick—albeit a really good one. But sadly, when Berger gave the tour, you could totally tell his mouth was moving.



## 10. The Trash Museum

Mom wasn't kidding when she said one man's trash is another man's treasure. At the Trash Museum in Hartford, Conn., the Connecticut Resources Recovery Authority (CRRRA) turns garbage into 6,500 square feet of pure recycling entertainment! Tour the Temple of Trash or visit the old-fashioned town dump. And for your recycler-in-training, head down the street to the Children's Garbage Museum, where you can take an educational stroll through the giant compost pile, get a glimpse of the 1-ton Trash-o-saurus, or enjoy the company of resident compost worms. 🐛