

A Rewarding Visit to the Taber Musuem

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A contingent of CCH&GS volunteers traveled to Williamsport March 6 to visit the Thomas T. Taber Museum. They included the author, Steve Smith, and Cryder Bankes. If you've never visited the museum, shame on you. The Taber Museum is, in a word, awesome. If we are looking for a role model (and we should be), we need look no further. No fledgling museum could go wrong by mimicking the Taber.

Primarily, the gang was seeking some tips from Curator of Collections Scott Sagar about how to implement and use our new Digital Asset Management software for museums called PastPerfect. [See Cryder's article on page 9]. But we got more than we bargained for, including a personal tour of the facility from Executive Director Gary Parks, which included peeks at the treasures hidden in the nooks and crannies of their extensive storage areas. We got a lot of tips on many museum-related issues from both Gary and Scott, and we got whole lot of inspiration.

Growth Patterns

Like our museum, the Taber Museum is the museum of a historical society. It is the museum of the Lycoming County Historical Society (LCHS), which was founded in 1907, and which, like the CCH&GS, has moved from place to place over the years.

Formerly housed in one of the mansions on "Millionaire's Row" in Williamsport, the mansion burned in 1960, destroying about 20 percent of the LCHS's collection. The fire prompted the LCHS to commit to building a more modern fire-resistant building, and so in 1964, some prominent community members were recruited to form a five member Board of Trustees to seek building funds.

The main part of today's Taber museum is the square-shaped two-level brick part in the front, near the street (West Fourth). This is the original section, which was built in 1968 to replace the old mansion that burned

With growth in mind, in 1999, the LCHS Board of Governors launched a capital campaign that raised almost \$2 million. Then, Thomas T. Taber III jumped in with a check for \$1 million. With funds from this campaign, the museum expanded in 2001, adding an addition to the rear of the main building, which is now used for exhibition, collections storage, and program space. This capital campaign also provided funds to hire a full time curator of collections, which Gary says was something that was recommended by the American Association of Museums.

Lycoming County also has a Genealogical Society. In fact, it is right next to the Taber building in the carriage house of the former mansion that once stood on the site, but these two are separate entities. This is the way things were in Columbia County before 1999, when the historical and genealogical groups joined together to form the Columbia County Historical & Genealogical Society. The two Williamsport societies are separate and have separate websites but are affiliated and share resources.



Steve Smith and Cryder Banks (left and center) behind the scenes with Scott Sagar at the Taber Museum, March 6, 2025

Similarities and Differences

Beginning in 1969, the LCHS began to operate with paid staff, as opposed to only volunteers. Today, the staff includes an Executive Director, a Curator of Collections, and a Development Director, whose sole job is to raise money (or, more formally: “financial planning.”) The LCHS/Taber also has several part-time employees, and a number of active volunteers.

The LCHS reaches out to the younger generation through Student Internships, Student Group Tours, a “Student Historian” Competition and a Summer History Day Camp.

Rather than a board of directors, the LCHS calls their board of directors the “Board of Governors” (sounds more impressive, doesn’t it?) It is composed of 12-volunteers who are elected to serve 2-year terms and who meet monthly.

The Museum’s Highlights

The first thing that grabs me whenever I walk into the Taber Museum is the perfectly-restored Model T Ford sedan parked in the lobby. The pristine black beauty looks like it just came off Henry’s famous moving assembly line. Or something you’d see in the Housenick showroom circa 1916. It is so inviting that I want to jump in and take it for a spin (I’m pretty sure that would lead to incarceration in a Williamsport jail. Plus, that crank starter might be a challenge.)

The next thing that grabs me is the larger of the Severin Roesen paintings. I’ve stood for what seemed like hours just staring at it, transfixed. The exquisite detail of this Roesen still life is stunning. It is a masterpiece, and the Taber has not just one, but three Roesens currently on display. Severin Roesen was born in Prussia in 1815, came to the U.S. in 1848 and settled at Williamsport in 1863. He disappeared from the radar screen in 1872; the exact date and place of his death remains a mystery. He was never very famous or wealthy in his own time and was

virtually forgotten until he was rediscovered in the 1960s after Jackie Kennedy hung two of his paintings in the White House, where they remain today.



One of the Roesen paintings at the Taber

Other Taber exhibits include a full-scale working grist mill and a blacksmith shop. Also simulated are a frontier cabin, a one-room schoolhouse, and a Victorian parlor. Kids seem particularly captivated by the Lumber Industry and American Indian galleries. Almost the entire basement of the main part of the building is devoted to the extensive Shempp Model Train Exhibit, which draws visitors from all over the U.S. These are just a few of the Taber's attractions.

If you'd like to see what a world-class museum conducted by an historical society and devoted to local history looks like, you need travel no further than 45 miles northwest to Williamsport, where you'll find the Thomas T. Taber Museum. It's well worth the trip.

I'd like to thank Gary Parks and Scott Sagar for kindly taking the time to share their expertise with us. And thanks for the inspiration.