

# *In Hartford, A World Bizarre*

## Museum Is Really A Curiosity Shop

By LYNN M. ERMANN  
*Special to The Washington Post*

HARTFORD, Conn.—Last year, an Egyptian mummified hand was slipped through the Faude family's mail slot.

It was sealed in a small Ziploc bag. The children, the first to spot the grisly delivery, calmly peered at the hand for a few seconds before shouting:

"Dad, there's something here for you."

Not much fazes the Faude children these days. Some fairly strange things have been sent to their father, Wilson H. "Bill" Faude, the flamboyant executive director of the Old State House here. For some time, he has been busy acquiring a collection for his curiosity museum, which opened last year. Joseph Steward's Hartford Museum is modeled as closely as possible on a 1797 museum, also in the Old State House and curated by portrait painter and minister Joseph Steward.

Thus far, Faude has a pickled two-headed piglet (fondly dubbed "Sweet 'n'



**You're not seeing double. This calf and its heads are on display in Hartford.**

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BY ROBERT BENSON—OLD STATE HOUSE, HARTFORD

Sour"), a stuffed two-headed calf, a 70-million-year-old triceratops horn, a stuffed eight-foot-long alligator, a "unicorn" horn, Nathan Hale's picnic basket and hundreds of other items. (With exceptions such as the hand, most are sent to Faude in packages with such innocuous markings as "Household Goods.") All these oddities are jammed into the small but popular one-room museum. So much has been donated that it is easy to forget that just

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# Views Of the Weird

HARTFORD, From D1

three years ago, no one expected the museum ever to open its doors. That Joseph Steward's Hartford Museum exists at all is a testament to the unusual vision of two unusual men.

For its original curator, the museum was a way to make a quick buck. In 1797, Steward secured a room in the Old State House as a portrait gallery. That was in the attic above the current museum. But the crowds never came, possibly because of the paintings. (Critic William Dunlap called them "wretched.") Steward thus hit on another scheme several years later. Influenced by Charles Willson Peale's Cabinet of Curiosities in Philadelphia, which had opened at Independence Hall in 1784, Steward announced that his museum would also feature curiosities and charge a hefty admission (20 cents). Hartford loved it. The museum flourished, later moving across the street; it finally closed in 1840.

Faude saw a chance to revive Steward's museum during the 1992-96 renovations of the Old State House. The museum was only a minuscule part of the \$12 million project. Built in 1796, the Old State House was the center of Connecticut government, including the chambers where the state legislature met. Most famously, it was the site of the 1839 trial of the Africans who took over the slave ship *Amistad*. The Old State House lost its place on the political stage when the Connecticut government moved to a new State House in 1878. Over the next century, the building was often on the verge of falling to the wrecking ball. Faude, who started fighting to save the building in the 1970s, had by 1989 plotted a new course that

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**A stuffed alligator  
and a two-headed  
calf join more  
conventional  
exhibits of  
paintings and sea  
shells in the  
Hartford museum.**

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would bring its colorful history back to life. It would include galleries and revamped court chambers, guides playing the parts of historical figures, a ceremonial firing of the cannons twice a day and an *Amistad* reenactment. The last touch would be the re-creation of Steward's museum, hosted by a guide playing the amiable clergyman.

Yet the nature of that museum was still a matter of debate. As far as Faude knew at the time, Steward was chiefly a portrait painter. Steward's curiosity collection had been considered a bit frivolous by many of the directors who preceded Faude, and for years the paintings had taken center stage. There was another issue. Would the public really want to see an 18th-century freak show? Plus, isn't there something a bit unsavory about encouraging folks to stuff their stillborn two-headed calves or hunt down wild boars? Yet Faude argued that Joseph Steward's Hartford Museum was a true piece of history that could be used as a teaching tool.

"It really demystifies the whole building," says Faude, who also doesn't believe in sanitizing history. His work on the other aspects of redoing the State House—such as the *Amistad* reenactment and the idea to fire the cannons twice a day and the many new galleries—helped

him sway the traditional Old State House Board. "They thought, 'Well, if Bill wants to have his little room, fine,'" says Kathleen A. Hunter, director of interpretation and education in the Old State House.

Using Steward's old advertisements as a guide, as well as other contemporary references to the museum, Faude began to reconstruct a catalogue of the original collection. There was only one catch: There were almost no traces of the original items. Everything would have to be found, re-created or donated anew.

How to find an oddity? Word of mouth. Faude contacted everyone he knew from old college buddies to powerful politicians in his search. The first major breakthrough came in 1996 when Faude learned of the stillbirth of a two-headed calf in Sheboygan, Mich., and arranged to have it stuffed and shipped. With this staple in place, he had the leverage to get more. A friend called a friend who wrote Buddy MacKay, the lieutenant governor of Florida, and requested that the first rogue eight-foot-long alligator be delivered—mounted—to Hartford. The new donation now hangs upside down from the museum ceiling.

Then came the pig. When Theresa Beck of Butler, Pa., visited Joseph Steward's with her family last June, she heard that the museum was in

need of a two-headed pig. Beck recalled that someone in her home town had one, but she wasn't sure where. Upon returning home, she called up a local radio show and sent out a request over the airwaves. Soon she learned that the pig, born on a farm in Widnoon, Pa., in 1972 had later been traded by farmer Stanley Hopper to Howard McQueenie of Rimersberg, Pa., in exchange for some unknown items. Through a series of phone calls, letters and radio inquiries, Beck determined that Ed Woitas, of New Kensington, Pa., was holding the pig. Faude then contacted Woitas, who eventually offered to sell it for \$200, a price covered by Beck.

Unsolicited donations have also arrived from locals eager to help out. The mummified hand was donated in memory of Jim Thomson of Farmington, Conn., by his children. Recently, James Bosco of Woodbridge, Conn., donated a large collection of stuffed creatures. This past December, a collection of birds—frozen and stuffed—arrived from the Rocky Mountain Arsenal in Colorado. (Because the taxidermist was out of town, an employee at a certain local insurance company let Faude store them in the company office over the holidays.) While Faude is still seeking all the items specifically mentioned by Steward,

he also knows that anything that was listed in Peale's collection, or anything that seems like the kind of thing either of them would have exhibited.

At present, the determined curiosity seeker is still looking for an 18-foot crocodile from Egypt, a gunship made entirely of glass, a very large penguin, four figures in wax depicting a guillotine, the god Bacchus's shoes and an African black dog who never had hair. Part of the search, of course, is trying to figure out what on earth Steward was talking about. "I have no idea what an African black dog who never had hair is," says Faude, which doesn't stop him from looking for one.

John Trainor, the tour guide who plays the part of Steward at the

museum, suggests that Joseph Steward "must have been the Discovery Channel of its day." Back then, travel was difficult and Steward's contemporaries learned about other countries and cultures by looking at his stuffed wild animals and unusual specimens. Yet the key word is unusual. This was an age of freaks. Steward and Peale, early influences of P.T. Barnum (a member of the legislature who served on the Old State House), were presenting an exotic world.

What Wilson H. Faude has done is bring that strain of 200-year-old curiosity out of the attic.

The Museum of Curiosities at the Old State House is open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. weekdays and 11 to 4 Saturdays.