



# HAMILTON

Houses, History, Hobbies – and Pie







# HAUNTS

By Symone C. Skrzycki



Each year, visitors spend \$738.2 million in Hamilton County, supporting 14,000-plus jobs.

You've heard of the big attractions: Conner Prairie in Fishers. The Palladium at the Center for the Performing Arts in Carmel. Grand Park in Westfield. But what about some of the lesser-known venues?

*BizVoice*<sup>®</sup> visited a handful this spring. Come along on a trip to a unique museum, national award-winning bakery, model train shop and historic jail.

Let the journey begin!

*EDITOR'S NOTE: Each 2018 issue of BizVoice<sup>®</sup> will feature a Road Trip Treasure, highlighting Indiana destinations and activities.*



All the way from Arizona: Tourist Kattie Brooks Kenyon admires a miniature.

## MUSEUM OF MINIATURE HOUSES CARMEL

In the heart of the Carmel Arts and Design District, Kattie Brooks Kenyon explores the Museum of Miniature Houses. She's on a road trip to Canada.

"I live in the west desert of Arizona – what they call the outback," she shares. "I travel every summer. I do all back roads and one of the things with this trip I've designed is going to the miniature houses (in various states)."

What draws her to miniatures?

"I guess, the intricacy of them – how they get them that small. There's kind of a story (behind each one)."

The museum is one of only five nationwide dedicated to miniatures. "We're about miniature houses, which are not dollhouses,"

executive director Elaine Mancini clarifies. "There are several differences. One is, a dollhouse is a toy; it's meant to be played with. These (miniatures) are not meant to be played with.

"Two, they design miniatures on a scale: usually an inch to a foot."

Pointing to a miniature, she adds, "This six-inch grandfather clock would correspond to a six-foot grandfather clock in real life.

"Three, if you're choosing a period . . . you have to be historically accurate. You can't have a toilet without the wall-mounted tank if you're doing a circa 1900 hotel (for instance), which is not going to happen. Or if you put two bathrooms on this floor, they didn't have those then. Whereas in a dollhouse you can do whatever you want."

The miniatures are magnificent. Ceiling fans rotate. Chandeliers glow. Flowers bloom. In one house, French doors open to an inviting sun room full of plants, wicker furniture and soft pillows.

Most miniatures are works of the imagination, but some are real-life



Impeccable attention to detail brings an antique dollhouse (left, the oldest piece at the museum) and miniature to life.



replicas. One example is Le Chateau, commissioned by a couple that had visited France. Monogrammed china and Renoir art are within.

In another part of the museum, Breyer horses draped in handmade bridles and saddles roam. Their manes and tails are made of real horse hair.

The oldest item on the tour, ironically, is a dollhouse (not a miniature) built by Thomas Russell for his niece in 1861.

"Until about 1900, dollhouses were made by individuals. The industry started making commercial dollhouses around 1900. In here, you see where the doors open," Mancini explains, leaning forward. "They found this note and there's this whole poem (written by Russell) at the end of it.

"Original everything. This is exactly the way he made it."

"It's 1861 and we're looking at it in 2018," she exclaims.

"Doesn't it send shivers down your spine? It's so awesome."

### Museum of Miniature Houses

- Opened: 1993
- Visitors to date: 91,000-plus
- Events: Nearly 40 (such as Bring Your Doll Day) are slated for 2018

## HAMILTON COUNTY MUSEUM OF HISTORY AND OLD SHERIFF'S RESIDENCE AND JAIL

### NOBLESVILLE

Graffiti from long ago in a juvenile jail cell conveys an ominous greeting: *Welcome to Jail, You Fool's (sp).*

Gulp.

Built in 1876, the building served as the sheriff's residence and the jail until 1977. Today, it houses the Hamilton County Museum of History.

"I'll show you the jail," proclaims executive director Susan Lucas, standing beside an imposing iron door. "This would have been the maximum security (section) for the men."

Visitors can enter the cells. Grip the bars. Approach a visitation window. Observe "prisoners" passing the time playing checkers, dealing

cards and listening to the radio.

The men's and juvenile cells (first and second floors, respectively) depict the 1940s-era, while the women's cells (single rooms with a window on the third floor) portray the 1870s.

Up on the second floor, Hamilton County historian David Heighway describes the jail's early days.

"In the Victorian time, this was all open – all the way from the ceiling down to the first floor. That's why it's only got these upper-floor windows. This was sort of like a big iron cage in the middle of a limestone box."

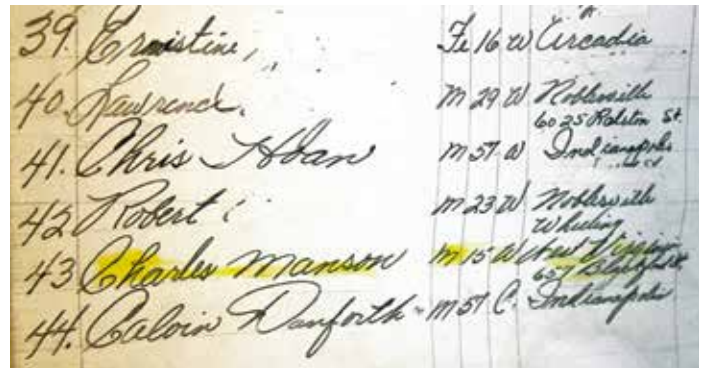
Fifteen prisoners escaped in the jail's first three years.

"This wasn't a great jail," Heighway acknowledges with a chuckle. "People say, 'Was (legendary Indianapolis-born gangster) John Dillinger here?' Pssh! He would have just walked right out."

A ledger of prisoners admitted to the jail in July 1950 hangs in the book-in room. Prisoner No. 43 (photo below) is notorious cult leader and murderer Charles Manson. At the time, he was a teenager and had escaped from the Indiana Boys School in Plainfield.

"I've heard different theories," Lucas offers. "He might have been a car thief. I'm not sure how he got caught in the county, but he was and then he was brought in here."

Newspaper articles detail the exploits of other inmates such as Ku Klux Klan leader D.C. Stephenson. The Noblesville native was convicted of the abduction, forced intoxication and rape of a woman



Wander through the book-in room and you'll see a photo of John Dillinger. Don't be fooled by the myth: He was never an inmate there.



that ultimately led to her suicide. His 1925 trial took place at the Noblesville Courthouse, adjacent to the jail.

A Victorian-era parlor and kitchen (depicting life somewhere between the 1890s and 1930s) are warm reminders of life beyond bars for the sheriff and his family. However, the two often intersected.

“This was both the family kitchen and the working kitchen for the cells themselves,” Heighway divulges. “Actually, the prisoners would come in here and work. They had nothing else to do with their time, so they’d come in here and do some scrubbing and things like that.”

He grins as a humorous story crosses his mind about 1950s sheriff Roland Guilkey.

“His daughter talks about coming down to breakfast one day and there’s somebody handcuffed to every piece of furniture in the house! Guilkey had busted a gambling den and run out of room in the back in the big cells and decided, ‘OK, guys. We’ll just sit down here and keep you here.’”

### Hamilton County Museum of History and Old Sheriff’s Residence and Jail

- The museum showcases historic businesses, the Civil War, pop culture and more
- Ghostly guests: The jail is a popular destination for paranormal investigators

## LISA’S PIE SHOP ATLANTA

Lisa Sparks doesn’t like pie. In fact, she’d much rather eat cake. But that didn’t stop her from opening Lisa’s Pie Shop in the mid-1980s.

She vowed never to advertise. She vowed to only accept cash from customers. And she vowed to surround herself with motivated people.

“Back then (when I started my business), they didn’t have debit. I said I’d never do credit. My husband thought I was crazy,” she recalls. “I had cancer. I’d had a hysterectomy. I was going through the change of life. I don’t like the taste of pie. He really thought I went crazy. So, I prayed to God a lot and this is where it got me.”

Today, Sparks’ award-winning pies are nationally known.

Originally, the business was located in Tipton County. She’s been at the Atlanta location since 2002.

The smell of baked apples and other flavors fills the kitchen where employees



Lisa Sparks (top, far left) is feisty and faithful. Her foray into pie baking started as an attempt to impress a boyfriend (who’s now her longtime husband).



Hunny Lee and Rebekah Noble are hard at work.

“They’re self-starters. My mom taught me when I was little that you become exactly what you put yourself around,” Sparks reflects. “So, if you put yourself around highly-motivated, self-starting people, it tends to bring you to a higher level. As well as – and I believe this more than anything – godly people. And these guys are like that.”

Lee removes a hot pie from the oven to cool. She has worked with Sparks for 18 years, starting at age 13. Noble, Lisa’s niece, has been with the business for three years.

Lisa’s Pies is known for its “pie in a jar.”

“That’s where we learned to take our pie and pie crusts – I believe we’re the only one in the nation – and we’ve made it shelf-stable for eight months,” Sparks explains.

Surrounded by flour, a big bowl of apple slices and other ingredients, she doesn’t skip a beat rolling the dough, fluting the pie crust (among other tasks) and recounting her story.

“What most people don’t know is that pie was not my love. I was a detasseling contractor and I walked cornfields for 30-some years. I ran detasseling crews and that’s what funded the pie shop because I could go out in the summertime and get ‘X’ amount of dollars and then I’d go buy a piece of equipment. That way, I didn’t get myself in debt. My philosophy is that I wanted to run my business and not have my business run me.”

That approach carries over to customers.

“I believe with all of my heart that we should go back to the old-fashioned days, where you don’t take a piece of plastic and run a piece of plastic, but you extend your hand,” she contends.

In the early days, Sparks did all of the pie production by hand.

“Including my fruit! I even hand-painted the pies when I first started out. I got bigger and bigger, so I don’t hand paint the pies anymore, but I still hand draw (her signature) on top of every pie.”

“And there,” she proclaims a moment later with a flourish, “is an apple pie!”

### Lisa’s Pie Shop

- 28 different flavors daily such as raspberry, cherry, blueberry, pecan, cream (e.g., chocolate, lemon, banana, key lime)
- A big seller: quiche. “The quiche could be a business all in itself!” Sparks remarks.

## MRMUFFIN’S TRAINS

### ATLANTA

Do you know the Muffin Man?

How about MrMuffin (aka: Steve Nelson)? Every Saturday, crowds converge at 165 East Main Street to see him run model trains.

“It really gets noisy! They (trains) all talk. They all have speakers. They make a lot of chugging noises. They blow smoke,” Nelson relates. “This layout is about 60 feet deep. It’s almost 40 feet across. It’s not finished. We just can’t seem to get as much time to work on it as we’d like.”

Guests eat muffins, drink coffee and mingle. Admission is free.

“There’s 11 loops of track. Right now, we’re running about 20-some trains every Saturday. My goal is to eventually run 50 at



What began as a holiday tradition (Steve and Liz Nelson – aka Mr and MrsMuffin – showcased their treasured model train layout in their basement) has grown into a booming business.

once. I'm not there yet," he notes.

A fictional world comes to life along the tracks. Among the landmarks are a soda shop, a church and a factory.

"We put a lot of little jokes on the layout. Like over there, where the California hotel is – Hotel California – there's a bird up there, which might be recognized as an eagle," Nelson points out. "I had a lady the other day ask me why there was a condor up there!"

The two-story shop spans 8,000 square feet. The bottom floor houses the model train layout, while the top level is home to Nickel Plate Arts (offering children's art workshops and activities) and Korber Models (manufactured train kits).

"That company was getting ready to go away," Nelson recalls. "We wanted to save the brand, so we bought (Korber) and moved it here (in 2016). We're looking around the hobby as people are retiring and businesses are turning over to find where there is something that we can keep alive, basically."

Down the road, a second shop houses the retail business. In May, the Nelsons launched a successful Kickstarter campaign to

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The collection includes steamers, Atlas O Reefers (more than 900 pieces), diesels and more.



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**JUST NORTH OF INDY**



## Road Trip Treasures: Hamilton County

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Generations gather on Saturdays to watch the trains traverse the tracks and hear them roar.

assist in building the Choo Choo Café. It will share a wall with the retail shop and open this summer.

“There’s no place to eat nearby, which is why we’re building the restaurant,” he affirms. “We have some work to do, but it’s going to really be nice. We’ll serve breakfast and lunch.”

Wife Liz Nelson (MrsMuffin) asserts that the train hobby promotes STEAM (adding art

to the traditional elements of science, technology, engineering and mathematics), cooperation and communication.

“We have a number of families that have gotten started in the hobby just because they’re constantly coming in here and kids are so invested from a young age,” she observes. “We have so many kids in here under the age of 10 that can tell me more about a train than I could tell you.”

Steve crosses his arms and leans back in his chair before asserting that almost everyone has a train story.

“They had a relative that had a model train. They rode a train. I can honestly say that virtually every Saturday, we’re having conversations with everybody that comes about a train. They want to tell us about it. They want to tell us about riding a train when they first got in the Army (for instance). What it was like. What the (passenger) cars smelled like.

“In our own way, helping these people remember and talk about it – that’s what it’s all about. Entertaining people. Creating an experience. Nobody leaves here unhappy.”

### MrMuffin’s Trains

- The MrMuffin moniker grew out of bedtime stories Steve Nelson told his sons growing up
- One of the top online model train retailers in the United States
- Famous visitors: David Letterman, Frank Sinatra Jr.’s band



MrMuffin’s Trains is also home to Nickel Plate Arts, which promotes the performing, visual and culinary arts. It offers classes (e.g., drawing, clay, painting) for children and adults.