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HOUSTON, Tx.----There's a nice collection of souvenir postcards in the lobby of one of the most unusual **museums** in America. However, you might not want to write "Wish You Were Here" when you send a greeting from the National **Museum** of **Funeral** History in an industrial park on the north side of **Houston**.

This place is not for everyone.

But everyone will be part of this history.

When I arrive at the **museum** I can't take my eye off mortuary students in powder blue smocks getting ready for an embalming lesson. The **museum** is adjacent to the Commonwealth Institute of **Funeral** Service. Visitors walk by the private mortuary school to enter the 22,000-square-foot **museum**.

Robert Boetticher is volunteer president of the nonprofit **museum**.

He is also a local **funeral** director. The **museum** was founded in 1992 by Robert Waltrip, a **Houston funeral** director who is the largest operator of **funeral** homes in North America. (More than 1,300 **funeral** homes and 500 cemeteries).

They do everything big in **Houston**.

But if you want to learn about Civil War embalming (the beginning of embalming in America) or tour a replica casket factory from the early 1990s, this is the place for you. Life is short. Travel is fun! How else would I have learned that Dr. Thomas Holmes, "The Father of U.S. Embalming," also invented root beer? I'll never have another root beer again.

"The history of **funeral** service is disappearing," Boetticher says during an interview at the **museum**. "You will never see a lot of the artifacts in here again. A lot of the vehicles here are hand-carved and made out of wood. You will never see those again. This is also an educational center, talking about our culture and history and

Boetticher does not smile at his deadly pun.

My favorite part of the museum is the collection of 40 original **funeral** cards: Eva Gabor, Francis Albert Sinatra, Dean Martin, Joe DiMaggio, Marilyn Monroe, John Franklin Candy, and best of all, mobster John Gotti with his picture (circa 2002 from the Papavero **Funeral** Home, 72-27 Grand Ave. Maspeth, N.Y.). There's "A Celebration of Life" from Wendy's founder David Thomas, whose **funeral** card read:

*"A good reputation is more valuable than the most expensive perfume in the same way the day you die is better than the day you were born."*

The world of **funeral** directors are as tight as Joan Rivers' face.

When Boetticher hears of a famous person's **funeral**, he reaches out to a fellow **funeral** director for a card. "But what we put out are only the items that have been made public," he says. "We do not violate the family's privacy." The **funeral** card collection is near "**Funerals** of the Famous," a collection of archival photographs and stories. I learn guests were asked not to wear black at Judy Garland's June 27, 1969, **funeral**. Her casket had been fitted with a glass top. There's also a copy of the **funeral** bill for President George Washington. The grand total was \$77.

Boetticher is a Los Angeles native who has lived in **Houston** since 1992. His uncle was Chicago born movie director Budd Boetticher ("The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond," "Wings of the Hawk"). "When I was in Los Angeles I did a lot of high-profile **funerals**," he says. "Then I went to Jackson, Wyo., where I bought a **funeral** home and was elected county coroner."

How does the **museum** approach the sensitive topic of death?

"We didn't open this to make it a gruesome place where all you see are pictures of tragedies and things like that," Boetticher says. "We wanted to talk about the different aspects of **funeral** service that used to be done and is changing for the future."

**Funeral** directors always try to think outside the box, and living proof is the **museum's** 1916 Packard **Funeral** Bus. The only surviving vehicle of its kind, the mahogany bus was originally mounted on a truck chassis. The bus had a Packard four-cylinder engine, made for trucks and

automobiles. The bus traveled 15 mph. Created to partially supplant the lengthy [funeral](#) procession, the bus held a casket, pallbearers and 20 mourners.

The bus was initially owned by a San Francisco [funeral](#) home. Bad idea. There are lots of hills in San Francisco. On its first run, the bus was climbing up a hill to the cemetery when the weight caused the bus to tip back. The pallbearers tumbled over mourners and the casket overturned. The bus was immediately removed from service.

According to the [museum](#), for the next 40 years a ranch hand turned the bus into a house. When a California [funeral](#) director discovered the bus, he had it remounted on a Packard chassis. Current owner Robert Larrabee (Merchant [Funeral](#) Home, Clarkston, Wash.) returned the bus to running condition. Otherwise it remains unrestored. The hard rubber tires are original. The windows and interior design are of Art Nouveau period and the radiator and headlamps are brass. The [museum](#) does an excellent job of presenting the bus. There is no velvet rope around the artifact. Visitors can peek inside the car and catch the musty smell.

Looking for a Chicago connection in the [museum](#)?

Try the weird eggshell-colored casket for three.

Visitors who look closely at the open bronze-plated casket will see it was made by Central Metallic Casket Co., 2333-43 Logan Blvd., in Chicago for the Hood Mortuary in Durango, Colo. The [museum](#) keeps the names and locations out of the story because it is so bizarre, but in the 1930s a couple's small child died. The parents were so depressed, they planned for the husband to murder the wife and then have the husband commit suicide. The couple actually outlined their plan to the mortuary owner. They requested a special casket to hold husband, wife and child. The casket was to be shipped to their previous residence where the child was to be disinterred and placed between the parents for final burial.

Of course, the couple changed their minds.

They relocated to another state. Some 20 years later the wife wrote a letter to Hood Mortuary. She said her husband had died and she wanted a refund on the three-way casket. The [funeral](#) home had new owners and were unable to give her the refund.

The [museum](#)'s eclectic collection is beginning to draw nationwide interest. The [museum](#) consulted on the pilot for the hit HBO series "Six Feet Under." When Sally Field did the 1995 miniseries "Woman of Independent Means," she visited the [museum](#) and picked the hearses to be used in the film. All but one of the [museum](#)'s 21-vehicle fleet are in working condition.

A very impressive gift shop includes solid chocolate candy bars shaped like caskets, "Any Day Above Ground Is a Good One" T-shirts and fascinating reading material such as "The History of Embalming" and "The Illustrated History of the American Ambulance (1900-2002)." Proceeds benefit the [museum](#).

There's plenty of room to expand in the spacious one-level [museum](#).

Boetticher says, "We have a lot of items that aren't out yet. We have items from the Oklahoma bombing. We were getting ready to start that exhibit when 9/11 happened so we pulled back. We weren't focusing on who did it or why they did it, it was about how the rescue workers from Oklahoma and all around the country merged into one spot."

The [museum](#) also has the largest collection of Ghana hand-carved coffins outside of Ghana, West Africa. The 12 coffins resemble forms representing the lives of the deceased, such as a fish, a canoe and a Mercedes-Benz. The Kane Quaye-crafted coffins appeared at the Chicago Cultural Center in 1996. Now they are a permanent installation at the National [Museum of Funeral](#) History.

And as far as Boetticher knows, the [museum](#) has the only "Snow White" casket in existence. A couple of years ago Boetticher was helping clean out the upstairs of one of Waltrip's [funeral](#) homes.

The tiny casket was found on a rear shelf. "After 'Snow White' came out in 1938 [funeral](#) companies made a 'Snow White' casket for a child," Boetticher explains. "At a [funeral](#) convention Hedy Waltrip (Waltrip's grandmother) bought this. It is in the same shape when she bought it. These caskets never took off. We don't know if it was built as a novelty or for children. But I did research on 'Snow White.' In every one of Walt Disney's classic animated films, he used death. He knew that death sold.

"But he didn't believe in [funerals](#) himself."

Just like a baseball fan who has his or her favorite era, [funeral](#) directors have their preferred niche. "My favorite is the Victorian era," Boetticher says. "I have all my Victorian clothes. So

when we go out (with the classic hearses), we dress in all Victorian. Back then there was a lot of dignity. The [funeral](#) director, which he is today, was a leader. They used to have three days of heavy mourning period. We don't do that anymore. Just seeing the undertaker standing out there with the big top hat and a black hearse ... it's hard to describe. It's fun. I played the undertaker in the Sally Field movie."

After a couple of hours at the [museum](#), I bid farewell to Boetticher -- not forever, I hope. I promise I will not fill my report with too many tired lines like how people are dying to get in the [museum](#). He still does not smile. "There's two main phrases people use when they walk in the door," Boetticher says. "First it's, 'Wow!' Then it's 'Look at this!'," and Boetticher speaks with a twinkle in his eye. His passion makes the room come alive.

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