



Stephanie Osteen

The Gaston Museum: A Window to an East Texas Past

BY GLORIA KEITH, COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR

MOST MUSEUMS PROHIBIT touching the displays. But not the Gaston Museum in Joinerville, where patrons are invited to experience how life was in the 1930s with hands-on activities in every room.

Upon arriving at the Museum, visitors receive a hearty welcome from museum director Stephanie Osteen and then are transported back in time through historical narratives and artifacts that tell the story of the East Texas oil boom and the former Gaston School.

“We are here because of Dad Joiner and Daisy Bradford,” Osteen says. “Dad Joiner was the largest oil strike in the world at that time. The school, which was the largest in the world at that time, was a result of that oil strike that brought families into the community. Our museum tells you the history of not only the community before, during and after the oil strike, but the school and what it brought to the community of Joinerville.”

Originally called Cyril, the town was later named after Joiner to become Joinerville.

At the museum, kids can deliver mail to one of the antique mailboxes, play checkers, shave Mr. Jones at the barbershop, fix Mrs. Jones’ hair at the beauty shop, shine shoes outside the barbershop and visit a grocery store stocked with items of the era. The hands-on approach even applies to a Bible in which visitors are encouraged to highlight and write their names next to their favorite Scriptures.

The museum features popular games and toys from the time—some of which may be new to many visitors—including croquet, hopscotch, jacks, pick-up sticks, Wahoo, skip jack, hula hoops, metal skates and a View-Master—a once-novel device for viewing images in 3D. Outside, kids can walk on stilts or play cornhole, horseshoes and other outdoor games. There was a rifle club in the gymnasium that recently burned down, but a small shooting gallery remains.

In another museum section, kids can pretend to make cookies and put their cookie dough in the oven. When they return at the end of their tour, they find actual cookies in the oven, generously swapped in for the fakes.

The snack shop is set up to appear just as it did in the 1940s. All of the items are original, including the seats, a stool, booths and chairs.

“We created it so that when you walk in, you go through the actual screen door and under the sign that was on the snack shop,” says Osteen. Signs that were in the shop hang on the wall with the prices of items that were offered at that time.

Elvis Presley performed at the Gaston School in 1955, and the owner of the school gave the boards from the stage to the museum. The stage in the museum was renovated for Elvis to stand on. “We have Elvis in the building, and you can listen to some of his music,” Osteen says, laughing.

The school section features a home economics cottage where

GASTON MUSEUM



James E. Moore SKSN Billy A. Moore SKSN Bobby Moore SK2
S. Navy 1951 - 1955 U.S. Navy 1950 - 1952 U.S. Navy 1950 - 1954

All Three Brothers Served On USS Prairie. James Requested To Serve On USS Prairie, With His Mother's Permission, He Was Able To Do So. Also Served With Faron Young, A CW Singer. Billy Was Stricken With Polio. Received A Medical Discharge In 1952. Bobby - Destroyer Tender (Supply Ship For Destroyers). He Said He Served On The "Geedumklin 1199 Men" Liberty Line - 1199 Men.



visitors can do cross-stitch or prepare cotton for the loom or spinning wheel. The section shows what the four-room school-house looked like before the oil boom and the big school on the hill was built. In 1932 locals claimed the school was the largest in the world. It was the second-richest school in the country at that time, behind New London, and boasted some of the best teachers around. Those who attended the school felt a special pride in it.

"Even now through the generations, families still come here and support the museum to preserve the history, and it's a phenomenon," says Osteen. "You don't see that now at all."

The Gaston's impressive veterans room features photographs—if the family provided one—of every Gaston student that served in the military during World War I, World War II, and the Korean and Vietnam wars.

"There are more, but we have over 250 that went to service and came back," says Osteen. "Then we had 16 that never made it home; we are missing three. Those are in the gold frames. We also have military uniforms from each of the armed services."

Museum staff members are more than happy to share a story if they have one and will talk about their experiences if they happen to be alumni of the Gaston School and their picture is on the wall.

Osteen's father is pictured on the wall.

"My mother had three brothers that went to the Navy," she explains. "My grandmother had to sign a release to give the youngest one permission to enlist because of the ['Sullivan rule']. At that time, you had to give permission for that last son to go into the military if they were going to the same location,

and all three wanted to be on the same ship. So my grandmother signed, and they all went on the same ship. The youngest was a golden gloves boxer and was very good at it, and he knew it. He also liked to drink beer, so he would go on furlough and get into a fight because he had been drinking. He ended up getting a dishonorable discharge because he liked to fight.

"The oldest of the twins (by a couple of minutes) was a Navy SEAL, and he would go on missions at night off the ship into murky waters, then have to swim to locations. He contracted polio, came back to the ship; they rehabbed him stateside with a medical discharge. He actually rehabbed where he was able to walk, and you couldn't tell he ever had the disease. The one that stayed on the ship was a great guy. He was a shop tender, and so he had a roommate/bunkmate that worked in the shop with him. They became best friends, more like brothers. In 1954, he brought his best buddy home with him on leave. He introduced him to his sister. Twenty-three days later they got married, and she went to San Diego with him. That was my mother, so I guess you could say my uncle brought my daddy home, introduced him to my mother, and so he found my daddy for me."

The gas station, snack shop and the White family home that are part of the Gaston Museum have been there since at least the 1930s, since Mr. White was working at the gas station when the oil boom hit in 1930.

The house is an original tent house that from inside the entrance looks like a regular house. But when visitors look upward, instead of a pitched roof, they see what looks like the shape of a canvas tent that goes up and curves over at the top.



Tent House Escape Room

It's one of the only original tent houses left in existence, and the museum uses it as an escape room. The cost is \$20 per person. Up to 10 people can be in a group, and the group has one hour to explore the four-room house for clues to escape. The rooms are much as they were when the Whites moved out, with the same furniture, decorations and all.

"Another escape we lovingly call the Eleanor and the White House is in the works," says Osteen. "When [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] was in office, Eleanor Roosevelt joined partnerships and had 200 outhouses built and installed in state parks all over the United States. Because of those, they named them the Eleanor and the White House, after Eleanor and her husband being the president."

Participants have five minutes to figure out the numbers for the combination. There is a two-seater outhouse on the grounds. It's not an actual working outhouse, but it is a scale replica that will have an escape on each side.

The museum features a brush arbor to show visitors how residents held revivals under the stars in the 1930s. Also outside is an equipment array that features corn grinding tools, crosscut saws, scales to measure sacks of cotton, and an old

wash bay station to draw water from the well and put it in buckets. Visitors can hand-wash clothes with the washboards. Another favorite with the kids is the mining section, where they can dig for arrowheads, use a metal detector to search for coins, or go to the sluices to pan for gems and gold.

"We have several schools that come every year," says Osteen. "Scout Troop 219, a group of older girls, are partnering with us on a couple of ventures, and they will also be adding some hands-on outdoor exhibits. We are hoping to involve them with helping educate large groups about the history in the different rooms at the museum."

The Gaston Museum caters to all age groups. Younger visitors can experience how life was for their ancestors, and adults can take a walk down memory lane—right here in Rusk County.

The museum is open 10 a.m.–4 p.m. Thursday–Saturday and can accommodate other times by request by calling (903) 722-9016. The museum is located at 6562 Highway 64 W. For more information, visit facebook.com/gastonmuseum. ■