

Museum of the Americas

by Gary Lee Miller

The Museum of the Americas hasn't had five visitors a

month since 1973, when they put the interstate through and left this part of the Upper Valley like a rock in the river that's too far to reach from shore. Admission is three dollars, which doesn't add up to much. I live off the money Dad

left from the Museum's glory years and try to run the place the way he would have if he were still alive. Dad was a master of the tourist business, and I hold hard to his principles, because that's what he taught me, the one of his two sons who wanted to learn.

Once every few weeks in the summer, visitors stop by, people who remember the Museum from the years before, or who make a wrong turn and decide to take a look before wheeling around in the gravel and dirt parking lot and moving on to where they'd intended to go. A couple pulled in last Thursday, the hottest, driest day of the year, in an old clay-colored Chevy wagon with Illinois plates and a little blue-and-white Scotty camper tagging behind. The woman drove, which seemed funny for people my age, better than seventy and with their best years behind them. She pulled the little rig into the Museum lot and it petered to a stop, barely stirring dust.

"What kind of exhibits do you have here, mister?" she said. Her voice was firm and honest, and I couldn't help but like it, try as I did not to.

I could have answered as simple as she asked, but that's not the way in

roadside attractions. “Soil,” I said, just like Dad would have, a little hum in my voice, a little shill. “We got soil from Tierra del Fuego to Tierra del Alaska, and all the Americas in between.” I smiled, to give her that welcome feeling.

The man slept leaning up against the window and she tapped him on the arm. “We’re here,” she said, as if they came here on purpose, instead of by accident. This got me to thinking about the old days, before the interstate spoiled it all.

WHEN Dad dreamt up the Museum of the Americas in 1949, just two years after my mother died, the whole family thought he was crazy. We had milked Holsteins through the Depression and nearly starved, but with the War, things had been steady. Dad’s pitch was that steady wasn’t enough. A new breed of cow gave milk better than any Holstein. The tourist.

Dad turned the words on his tongue like a schoolmaster as we sat at the dinner table, him and me and my older brother Kenny.

“Tourists’ll mean more to Vermont than milkers ever have,” Dad said, “Milk you can make a penny off of. But a dimwit from the city can make you a dollar.”

We didn’t believe him, Kenny especially, who was fifteen then and in the middle of a long career of battling with Dad.

“People are gonna drive all the way from Boston to see a museum on a farm in the middle of Vermont,” Kenny said. “I most doubt it.”

Dad didn’t say a word then. The dinner table was sacred, a place where peace was guaranteed, even to Kenny. But later that evening I heard the beating, and took it as a sign of our doom.

It turned out, of course, that Dad was right. He had powers—not just the power to throw bales of hay onto a wagon all day long in the summer sun, but powers Kenny and I could never imagine having for

our own. Dad knew. He dreamed those cars nudging their way into the Upper Valley like calves to the teat, and people with more money than we'd ever seen, and his dream came true. Before long, visitors started driving to Vermont from Boston and New York and Saratoga Springs and Hartford, and the locals who waited at the edge of the road with something to sell never lifted another shovelful of cowshit in their lives.

THE woman from Illinois climbed out of the wagon and went around to her husband's side, pulled him up out of his seat as his face soured with pain. Having to be helped embarrassed him. I saw that, and looked away. Dad trained me to watch visitors, take action to please them in any way that didn't cost money or break his rules. He'd smile, chat with the men about the trout fishing, compliment the ladies on their hats. He'd dote on the children especially, in a way that made me work harder to please him. And when I'd done right, the small reward that came, a nod, maybe, or a squeeze on the shoulder, made me feel special, that's all. I learned to love that feeling.

The man in the pickup gathered himself upright. I stepped toward him and held out my hand.

"Colonel Bill Davis, USMC, retired," the man said. "And this is my wife, Norma." The Colonel wore creased khaki pants and a khaki t-shirt and loafers, a gray brushcut and tobacco-brown skin, tattoos faded to the color of mold. His handshake was soft, although he tried to squeeze. There had been more to him at one time, but sickness had worn him down.

"Tom Grant," I said. Norma held out her hand and I took it. Her thin hair had more lead to it than gold, but her pale blue eyes and the blush to her cheeks made me think she must have been beautiful some years before. She wore khakis like her husband's, a blue cotton blouse, and small red canvas shoes with white laces. She smelled of old fashioned perfume.

"We heard about this place," she said. "But we didn't half believe. We

been on the road since daylight Monday, and we haven't had our dinner yet—”

The Colonel cut her off. “We came a long way to tour your museum,” he said. “If you don't mind, we'd like to get started.”

Norma stood looking at her shoes.

“It's not a matter of whether I mind,” I said. “We closed twenty minutes ago. Hours are ten to five.”

You might think me cruel. They'd come so far and him sick. But the Colonel wasn't the first pushy visitor I'd seen. “Give a tourist an inch and check for your eye teeth,” Dad used to say. “They'll take 'em and your molars to boot.”

I saw my brother in the Colonel's face then, the look Kenny got when he'd run into trouble and didn't understand why. Kenny never got the point—that sometimes you do things just because you should—and he still doesn't. He mostly drinks, and works on the engine of a Chevy or a Ford when he runs short of money for liquor.

I'm not rebellious. A few good beatings taught me to do what's right. So it surprised me to find myself considering some- thing Dad would not have approved of. The look on the Colonel's face, that quiet hurt, softened me somehow—or made me bolder.

“I'll make an exception,” I said. “Once. On account of how far you've come.” I tried to sound stern, but I couldn't help let- ting some kindness leak into my voice.

“Bless you,” Norma Davis said, but as she spoke I heard Dad, too, calling me an idiot, saying this was trouble. Even in the heat, I shivered.

THE Museum of the Americas doesn't look like much from the outside. A long, low-slung clapboard building, more of its washed-out yellow paint peeling than not. A sagging cupola with a cast-iron bell and half a dozen pigeons nested in. As we walked to the entrance, the Davises peered down the length of the ratty old place, and I saw

disappointment in their eyes.

The Colonel pulled out his Zippo lighter and lit up a Pall Mall. “You know you shouldn’t,” Norma said. He ignored her, and she turned my way.

“Emphysema,” she said. “They’ve told him he won’t last long if he keeps this up.”

The Colonel took a slow, deliberate drag, exhaled, took another and tossed the cigarette into the dust. He coughed roughly and spat, wiped carefully around his mouth with an old white handkerchief.

“The sign says three bucks,” he said. “Is that it?” I nodded. His hand shook as he passed me a ten dollar bill. I counted

change from my own wallet and gave him two red paper tickets, each torn in half.

I pushed open the door and reached in to switch on the lights. As we stepped into the room, a cool draft reached out to meet us, and the scent of good, sweet earth tumbled softly down the back of my throat. In my mind, I heard the old man’s words, and I took a deep breath and spoke them like he taught me, not too loud to be irritating, and perfectly clear.

“The building is set sixty inches below ground. The main exhibit is at normal basement level. This allows for natural cooling and helps to preserve the soils.”

The Ball jars sat row on row, freshly polished, brass lids winking, the varnished pine shelves giving off a separate, ambered glow. Inside the jars, heaped two-thirds of the way to the lid, not compacted but held loosely, “to breathe” as Dad used to say, in shades of sulfur and rust, powdered cocoa and cast iron, were the soils of the Americas.

“It’s beautiful,” Norma Davis whispered. People often do.

IN the beginning, the Museum of the Americas had more standard

exhibits, mostly Indian artifacts Dad bought at auction. A Mohawk mask and some arrowheads. An old tom-tom and some antlers tied together with a deerhide thong. Three months after the Museum opened, just as business was starting to pick up, one

Professor James E. Erickson came up from Harvard University on a day when Dad wasn't around, and he talked Kenny into selling all of those things for a hundred dollars. My brother was honestly trying to please Dad. I believe that. But Kenny didn't stop to think how much those old Indian things were really worth, or that they could make us more money in the long run if we kept them around.

I will never forget the whipping Kenny got. I lay in the dark in my bedroom listening, and the worst part came when he couldn't cry any more, and there was only the sound of the strap.

The next morning, Kenny stood at the breakfast table because he could not sit, his food untouched and his face changed somehow, as if he knew something the rest of us did not. I turned away from my father as he spooned oatmeal onto my plate. Dad took it as a challenge.

"You go ahead and sulk, Thomas," he said. "But my job is to teach you things that you'll never forget, by example or by other means. Do you understand why your brother got hell?"

I looked at Kenny, and more than anything I wanted to help him. But through his tears I saw what he was. Someone who begged for sympathy when he'd done something he shouldn't, but would go right back and do wrong again the next chance he got. I, on the other hand, was the good boy, the boy who was learning to run the Museum of the Americas. Like my father, I had the place in my blood.

Dad set a glass of milk beside my oatmeal. "Well, Thomas?" he said. "Yes sir," I whispered. "I understand." Quietly, Kenny began to cry.

Without the Indian relics, the Museum of the Americas fell back on the only exhibit it had left. Soil. You'd be surprised how many people drove out of their way and paid good money to see it. Of course, this

wasn't just soil from the back yard. It came

from Jasper, Alberta and the Yukon and the Alamo. There was soil from Bolivia and Guatemala and from the digging of the Panama Canal. I'm not sure how Dad got all of it, how much he paid. Every so often a package came, peppered with stamps and heavy for its size. The Museum of the Americas might be your only chance to see Colorado River silt from the Grand Canyon of Arizona or black gold from the cotton fields of the Mississippi Delta. People lined up at the Museum door summer after summer.

THE soil in the first jar was pale and sandy, mixed with bits of purple and black. The Colonel read out loud from the history thumbtacked to the shelf below the jar. "Soil of the Eastern Woodlands Indian. From the shell middens of the Wampanoag, raised up at their gatherings before the coming of the White man. Taken at Corn Hill, Truro, Cape Cod. May 13, 1950 by Custer A. Grant, Curator.

"Look around," I said, feeling Dad's voice in my throat. "I'll gladly answer any questions that you have."

I'm shyer than Dad was, quieter, but I do a good job. I picked it up quick, got into the routines, did what I was supposed to and didn't do what I wasn't. And I couldn't help thinking how easy it might have been for Kenny, if only he could've brought himself to do the right thing for once. Why people take the hard road is a mystery to me.

The Davises moved quickly down the row of shelves, hardly bothering to read the histories, which are what make the Museum interesting, if you ask me. "Soil is where life comes from and where death goes to," Dad used to say, "and what man walks on in between."

They finished the exhibits on one side of the room, and moved to the other. By the time they were halfway along the wall, their smiles were gone. Holding hands, they passed down the line, slower and slower until they got to the last exhibit, soil from the Falkland Islands that a British soldier sent from the war. They stopped and stood.

"Mr. Grant," the Colonel said. He took a weary breath. "Is this all you

have?" He stood at parade rest, his hands clasped behind his back, his feet spread slightly apart.

"Yessir," I said, irritated. "Soil. I told you that before you came in."

"It isn't that," Norma said. Her voice sounded hopeless. "Do you have any more samples besides the ones on the shelves?"

"Oh Lord, yes," I said, feeling dumb. Dad never squawked when I made a mistake with a visitor, but he always knew.

"We're interested in something particular," the Colonel said.

"Yessir?" "Soil from the jungle. We wondered if you had that, Mr.

Grant. From the Amazon. From Brazil." "Yessir," I said. "We have Amazon soil," and I recalled Dad

saying how people go for the exotic over the ordinary every time. It took me a minute to find the jar, high up on a shelf in the back, the soil black as India ink, a spiderweb of moisture creeping up the inside of the glass.

"That's the stuff," the Colonel whispered. Norma came forward into the little room; all three of us crowded together amongst the dusty shelves and bottles, beneath a single yellow bulb.

Slowly, the Colonel's hand squeezed the rim of the jar. He struggled for breath, and after a snap of his wrist that I could almost hear, the lid began to turn and rise, scraping softly against the spiraling ridge of glass.

And then the smell. The Colonel lifted the lid and it poured out, rich and wet and full with life. "Hmm," he said, and Norma and I said it back. We stood there for a moment, and I closed my eyes, the wonderful smell of that soil filling me, and then I heard the lid slowly spin closed.

The Colonel sat the jar back down on the shelf. He looked

straight into my eyes with his own, resolute and honest. "What would

you take for it," he said. He nodded at the jar. I answered him the only way I could. "I wouldn't take any-

thing. It's not for sale." "Just tell us what you want for it," Norma said. "We'll pay." I cleared my throat. Most people would have gotten the

point, but the Colonel went on. "It sure would mean a lot to us, mister," he said, in the kind

of wheedling tone that a man of his stature shouldn't use. "Didn't you hear me?" I said. "I won't repeat myself." I shut

off the light and closed the storeroom door. They followed me out silently, and we all stood for a moment in the sun. Just when I started to feel embarrassed about the harsh way I'd spoken, the Colonel asked if they could camp in the parking lot for a couple of days before moving on. Dad wouldn't have done it, but the guilt moved me.

"That's fine," I told the Colonel. "Two nights, but no more."

That evening, as the dark came on, I spied on them from the kitchen window. They brought a lantern, a folding table and chairs out of the camper, set up a gas cook stove and soon I could smell some kind of a stew. The lantern hollowed a honey-colored space out of the night that seemed to be made for just them. They were making my place into their own. Dad would have considered it black sin.

EARLY the next morning, Norma Davis knocked at the back door. I opened it and she stood there, holding a plastic pail. Beyond her, I could see the Colonel, sitting on the Scotty's wrought-iron doorstep, smoking a Pall Mall in the already slaking heat.

"I'm sorry to bother you," she said, "I was wondering if I could get some water from your outside spigot."

"Sure," I said. "A dollar fifty a bucket is what I usually charge."

That was Dad talking, but before I could take it back, she dug six quarters out of her snap change purse. I walked around the house and turned on the spigot. It ran slow, and I stood near her while the bucket filled, looking up the valley for a sign of rain.

“It’s not just for ourselves that we want that dirt. It’s for our boy. Daniel.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “Because I can’t sell it. My father left it in his will that way, and I can’t let any of it go.” Purely speaking, this was a lie. My father trusted that I knew what to do with his legacy. He did not have to write things down.

“When he turned eighteen, Daniel joined the Corps,” Norma went on. “It was his father’s idea, mostly. The boy finished boot camp and took his thirty day leave. He packed up and went on a vacation to the Amazon.

“For two weeks, we didn’t hear a thing. Then it was four weeks, and his return flight came and went. We got a letter, saying that he wasn’t coming back. I seen it comin’, but Bill, he didn’t. He promised never to forgive the boy, and he hasn’t. Even after we got the letter sayin’ that Daniel was dead. It’s been twelve years, now.”

“So your husband wants something to remember your son by.”
“There’s more to it than that.” Water flowed over the rim of the bucket, staining the dry

grass dark. “We were sent here,” she said. “Because Bill’s dying.” “A jar of dirt won’t cure emphysema.” “I know it,” she said. “Bill always wanted to travel out

West, and with his condition, we figured we better do it soon. In Tucson, on the street, we met this Indian. He said he was a seer, and I wouldn’t have believed him, but he proved it. He knew us, somehow, knew about Daniel and Bill. And he knew this place. He sent us, Mr. Grant. He said Bill should steep a

tea from that Amazon soil and drink it, and he’d have peace over Daniel, and Daniel peace over him. So we got in the truck and came

here.”

When I was a boy, we had our God. He raised his temple and charged visitors by the head and sat across from us at the dinner table and said Grace. “If God blessed us, what did Ma die for,” Kenny would say, and Dad would beat him to a rag. And a week later, Kenny’d say it again, and get the same.

“Listen, Missus,” I said. “This is a museum, nothing else. It can’t straighten out the mistake your son made, no matter what some medicine man says.”

“You never knew Daniel, Mr. Grant,” she said. “What makes you think he made a mistake?” She took up her bucket and walked toward the Scotty, the water where it spilled raising tiny explosions of dust.

THAT night, rain threatened. Thick, hot bolts of grit-laden air rattled the bedroom windowscreens, and I lay on my bed for hours, trying to sleep. I closed my eyes, and a vision of Dad emerged from the darkness. He stood at the entrance to the Museum in his creased black trousers and his starched white shirt, his back straight with pride, and I heard the joy-ful timbre of his voice, the love, even, for what he had built there, as he spoke to a group of visitors, led them inside. He turned toward me and I could not face him, and then he turned away.

The telephone startled me awake at a quarter past three. I pulled on some dungarees and a shirt, flipped on the hallway light and went down to the kitchen.

“Tom,” a man’s voice said. “Yessir.” “It’s Jim Fletcher at the State Police barracks at Harrisville.

We got Kenneth over here. Driving under the influence, same as last time, no accident, nobody hurt. He says he wants you to come down and pick him up.”

From the window, I saw the Scotty trailer, its tiny windows dark and its painted steel skin glowing softly in the moonlight. The Davises were

sleeping, dreaming that the Colonel could drink a tea of Amazon soil and be shed of his agony, of what his son had chosen and done. But a life is not that easy to change, whether it's your own or somebody else's. It involves work, and you can't go begging for miracles.

"You just hang onto him," I told Jim Fletcher. "He knows better than to have you call here, and for all I care he can sit there for the rest of his life." I slammed the receiver down into its stirrup and went out onto the porch to get some air.

THE breeze had died and the heat risen again, but I smelled water; it came from nowhere in the dusty heat. I turned and walked out into the yard, wondering if I tasted the first wisps of a rain, but the storm had blown over, and the stars shone clearly against pure blackness, and not even the most distant glimpse of heat lightning paled the sky.

Yet around the doorstep, the air hung like clean, wet bed-sheets, just pinned to the line. It seemed like nature had moved out of turn somehow, and I might have gone to bed believing that, strange as it was, but then I noticed the sound of water hitting earth, and I realized that the Colonel's wife had been at the spigot again and left it partways on. Dad was right, and he had always had been. People would take advantage; people were selfish, inconsiderate, and small.

I was halfway across the parking lot before I could stop myself. I jumped on the corrugated steel stoop of the trailer and hammered on the door, echoes loping back and forth across the lot, from the trailer to the Museum of the Americas and the rocky hills beyond. The camper leaned on its keel, and the door tilted open. In the doorway stood Norma Davis, draped in an old cotton robe.

"Turn on the light," I said. Blood churned in my eardrums, and my skin burned hot.

"Mr. Grant," she said. "My husband is sleeping."

"I do not give a God damn. I want you off my property, and I do not want to wait until morning for that to happen. Turn on the light."

Norma switched on a battery lantern, creating a pale yellow dome of illumination that left smudges of blackness at the high and low corners of the trailer. I saw clean dishes stacked beside the sink, a tiny table piled with clothes. The lantern's reflection shone in the pail of water that sat on the trailer floor.

The Colonel slept on a bunk folded down from the wall. I could hear his faint breathing. He lay covered in a blanket, and only someone dying could be cold on a night like this, but that did not lessen my anger or bring any shame.

"I heard your phone ring," Norma Davis said. "Late night calls often mean trouble."

"There is no trouble," I answered. "Other than that I have made myself, against my better judgment."

"I wish you wouldn't talk so loud," Norma said. "We'll leave in the morning, like I told you, and we don't mean to bother you at all."

"But you are bother," I said. "There is nothing else to you but that."

"I paid for the water," she said sullenly. "I left the money inside the door."

"I do not want your money. I want your departure."

"You'll wake him," she said. She moved farther into the doorway, as if to push me out. But I was on my own land, and I knew the rules.

"Waking your husband is my intention," I said. I considered hitting her then, to get her to step back, but I saw movement in the back corner of the trailer, heard bedclothes rustle, and I stopped myself. The deck of the trailer shifted once more.

The Colonel slowly rose up on his elbows. His hair stood at angles to itself like a stormbeaten hedge. He poked around on the night table for his eyeglasses and a dry cough came, a convulsion, and the eyeglasses clattered to the floor. He blinked and stared in the cobwebby light.

“Danny,” he said to me. “Son, is that you?”

Once more, I recognized my brother in the Colonel’s face. But this time, I saw just a bit of the real Kenny Grant, a person who had made mistakes—not on purpose, maybe, but because he was human, plain and simple, because he came from earth and would go back to earth and, and in his hurry to live in between, might act without thinking something through the whole way. And then I understood. It was not up to me to give salvation, or to withhold it. It was not up to me to judge.

Dad would never have forgiven what I was about to do. “Stay until morning,” I told Norma Davis. “But that’s all. I don’t like people on the property. That Museum door has never been locked. And I don’t expect to start locking it now.”

“We’re not thieves,” she said.

“I didn’t say that. It’s just that with me asleep, you could get into that storeroom and take whatever you wanted. I don’t mean that you would. But the opportunity presents itself. Do you understand me, Mrs. Davis?”

She smiled and began to thank me, but I hushed her with a look.

“Be gone in the morning,” I said. She closed the camper door.

DAD always said that for every night a visitor camped, you’d spend two days cleaning up after him. Yet this once, it seemed,

he was wrong. When I woke the next morning, hardly a sign of the Colonel and his wife remained; even the Scotty’s tracks in the parking lot had been taken by the wind. It was afternoon before I noticed the visitors had left something behind. The Ball jar leaned over on the grass near the spigot. Soil of the Amazon Basin, the label read. Collector unknown. A tiny puddle of water, no more than a tablespoon and speckled with tiny flakes of soil, lay in the bottom of the jar.

I picked the jar up, unscrewed the lid, and put my lip to the rim. The

scent that rose was not of the Amazon, but of the entire history of my life. Cowshit and dollar bills, visitors from Boston and New York and Saratoga Springs and Hartford, raised welts and Dad's dinner table, betrayal and fear.

I swirled the water around for a minute, watching the particles of soil drift, spin, and collide, moving in courses beyond their control. Then I tipped the jar upward and drank. The water felt cool and sweet on my tongue.