

June 27, 2004----

BENTONVILLE, Ark. --Wal-Mart is known for big values, but I sure got more than I bargained for when I was locked into the Wal-Mart Visitor's Center on the Bentonville town square.

Longtime Wal-Mart employee Carolyn "Boo" Randolph met me at the museum to all things Sam Walton on the Friday of Memorial Day weekend. When she left around 5 p.m., she locked the door behind her. Curator Rex Horner had left his keys in his pickup truck, parked on the town square. He did not have any spare keys. Neither did Wal-Mart communications manager Sharon Weber, who was on hand to assist with any difficult questions.

My main question was "HOW DO WE GET OUT OF HERE?"

Instead, Weber briefed me on the 2000 Ashley Judd movie "Where the Heart Is." The movie is about a young woman stranded at an Oklahoma Wal-Mart with \$7.77. Then Weber said, "I don't think we have any food." Horner began working the phones. He looked stressed out. Weber volunteered to show me pictures of her family's recent vacation. She said she was on the verge of having her 12th grandchild. She would not tell me her age. I told her I would be turning 49 in a week, hopefully before I got out of the Wal-Mart Visitor's Center. She said, "You're older than me."

And then she laughed.

After 45 minutes Horner finally tracked down a Wal-Mart security officer at corporate headquarters in Bentonville. He let us out.

Bentonville (pop. 19,000) is not high on my list of places to be stuck on a holiday weekend. The visitor's center is surrounded by irony. Although the town square features a new fountain and amateur bluegrass musicians who gather on summer Friday nights, a desolate atmosphere is created by empty storefronts and lack of pedestrians. It was around 7 p.m. when I got out of the museum and the only sign of retail life was the Station Cafe ((479) 273-0553, check out the 6-ounce, \$4 steak burger), next door to the visitor's center. The emergence of Wal-Mart helped suck the life out of small downtowns like Bentonville.

Bentonville also is named after U.S. Sen. Thomas Hart Benton. His grandnephew was regionalist painter Thomas Hart Benton, a champion of individualistic expression. You can't find something as pedestrian as Playboy magazine at Wal-Mart.

But the Wal-Mart Visitor's Center is a 10 in the world of roadside museums.

Although it calls itself a visitor's center, I reckon that's just folksy Wal-Mart speak. It truly is a museum, which opened in 1990 and draws 50,000 visitors a year. It is on the site of Walton's 5 & 10 store that Walton opened in 1950 and closed in 1967. The impressive gift shop in the museum lobby retains the dime store's original floor. Walton's 5 & 10 was originally Harrison's variety store.

Actually, Walton's first store was a Ben Franklin franchise in Newport, northeast of Little Rock. Between 1945 and 1950, Walton turned his store into the top Ben Franklin unit in Arkansas. He was so successful he lost his lease when the building owner turned the store over to his son. Walton started over in Bentonville.

It wasn't until 1962 that Walton opened his first Wal-Mart, in Rogers, five miles east of Bentonville. The store opened on July 2 and an archival 1962 Wal-Mart ad in the museum promised "22 Depts...You must save at Wal-Mart. Our policy guarantees it." The building still stands today as a flea market.

The museum highlights run from Walton's scratched yet trusty 1979 Ford custom pickup (with 65,627 miles) to the hula skirt Walton wore down Wall Street after the company reached a record 8 percent pre-tax profit in 1984. The industry average was 3 percent. Walton promised his employees he would hula down Wall Street if the pre-tax profit hit 8 percent.

There's also the 1942 bridal gown from Walton's wife, Helen, and a recreation of Walton's office that was moved from corporate headquarters just after the dime store impresario died and found pennies in heaven. Walton's office bookshelf includes *Closing of the American Mind*, *The Game of Business* and *McDonald's (Behind the Arches)*. The museum touches on Walton's few flops, such as the late 1980s Hypermart USAs. Walton opened his first Hypermart in a Dallas suburb. It was 220,000 square feet -- or the size of five football fields, side by side. To me, a Hypermart sounds more like a shock treatment than a shopping experience.

An impressive Wal-Mart gift shop has been established in the museum lobby. Before you walk into the museum, a sign updates the number of Wal-Mart stores open to date: 2,981 during my visit, which did not include Mexico, super centers or Sam's Clubs. "We were fairly small back in 1979," said Johnson, who started with the company in its training department. "Sam would come around to the offices and get his coffee like everybody else -- standing in line. Sam always thought he could improve upon what he had. He always looked for things people were doing correctly in other stores or chains. That's how the people greeter started. He saw that at a store in Louisiana. He was a big fan of K-Mart. He always tried to look at the things they did right."

Johnson grew up in Gideon, Mo., (pop. 2,000) in the boothill part of the state that hangs in to Arkansas. She was tagged with her nickname "Boo" after her siblings

teased her about being a crybaby as a child. I thought she earned the name "Boo" for locking visitors inside the museum.

She moved to Bentonville when her husband, Larry, got a job with the school system in Bentonville. He also snagged a part-time job as a weekend truck driver for Wal-Mart. Today, more than 1.5 million Wal-Mart employees worldwide work for a \$256 billion-a-year company -- that's greater than the gross domestic product of Switzerland. However, according to a recent congressional study released by U.S. Rep. George Miller, Wal-Mart stores cost federal taxpayers more than \$2,100 per employee to cushion low-wage levels. For example, for a store with 200 employees, the report estimates taxpayers each year pay \$36,000 for free and reduced-cost school lunches. See the report at <http://edworkforce.house.gov/democrats/WALMARTREPORT.pdf> This report is not in the museum.

I drove into Bentonville on Walton Boulevard. I listened to country music on 'SAM-FM' (98.3). And I visited the visitor's center on the eve of the annual Wal-Mart shareholder's meeting. "We're expecting 15,000 to 18,000 people," Weber said. "K-mart just had their first shareholder's meeting in three years--they had 100 people." Horner added that 1,300 international shareholders were going to tour the museum on the Monday after my visit. I began to understand the Wal-Mart struggle of being so big while projecting a notion so small.

Sam Walton didn't throw much away.

That's how the museum has its eclectic roots in the packrat tradition of the Roy Rogers and Dale Evans Museum, in Branson, Mo. At the Wal-Mart Visitor's Center you can see a big box of keys to assorted doors in Walton's life. This makes my baseball bobblehead collection look normal.

The last wallet of Walton's life can be seen, complete with its Oklahoma and Texas hunting licenses. There's a souvenir "Slammin' Sam Walton/Discount Champion of the World" jacket Walton wore when he was in a fantasy boxing match with Sugar Ray Leonard. Walton employees--or associates in Wal-Mart terminology---also saved things throughout the years, such as early 1990s baseball caps which read: "When I die bury me at Wal-Mart so my wife will come visit me." And if you look close enough, you can catch a young "Boo" Randolph as "Shirley Shrinkage" in a Wal-Mart promotional shtick.

Visitors can see the 1950 grand opening advertisement for the Bentonville store a yellowed newspaper which Walton saved. The ad is partially burned from a fire in Walton's home. The ad is positioned next to promotional Walton 5 & 10 fly swatters. Even wacky Wal-Mart testimony is on display, such as the customer who returned an outdoor thermometer because it "never had the correct time." Another highlight is the Presidential Medal of Freedom that President George H.W. Bush gave Walton on March 17, 1992. Bush came to Bentonville to give Walton America's highest civilian award in the auditorium of corporate headquarters where Walton

gave his Saturday morning pep talks. Walton died three weeks after he was given the award. Horner said, "Sam was very involved in putting the museum together."

Walton and his family lived in Bentonville, "as the crow flies" from the store, according to Johnson. Their house was designed by E. Fay Jones of Fayetteville, Ark., a student of Frank Lloyd Wright. (Jones also designed the Thorncrown Chapel in Eureka Springs, Ark., deploying more than 6,000 panes of glass.) "They lived on a country lane so you can't see the house from the street," Johnson said. Some pictures of the house appear in 'The Walton Wing' of the museum. Another part of the museum pays tribute to Moon Pies (graham crackers dipped into marshmallow and coated with chocolate). For many years one of Walton's top volume producing items was the Moon Pie. Johnson admitted, "They didn't do well in the northern states. They didn't know quite what they were."

Some northerners may ask about Moon Pies, but Horner said the most common question visitors ask is 'Where did the squiggly come from?' The squiggly is part of "The Wal-Mart Cheer." While on a 1975 trip to Korea to visit a tennis ball factory, Walton saw his first company cheer. He liked it so much he created a cheer for the regular Wal-Mart Saturday associate meetings. The cheer goes: "Give me a W, give me an A, give me an L, Give me a Squiggly, Give me an M, Give me an A, Give me an R, Give me a T.... What's that spell? "Wal-Mart!." The "squiggle" denotes the star between Wal and Mart on the store sign. Weber then squiggled her booty back and forth.

This is when I knew the drive to Bentonville was worth every minute.

Walton graduated from the University of Missouri in 1940 with a major in economics. He was president of the Burrall Bible Society and president of the Senior Men's Honor Society. Once Walton settled in Bentonville, he led Bible classes and taught Sunday school at the First Presbyterian Church of Bentonville.

In American suburbia and now in Chicago, the grass roots flavors of Walton are as hard to find as a meadow in a museum. The mere mention of Wal-Mart evokes a passionate reaction, good or bad. There is no squiggle room.

Small town Wal-Marts are more loyal than urban Wal-Marts.

"People show how they feel by where they shop," Weber said. "When our customers read an unpopular article in the paper, they go, 'That's not my Wal-Mart.' Our sources are very grass roots. In small communities, Wal-Marts are very much gathering places. Senior citizens play bingo once a week in many of our stores. You go on Friday night to see your friends. People get married at Wal-Marts. (I might add that well-lit Wal-Mart parking lots are hot spots for motorhomers.) Our agenda is very much bringing every day low prices to our customers and doing the right things in our community. That's what our goal was in 1962 and it continues to be." The Wal-Mart Visitor's Center does a superb job of honoring that mission as

the world spins around the small-town square.

FINALLY, The Wal-Mart Visitor's Center and museum is not always humble.

One exhibit in the small museum points out: "To call Wal-Mart's stock performance phenomenal would be an understatement. The first offering on Oct. 1, 1970, was \$16.50 per share. It was listed on the New York Stock Exchange on Aug. 25, 1972, at \$33 per share.

"Wal-Mart stock has split two-for-one 11 times since the first offering in 1970. That means a person buying 100 shares for \$1,650 in 1970 would today (as of March 1999) have 204,800 shares worth over \$12.2 million based on the \$16.50 per share price."

That is a world of Wal-Mart.