

Tribute to open road stung by gas prices

NORWICH, Ohio — One of the best-kept secrets in Ohio is tucked away across from the Baker Motel at the I-70 exit for Norwich, east of Zanesville.

The National Road/Zane Grey Museum tells the story of America's romance with the open highway, in particular the thoroughfare that came to be called "Main Street U.S.A."



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Unfortunately, the glaring irony of this unique reliquary showcasing the nation's progress in highway travel is that gasoline costs have taken a serious bite out of visitation to the museum.

Mary Ellen Weingartner, who manages it, said Thursday, "I suppose the largest negative effect on visitation has been with school groups, because the fuel costs are eating too much of the budget away for the schools to cope with."

Kim Schuette, communication manager for the Ohio Historical Society, which operates the Norwich museum along with 57 other state historic attractions, agreed. "Some of our sites have reported that visitation has been down over the past few months," she said. "I believe it has been a knee-jerk reaction to the sharp increase in gas prices."

Times change, often stunningly.

A relic Sohio gasoline sign at the museum proclaims the price of a gallon of gas to be 14 cents.

The historical society operates a "History To Go" van that takes some of the state's heritage to schools, though Weingartner thinks that there is nothing quite as powerful as being in a museum enclosed by the entire aura and feel of another age.

"You stand here and you think of all the hundreds of Conestoga wagons, then the Model T's that crossed this road," she said, motioning toward a 136-foot diorama that offers a superbly detailed history of the road, right down to a model construction of High Street in Downtown, complete with the old Neil



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Mary Ellen Weingartner, at the National Road/Zane Grey Museum, is seeing fewer visitors.

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House Hotel.

Along the way, life-size wheelwrights and blacksmiths ply their trade alongside displays of Conestogas, stagecoaches and antique automobiles.

The site also chronicles the life of local hero Zane Grey, the wordsmith who was christened "the father of the adult Western" before Louis L'Amour could even write his name.

During the hour or so I spent in the museum, only two other visitors showed up.

It is a shame. The historical society, which always has been the redheaded stepchild when it comes to state funding, is taking it on the chin again.

Lately, it has been compelled to consider transferring responsibility for three of its sites to other agencies: the Newark Earthworks, Seip Mound State Memorial and Schoenbrunn Village. The transfer would place the first two sites under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service, while Schoenbrunn would be operated by the Dennison Railroad Depot Museum.

For now, the site interpret-

ers at the Norwich museum will continue to tell the story of the road, despite what the spiraling price of unleaded regular has done to undo the nation's romance with gas-guzzling transportation.

For the 57 miles spent getting from the Outerbelt on the East Side to the museum, it is well worth a careful consideration of what made us hostage to high-test gasoline.

For more information on the museum, call 1-800-752-2602.

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