



This page: The Gypsy at the Gypsy Arcade in Virginia City. Facing page: Marge Antolik, left, and Kate McCourt, curators at the McFarland Curatorial Center in Virginia City, stand in front of the Gypsy Arcade.

Despite rumors of outside investors, Virginia City's 150-year-old gypsy fortuneteller will remain in the hands of the people of Montana



Already Spoken For

In August 2011, a headline in the *London Daily Mail* read, "World's Only Talking Gypsy Fortune Teller Machine Set to Sell for Millions of Dollars: David Copperfield Bids \$2 Million for 100-Year-Old Machine in Montana; Experts Believe the Gypsy Could Sell for \$10 Million." Other media including the *Los Angeles Times* and *USA Today* also reported the story, describing a bidding war between celebrity magician Copperfield and other collectors and Montana's refusal to sell, despite the state's need for money. ▶

Story by Beth Judy Photos by Lisa Wareham

“The Gypsy,” short for “The Mills Novelty Gypsy Verbal Fortune Teller,” has resided in tiny, historic, largely state-owned Virginia City (known as “VC”) since the 1950s. She was a product of the Mills Novelty Company in Chicago. If you go to VC to see her, she doesn’t seem rare. VC’s collection of American antiques includes numerous fortune-telling machines and other gypsies. They are small, though, plus this one talks. When she was operational, the Gypsy, an elegant, black-haired bust sitting in a tall booth or “gypsy cart,” stirred to life at the clink of a coin falling through one of two slots (one for men, the other for women). Her eyes

rolled and her teeth gnashed, presumably from the effort of searching the ether. Then she turned to the petitioner and “spoke” (thanks to wax cylinders and Edison gramophones) through a cone connected to a tube. Listening through a matching cone, the customer heard an imperious voice warning against a “dark complexioned woman,” assuring that “you will find marriage three times with increasing joy,” advising “waiting a little while” for “the greatest happiness of your life,” or another of approximately 40 fortunes. In contrast, other machines only issued printed fortunes. Today, despite the *Daily Mail’s* headline, there may be another verbal fortuneteller or two in the world, but they belong to private collectors. She was appraised at \$1.2 million.

Advertising copy that accompanied the Gypsy read, “The amazing life-likeness of her actions holds patrons spellbound... She’s capable of astonishing All Beholders.” People who remember her in action agree. As a 5-year-old around 1957, Kim Hudson, a Madison County postmaster, climbed onto the narrow children’s step on the cart’s front and awaited his fortune. “I was mesmerized,” he remembers. “I didn’t want to leave.”

Did the Gypsy foresee her own future? That a millionaire would sweep her up and bring her west? That he would replace her wax cylinders with tape players and a modern voice—but that she would ultimately go mute in a VC restaurant window, frightening children and suffering the sun’s rays? That another man would lovingly repair her, but die before he finished? That rich suitors would vie for her again?

The millionaire who brought her west was Charles Bovey, a General Mills Company heir. Bovey arrived in Great Falls in 1926 at age

19 to learn the family business, starting with sweeping the flour mill floors. He and his wife, Sue, loved Montana and its history. In the 1940s, Bovey happened to drive through VC, a gold-mining town that boomed in 1863 and bust three years later when most inhabitants moved on to Helena. Despite the abandonment, VC was named the capital of Montana Territory in 1865 and remained



This page: The Gypsy has two coin slots; one for men and the other for women. Facing page, top: There are several fortune telling machines in the Gypsy Arcade, but the main attraction is the Gypsy herself, pictured at the center back. Bottom: One machine at the Gypsy Arcade gives fortunes based on eye color.



so for 10 years. Its status as county seat and some continual mining saved it from becoming a ghost town.

While watching a man tear an old VC building apart for firewood, Bovey realized this cradle of Montana history could disappear fast. He returned and began buying and shoring up buildings, meanwhile stocking them with a phenomenal hoard of authentic, everyday objects from the 1860s to the 1920s. About 100 of these objects were other buildings bought from around the state and trucked to Nevada City (known as “NC”), a second former mining camp nearby. When the towns were ready, Bovey opened them ▶



Top: Marge Antolik is a curator at the McFarland Curatorial Center in Virginia City. Bottom: Various parts of the Gypsy have been restored over the years including her silk sleeves.

to the public.

Bovey died in 1978. In 1997, concerned citizens succeeded in convincing the state legislature that VC and NC were too important to be auctioned off or privatized. The state bought the towns, intact with Bovey's collection of everything from 100 boxes of "new" shirt collars and pairs of ladies' boots to Great Northern Railway crockery to an amazing selection of music machines to period printing presses, wagons and brewing equipment to, yes, the Gypsy. First the Montana Historical Society managed the property, then the Montana Heritage Commission (MHC) was created to manage the effort.

Around this time, VC curators recognized that the Gypsy was hurting. In Bob's Place restaurant, she was a visible and popular part of many visitors' VC experience. She is also "one artifact out of a million plus," sighs MHC curator Marge Antolik. For VC curators, the task of caring for Bovey's former collection



is gargantuan. Cataloging each item to museum standards alone, it's estimated, will take one person 38 more years. Simple maintenance is hard enough to get to, and "dust eats right into metal," Antolik says. In stark contrast, legislature-allotted funds for MHC range from small to

zero. Meanwhile, the joints of the old buildings containing many of the items are loose. This summer, ecstatic curators managed to procure UV-protective shades for windows. But standing outside those windows on a chilly day, you can watch those shades, inside, blow in the wind.

Walls in VC, like funds, are thin.

The man who loved and repaired the Gypsy was John Kjelland, a respected furniture conservator in Missoula. Mills Sinclair, grandson of the Gypsy's inventor and a sometimes visitor to Montana, heard of her plight and funded her conservation. Kjelland worked his own magic on the sound system, the cabinet, the Gypsy's crumbling silk sleeves, her head and hands, her beaded lanterns. He was just getting the speaking-tube fabric rewoven when he unexpectedly died. "John so loved the Gypsy," Antolik says. "He would light up around her. She was rare and a challenge—there were so many materials involved. When we ran out of money, he would work on her for free."

The spate of publicity about the Gypsy was overblown. She belongs to the people of Montana. She can't be sold just like that; by law, protective procedures for selling part of a collection would have to be followed. Nor could any proceeds be used unrestrictedly to shore up Montana's budget, like the news reports made it sound. Money would go into an MHC trust. However, the MHC could certainly use that money. Ironically, last summer, when visitors spurred by the publicity came to see her, the Gypsy's arcade was often closed. The MHC couldn't spare the staff, or even the volunteers.

But things are looking up. Last summer the MHC, which is supposed to be self-supporting, increased revenues by 135 percent after hiring a new, young business manager,

Elijah Allen. Allen spent money on marketing and introduced a family pass and e-commerce. "We're now to 70 percent of where we're supposed to be," he reports, cautioning it may take three to five more years. VC turns 150 this year, and a slew of celebrations and events should draw crowds. The Montana Department of Commerce, which oversees the MHC, is still in conversation with David Copperfield, who has mentioned helping with completion of her conservation and promoting her, reports Marissa Kozel, department spokeswoman. The Gypsy is too delicate to return to public use, but in line with Bovey's belief in accessible history, creative minds at the MHC are discussing running her a few last times, capturing that digitally, and sharing it in an exhibit beside her cart.

Every day, even in the off-season, visitors from near and far wander VC's boardwalks, peering through windows into the past. They're impressed, enchanted. All the objects they see, even ordinary ones, stir wonder and mystery. If the Gypsy draws even more people to experience that, curators are thrilled. Meanwhile, in her quiet, well-protected arcade, you can almost hear the Gypsy murmuring to herself. "Disregard oppositions to your plans, you will succeed in spite of them." "Your stature will soon change for the better." ■

A frequent contributor to Montana Magazine, Beth Judy writes from her home in Missoula.

GET PAID FOR AN OVER-NIGHTER!

STAY & SAVE

Stay with us and receive a **\$25 Gas Card**



GREAT FALLS • HAMILTON • HAVRE



HELENA



MILES CITY



BIG TIMBER
COLUMBUS • CONRAD



BUTTE • DILLON
SHELBY



BELGRADE
OPENING SUMMER 2013

Package rates starting at \$89.00 - \$144.00. Package rates vary depending on location and time of the year. Call or visit our website for details.

Toll Free (US & CAN) 800.442.4667 • townhouseinnsofmontana.com