

Where the past lives on ...

TATTOO HISTORY MUSEUM

Story and photos by Chris Pfouts



If the Interstates are the modern beaten path, Rich T's new and relocated Tattoo History Museum is on the road you take to get to the road that leads to the beaten path's service road. Way out yonder is where, but just a tick off the Bob Evans Highway. If you're not in an area serviced by the mighty Evans empire, Bob Evans makes sausages that rock the universe, and have a large string of family restaurants to sell them. And a sausage highway leading to the source.

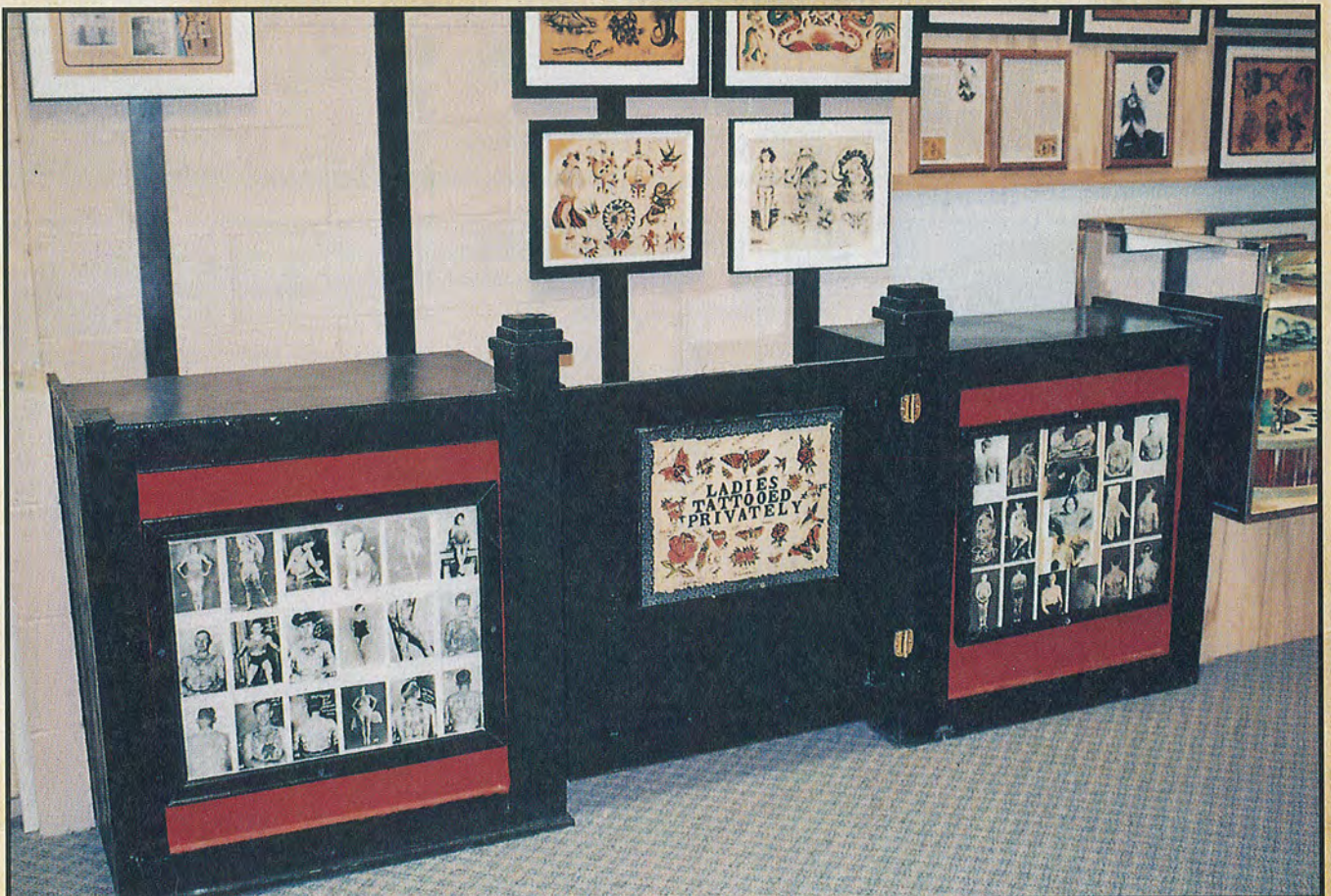
You leave the beaten path of I-70 in Columbus, Ohio, and turn down Route 23. Halfway down the rest of the state you roll off onto 32, the Bob Evans Highway, then take the Route 93 exit and you're mostly there: Coalton, Ohio. It's God's country, beautiful mountains and deep forest. Coalton itself is a flyspeck on the map.

That particular flyspeck is totally worth the trip. As you all know, there's a whole bunch of nothing to see on the interstates these days—strip malls and fast food joints, gas stations and rest stops. The same old nothing for hundreds of miles. The interesting parts of America are out along the rural two-lanes.

And it's a rural two lane that fronts Rich T's Tattoo History Museum, housed in the Bicknee Tattoo Supply building.

Rich has spent years aggressively chasing scattered bits and pieces of tattoo history and bringing them together in one visitor-friendly location. Along the way, he has hit some main veins and managed to save significant chunks of tattoo history from fading into oblivion. Being in the Midwest, Rich tends to focus somewhat on the artists who flourished in his neck of the woods. Stoney St. Clair and Al Schiefly are two artists who have drawn his attention. St. Clair worked the last part of his career right up the road in Columbus, and there is a lot of Stoney's iconoclastic, oddball flash in the Tattoo History Museum. In Al Schiefly's case, Rich has managed to gather a really significant percentage of this colorful Ohio artist's letters, photos, flash, equipment and even the gates from inside his studio.

For a student of tattoo history—or anyone with even a mild curiosity about the subject—the Tattoo History Museum



TATTOO HISTORY MUSEUM

is an essential stop. In those long glass cases are beautiful spreads of old catalogs, letters from ink-stained names that echo down the halls of time, business cards from long-vanished artists and studios, machines made by the famous and the unknown, traveling boxes from itinerant carnival artists and much more.

Seeing a Charlie Wagner business card in one of those cases, for example, can be deeply moving. Wagner devoted his life to tattooing, as much as anyone ever could. His career started before electric machines, and he was the main protégé of O'Reilly, who invented the machine. Wagner tattooed for over 50 years and died in 1953, still with an active studio on the Bowery. He ran a supply business and tattooed thousands upon thousands of people. But there is so little left of Wagner anymore, that a business card is a real gem.

And that's just one card in the flood of artifacts Rich has collected. All of it is steeped in the blood—of course—and sweat of tattooing's pioneers, as well as the men like Al Schiefly, who kept the art alive through the lean years.

If you are motoring along I-70 through Ohio, make the Tattoo History Museum one of your stops. Don't deprive yourself of this spectacular resource. And not only the museum, of course, Rich's excellent traditional tattooing is available, and the Bicknee showroom is terrific. I made it sound like it was a thousand miles from civilization but it's really about two short hours off the slab. And it's a ride through beautiful country.

Not to mention that you can wander a little further and get yourself a sausage meal right from the Evans source.

Tattoo History Museum is located at 108 Broadway St., Coaltown, Ohio 45621, or by phone at toll free (866) 441-8190 or (740) 286-2400. 