

# ROADSIDE MEMORIAL, MUSEUM AND MORE IN BUCKSKIN

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"We're trying to get people to dream here," James Henager says, switching on a plastic children's night light. The object flickers as its interior bulbs warm, then milk-white plastic, shaped like the word DREAM, illuminates to banana-cream. Henager smiles and gestures in the manner of Vanna White.

The Henager Memories and Nostalgia Museum rests just south of Buckskin, between Hwy 168 and Hwy 68, along Hwy 57 (about a 40 minute drive due west of Ferdinand). The museum, which began as a warehouse of family keepsakes, has been

a 501c3 since 1998. Its curator, Mr. James Henager, quizzes visitors through an upstairs storage facility filled to the brim with memorabilia.

"I kind of do this like a maze," he tells us. It is the morning of Monday, October 1, and Connie Burgdorf and I (Connie is a photographer and new colleague here at the Ferdinand News and Spencer County Leader) have driven to Buckskin in order to take a look at the Veteran's Memorial of America, which is touted on Henager's paperwork as a "Division of the Henager Museum." The memorial will turn out to be the final exhibit on our tour.

Before that, Connie and I will glance at

McDonalds drinking glasses and gawk at 60s fashions on wire hangers. We'll stand amid plastic trees covered in decades of Christmas ornaments. We'll view panels of framed images of Abraham Lincoln.

The comic-book-style movie posters of the 40s and 50s palliate even the ceiling: watery-blues, too-bold reds and faded yellows announce classic western idols — Gene Autry, Pat Brady, Dale Evans. The later 20th century is represented by David Bowie, Jackson 5 and Beatles LP's pegged into paneling. There's an old juke box and rusted Royal Crown Cola dispensing machine (glass bottles) that both still operate. Connie and I wander along, nodding politely at Henager's finger-pointing,

watching our footing on sub-flooring covered here and there with bits of orange shag.

The repository's curio cabinets, bookshelves and display cases house "The Official" a-lot-of-things. A Smokey Bear exhibit and collection of items recovered from the now defunct Roy Rogers - Dale Evans Museum (once in Branson) are two of several displays that Henager references under a variety of appellations and declarations. *We've been told it's the largest... We have more of this than...*

"We're here not only to educate but to entertain," Henager pontificates. At some point, the curator reminds us that the pig on the old American sitcom, *Green Acres*, was from Indiana.

Beneath our feet (and apparently sturdy sub-flooring) palettes upon palettes of canned foods, non-perishable boxed edibles, bags of snacks and chips and plastic bottled beverages cover the concrete floor of what Henager tells us was once a woodworking business. The stockpiles belong to

Henager's primary outreach, The Veterans Food-Bank of America. The qualifications for receiving food are pretty simple: be a veteran in need. Henager asks only for proof of military service and a once yearly household income check.

"Most people don't know this but 70% plus of all homeless males are veterans in this country," he says.

In actuality, the number of homeless persons (including veterans) has always been difficult to track — most especially because a significant portion of the homeless population is migratory. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, "Like the general homeless population, veterans are at a significantly increased risk of homelessness if they have low socioeconomic status, a mental health disorder, and/or a history of substance abuse. Yet, because of veterans' military service, this population is at higher risk of experiencing traumatic brain injuries (TBI) and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), both of which have been found to be among the most substantial risk factors for homelessness."

Henager points out that although many veterans do have consistent shelter, they may be living in extreme poverty, some on "five to six hundred dollars a month."

Veterans might be "in such a spot," according to Henager that they "may have a roof over their head one day and not the next. This is a lot of them like that. That's a lot of stress on a lot of these people."

For this reason and others, the food bank accepts nothing refrigerated or frozen.

"I understand what it's like," confides Henager. A life-changing car accident resulted in head trauma that exaggerated the PTSD he suffered after serving as an Air Force Medic. "I would shut down for so many hours a day, and I just couldn't work," he explains.

Now, Henager works a schedule that fits his needs, providing boxes of homeless outreach supplies to private homeless shelters, standing outside retail spaces accepting donations and thanking the veterans he meets, organizing and distributing food to veterans in precarious circumstances.

Upstairs in the museum, Connie and I step into a room lined halfway around in military uniforms. Most of them are from World War II. One is made of thick bone-



Gunslingin' dandies — James Henager stands beside a handmade dream-scape of the Old West. In the same case, he shows Connie and I a "Back in the Saddle" LP on the Okeh label. "Most people seen it on the Columbia record," he informs. Henager also tells us that the label was admired by researchers scouting for Ken Burns' upcoming PBS documentary on country and western music history. The documentary is tentatively scheduled to air in September 2019.

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