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MADISON, Wis. -- One way to ensure a good road trip is to make snap decisions, and the Stuffed Squirrel and Chipmunk Museum is a tribute to those who zipped when they should have zagged.

The museum, which rests in the basement of the Cress Funeral Home on the west side of Madison, features a roadkill rodent collection that was beautifully restored by late Woodruff, Wis., taxidermist Vito Marchino.

Curator Sam Sanfillippo is a semi-retired funeral director who is a partner at Cress. Sanfillippo is an avid outdoorsman, too, which is why his museum also includes moose, nearly 600 mounted fish, a caribou, a stuffed turkey, three blond raccoons and a rare four-legged goose.

This is where wildlife never dies.

Sanfillippo, 85, designed and hand-built intricate dioramas for the animals, including a Western bar scene where squirrels are dancing cheek-to-cheek and playing a piano. One squirrel is hoisting a mug of beer, while one is passed out on the bar. In another diorama, a squirrel rides a mechanical horse into eternity.

He titled a long circus midway scene "The Woodland Fair."

Chipmunks are on their hind legs taking tickets (admission: five seeds) and carrying balloons. Three more chipmunks are standing on back legs and wearing yellow hula skirts. They are on a stage with an awning that reads "Topless Girlie Revue." In another room of the not-so-hollowed halls, Sanfillippo has dressed a stuffed badger in University of Wisconsin gear, including a white baseball cap. (Not to fear, cheeseheads: The dead badger was imported from Wyoming.)

Lisa Stone is curator of the Roger Brown Study Collection of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In 1993, she co-wrote the book *Sacred Spaces and Other Places*, which touches on the art of taxidermy as celebrated at the Museum Bar in Phillips, Wis.

"Taxidermy is a high art form and high form of sculpture," said Stone, who has yet to visit the Stuffed Squirrel and Chipmunk Museum. "In a lot of Upper Midwest regions, there is a whole genre of museum bars and other places where there are tableaux of taxidermy. Some are similar to dogs playing poker in velvet paintings. The whole idea is animals personified doing things people in the North Woods would be doing; drinking, playing poker. Taxidermists try to outdo each other with more and more elaborate scenes."

Sanfillippo draws a sketch and designs settings for the taxidermist. He said it costs

about \$300 per animal for a taxidermist to work on a squirrel or chipmunk. He has a keen eye for detail. He found a miniature sombrero for one poker-playing gray squirrel. A black squirrel is smoking a tiny cigar. The critters sit on handmade chairs and are folding tiny decks of cards.

"Many times kids are upstairs crying because they've lost grandma or grandpa," Sanfillippo explained during a tour of the museum. "Then I take them down here. You can't get them out of here. The families are upstairs and they say, 'Where did our kids go?' "

The museum also has the best collection of stuffed albino squirrels I suppose I have ever seen.

Sanfillippo placed two pairs of albino squirrels in two pink toy Barbie convertibles that match the squirrel's pink eyes. Other albino squirrels are riding motorcycles and playing basketball. In a world of true harmony, two albino squirrels share a working toy Ferris wheel with two tiny chipmunks.

"The albino squirrels come from Marionville, Mo.," he said. "Their Lions Club is in charge of albino squirrels. I've been a Lion member for 40 years. Several years ago I saw a magazine article about the 'Albino Squirrels of Marionville.' I wrote the Lions Club and said, 'If one of your squirrels gets a heart attack and dies or gets killed by a car, if you wouldn't mind, would you mail it to me?'"

Sanfillippo soon forgot about his letter. But six months later the family beagle, Sammy Boy, started going nuts. "I said to my wife, 'Honey, did you feed the dog today?' " Sanfillippo recalled. "She said, 'Yes.' He had been outside already. I said, 'My gosh, he doesn't act like this every day.' So I took him off the leash, and he went right to the front door. A UPS box was sitting at the front door. Sammy Boy could tell what was in the box."

Eight dead albino squirrels had landed from Missouri.

Sanfillippo was a hunting buddy of Wisconsin Gov. Warren P. Knowles. He said Knowles brought Presidents Ronald Reagan and Gerald Ford to the Squirrel and Chipmunk Museum. Knowles even helped Sanfillippo find his museum pieces, asking game wardens to dispatch the less splattered critters to Sanfillippo. (The former governor died of a heart attack in 1993 during the Governor's Fishing Opener, an event he founded. Knowles was cremated.)

Sanfillippo said he began designing the stunning bar scene when he was 16. He has added to it over the years, incorporating the most minute details, such as a tiny fish mounted on the backbar and red barstools. A total of nine squirrels sit along the bar.

"These little animals were killed on the highway," Sanfillippo said as he peered down at the bar, his favorite piece of museum art. Then he added, "This isn't all of it.

My whole house is filled with animals and fish. I have 45 deer heads in my basement."

Sanfillippo, who has been married for 57 years, has two daughters. His wife, Patricia, is obviously understanding.

Born in Waukesha, Wis., he moved with his six brothers and six sisters to Oconomowoc, Wis., when he was 3. (Bonus fact: "An Indian tribe was coming through town," Sanfillippo said. "The old Indian fellow was quite old. He said to the other Indian, "I cannot walk no more. That's how Oc-on-omowoc got its name.") The Sanfillippo family has been in Madison since 1949.

Sanfillippo started in the funeral business in 1941 in Milwaukee. He was drafted in 1942. While serving as a surgical technician in World War II, Sanfillippo was decorated with five Purple Hearts, a silver star and a bronze star for saving nearly 300 lives. In a lifetime spinning around life and death, I had to ask: Is there anything that connects taxidermy with the funeral business?

Sanfillippo gave me a straight answer. "No," he said. "Like with fish taxidermy, you soak the hide in a solution. With the chipmunks and squirrels they soak and treat the skin for several days. They also make a plastic form and put the animal in that. Once it is soaked, it will keep forever."

These days, Sanfillippo hires a Madison taxidermist for his artwork. "It's nice we don't have to bury these animals," Sanfillippo said as he eyed a stuffed beaver. "Most of these animals are roadkill. I feel like I'm bringing them back to life."