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WATERVILET, Mich. The House of David sect had a slight problem. During the mid-1900s the Christian organization operated a baseball team, vegetarian restaurants and even ran the world's largest miniature railroad out of Eden Springs Amusement Park near downtown Benton Harbor, Mich.

But there were no raves with these Daves.

They were celibate.

No one could pass down their lore. And that's where Chris Siriano came in. He operates the new House of David Museum in Watervilet, about 10 minutes east of Benton Harbor.

"The House of David history needed to be saved," Siriano said during a tour of his definitive museum. "It's been an important part of this area for almost 100 years. I wanted to set up a museum where the House of David could be researched - schoolchildren, college students or anyone else could come in to appreciate what they were about."

Siriano's museum has more than 2,500 House of David items, including 1,000 rare photographs, 700 pieces of artwork, more than 100 wooden souvenirs and several original House of David baseball and basketball uniforms. Some of the smaller pieces are for sale.

The House of David was organized as a commonwealth, according to the apostolic plan (Acts 2-3), in spring, 1903. The group claimed to be one of the Biblical lost tribes of Israel. Founder Benjamin Purnell believed the upcoming millennium would usher in the new dawning of the Garden of Eden on the site of the since-demolished Eden Springs Amusement Park.

"Get Ready," as Michigan's Rare Earth sang in 1970.

By 1916 there were nearly 1,000 men and women living in the Israelite colony. They concluded the old world would be destroyed once Christ's elect 12,000 members from each of the 12 tribes of Israel gathered in Benton Harbor. And a thousand years of harmony and tranquility would begin.

House of David members turned in all their worldly possessions to a commonwealth fund, from which they received support in sickness and in health, and contributed labor according to their capabilities.

Their motto was to look forward and not backward, which is why the members' backs are to the cameras in some pictures.

Most of the men never had haircuts or shaved. They wore long hair and a beard because Jesus did. The What? Where? When? Why? and How? booklet, published by the House of David in 1931 pointed out that "Jesus, being a Nazarite, never transgressed his Father's commands."

The House of David was built with shingle guys and gals. To engage in sex would cross the word of Jesus. The members believed they could only have children after the millennium.

Just like what I'm thinking.

Siriano said there are six House of David members alive today. They are in their late 80s and early 90s and still live in the old mansions that housed the membership. Siriano talks to them three times a week.

One House of David member, 88-year-old George Anderson, once faced Hall of Fame baseball pitcher Satchel Paige during the summer and guarded Meadowlark Lemon of the Harlem Globetrotters in winter basketball games. Made up only of House of David members, the baseball and basketball teams barnstormed across the Midwest, playing pick-up teams and all-star aggregations like the Globetrotters and Negro League All-Star squads.

The House of David baseball stadium was located on Empire Avenue in Benton Harbor. The outfield fence remains today, while the dirt diamond has been transformed into a House of David Trailer Park. The trailer park is operated by Paul Johnson, the last person who joined the House of David (in 1953).

Siriano, 37, is a Benton Harbor native.

He remembers how his parents took him to Eden Springs to ride miniature trains and race cars. "That's about all that was left when I was a child," Siriano said on a dark winter Saturday afternoon. "The vaudeville shows were gone. The bands and orchestras were gone. The baseball teams quit playing in the 1950s because the guys got too old. The zoo was closed.

"They still participated in the food market in Benton Harbor, and the House of David still had their own hotel and vegetarian restaurants through the beginning of the 1970s. I loved their ice cream. They made their own ice cream, and they patented their waffle cones. Everyone went there to try their world-famous waffle cones. It was such a unique taste."

The House of David compound is located on nearly 100 acres of land on Britian Avenue, off Michigan 139. What remains is closed to the public. Siriano said, "The hotel and restaurant are still standing, but they're in disrepair and

ready to be razed. The train tracks still in place. (Walt Disney once bought one of the miniature trains for his studio.) It took three years for them to build a miniature stone house for kids. They used thousands of hand-carved stones cut like diamonds, and that's still there. But it's all private, and the remaining members don't like people poking around."

So, Siriano's museum affords one of the best ways to get in touch with the House of David. Museum visitors can buy an original House of David amusement park pennant for \$25, an original packet of postcards for \$20 and reproduction House of David baseball jerseys from 1931 and 1935 for \$125 each.

One of the collection's most precious items is a 1932 red "midget auto," one of 14 original cars from the amusement park. The amusement park was particularly popular during the Depression, when visitors - including many Chicagoans - could go there to have fun without spending lots of money.

Siriano tapped the midget auto as he celebrated the fact it was built from old bed frames and used parts from Model A's and Model T's. "Those cars became famous," Siriano said. "People enjoy that when they come here. And the baseball stuff is popular. House of David baseball memorabilia is super-hard to find because they barnstormed with the Negro Leagues and they are considered part of that history."

Siriano even has a 6-foot-tall 1920s groundup fishscale finish and handcarved teakwood column that came from a float the sect entered in Southwest Michigan's annual Blossom Parade. The House of David entered the parade every spring. And every spring their float won.

"In fact, in the 1950s they were asked to take a couple of years off to try and encourage the parade's corporate sponsors to continue to spend money, and maybe they'd be awarded first place," Siriano chuckled. "This is one of the last pieces of big statuary that's left anywhere.

"The House of David made a lot of sculptures, but they kept them in the upstairs of their art department. In 1965 their art department burned to the ground, so it's unusual that something that big from the art department got out into the public." Siriano found the statue at an estate sale northeast of Watervilet. He makes no money from the House of David Museum, although he accepts donations. Siriano draws his income from his antique business.

Some people who live around Watervilet and Benton Harbor don't exactly view the House of David in the spirit of Disneyland magic. House of David founder Benjamin Purnell was a traveling preacher, and for a while he was a broom-maker in Richmond, Ind. He loved music, particularly Hawaiian steel guitars, Marimbas and African-American spirituals. Benjamin was known to ride around the House of David property on a white horse, wearing a flowering white robe and jewel-encrusted sombrero. He met his wife Mary in Ohio.

According to a 1953 Chicago Sun-Times article, Benjamin - as he was known around the House of David - said a dove perched on his shoulder and directed him to Benton Harbor. That suggested divine intervention.

In 1927, allegations of fraud and sexual misconduct were made against Benjamin, which led to the most celebrated civil trial in Berrien County history. The case ended with a guilty verdict on charges of teaching and practicing perjury, but the decision was later reversed on appeal.

Benjamin died of diabetes and tuberculosis 11 days after the civil suit's conclusion. He was 66. After his death, his wife started the competing City of David, virtually across the street from the House of David.

The House of David sect, of course, believed the chosen dead will rise again, so Benjamin's body lies mummified in a glass-covered coffin in a chapel in the still-standing Diamond House (so named because in the sun it sparkled from the stones and minerals from which it was built). Only members can view his coffin.

"When the others died, their bodies were placed in Crystal Springs Cemetery in Benton Harbor," Siriano said. "There's no headstones; a few had a number on a stone, but most of them are in unmarked graves."

So for now, the most passionate tribute to the colorful sect can be found in southwest Michigan. It could make for a memorable pre-millennium pilgrimage.