



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“In this centennial year we have been made more keenly aware of how important our services are to the city as we provided our photographs and research assistance to those persons charged with creating meaningful centennial events for Richmond’s citizens...”

-Lois Boyle, President,
[Richmond Museum of History](#), 2005

I recently visited the Richmond Museum of History, which is housed in a 1910 Carnegie Library building. This museum provides a wonderful opportunity to visit the past.

The upstairs area is divided into sections that flow into each other. One shows a kitchen, complete with wood-burning stove. Another includes an old fire engine, as well as the bell system for fires. The bell system is an excellent example of something that is utilitarian and yet beautiful in its workmanship, as the Museum’s manager, Donald Bastin, commented to me. It is housed under a clear cover and it looks like the inner workings of a giant music box.

There is also a lovely shiny black restored car, with a sign next to it that says: “This Model A Ford car was the first car off the assembly line at the Richmond Ford Plant in August 1931.” According to Bastin, there may be some question

about whether this was literally the first car from this plant, but it was certainly one of the first – and it is a thing of beauty.

Everywhere there are enlarged black and white photographs that give you an idea of what Richmond and surrounding cities used to look like. On the walls are glass cases full of all sorts of memorabilia, like a glass milk bottle with the inscription “Good morning, good health,” and a 1949 photograph of a protestor carrying a sign that says: “Shoot Jim Crow Out of Lucky.”

On the ground floor is the section of the museum that is reserved for current exhibits. The one recently installed and running through January 2006 is called *A Children’s Holiday Exhibit: Antique Toys, Dolls, Children’s Art from Postwar Richmond*. The collection of toys and artwork is perfectly designed for the young and that is the intent, according to the guest curator, Clementina Diaz. By using few signs, bright colors,

lots of open space and an area of touchable objects, the goal is to give young museum-goers a positive museum experience which will encourage them to become lifelong museum regulars. I think in this way libraries and museums are similar: they are both committed to providing not only information, but also a setting that offers visitors of all ages an ongoing and ever-changing resource.

Certainly the appeal of this exhibit should have that effect. There is a slide show, a table for creating art, toys to play with and lots and lots of children's paintings – starting from the late 1940's - displayed on the walls. Many of these are from a children's daycare center run by Monica Haley. On the wall is an example of a typical day, which began at 6 a.m. and ended 12 hours later. The schedule is packed with activities, although some are less pleasant, like the 9-9:15 slot,

which includes “cod liver oil and juice.” There are also multiple examples of old children's toys, like a real Red Ryder BB gun, with “Red Ryder” in script on the stock, and “the world's smallest dolls.”

The Richmond Museum of History was started in the early 1950's, and has been consistently open since 1982. How fortunate Richmond is to have a separate building like this; there are many local history collections, but many less with the room for displays and visitors. It is well worth taking the time to visit and learn more about the fascinating history of this area.