

Fort Thomas Military and Community Museum

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The Fort Thomas Military and Community Museum in northern Kentucky is on the grounds of a former United States Army post that had served as an induction center, military hospital and army depot from the time of the Spanish-American War in the late 1800s until 1964. The museum is in a small house, each room loaded with remnants of military service as well as memorabilia from the surrounding community.

This museum has so many unusual treasures that it was difficult to narrow our spotlight to just one. Museum Director **Deanna Beineke** suggested a 1914 McClellan saddle.

"We received this 100-year-old saddle, tack, pictures, riding pants and more last summer," she said. "It had not been touched in decades, and the leather was so dry, we were afraid to breathe on it too hard for fear that the straps would break."

The staff has been working to restore the leather to make it less fragile, but in the meantime, they have been learning more about the saddle's original owner. U.S. Marine Corps Maj. **C. Brewster Rhoads** was from the Philadelphia area, but his grandson lives near Cincinnati and thought a museum focusing on military history would be a good place for it.

The museum also has photos of Rhoads with the saddle astride his horse in France during World War I,

as well as his overcoat and wartime diaries. In conducting more research, the staff found that Rhoads re-enlisted in the Marines during World War II and was involved in the establishment of the U.S. Marine Corps Women's Reserve. The collection includes a letter from **James Forrestal**, a former U.S. secretary of the Navy and the first U.S. secretary of defense, commending Rhoads for this service.

The museum is part of Tower Park, named for the iconic 100-foot stone water tower that was built around 1890 to supply water to the fort. Also on the grounds are buildings from the late 1800s, including the former mess hall, a structure that is referred to as The Armory but actually was a drill hall and gymnasium, and 15 officers' homes. These stately homes are on the National Register of Historic Places. After years of neglect, they are being restored and turned into private residences.

"Tower Park is one of the last vestiges of that kind of military installation," Beineke said. "The whole park is a living museum."

The building housing the museum was constructed in 1910 as the home of the fort's hospital supervisor. The collection includes artifacts that have been found on the grounds as well as donated items from every military conflict from the U.S. Civil War through the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Due to space limitations, we cannot display artifacts from all wars all the time. We are currently focusing on Spanish-American and WW I," Beineke said. "But artifacts and research materials can be retrieved with notice for special projects."

About half of the museum focuses on artifacts from the community, including an almost complete set of Highlands High School yearbooks, spanning more than 100 years. It has photos, diaries and letters from residents of the city of Fort Thomas and an exhibit dedicated to **Pearl Bryan**, a 22-year-old pregnant woman from Indiana who was found decapitated in Wilder in 1896.

"The gruesome nature of the crime and its notoriety at the time still draw public interest," Beineke said.

One room of the museum spotlights the tragic fire at the Beverly Hills Supper Club in 1977 that killed 165 people. The club was located in nearby Southgate, so the city's residents were among the first responders. The Armory served as a morgue where family members came to identify the dead. The collection includes memorabilia from the club's heyday as well as items from the fire such as singed and burned pieces and a large metal cash register that had melted almost beyond recognition.

Open Thursday through Saturday, noon-4 p.m. and Sunday, 1-5 p.m. Closed January-March. Also open to visitors upon request by appointment only.