

Downtown Tucsonan

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Don't Miss Out on Downtown History Museum and Its Dillinger Room

By Teya Vitu

Did you know the railroad tracks that set off Downtown were once the very eastern edge of Tucson, quite a bit east, at that, of most of the 1880 town?

Or that Downtown had 15 car dealerships in the 1920s?

Or that there even is an Arizona Historical Society Museum Downtown that brings alive what Downtown was like when many of today's Downtown buildings were built?

If there is such a thing as "hidden in plain sight," "best kept secret" or "missing something you walk by every day," this Downtown museum in the Wells Fargo Bank building is the grand prize winner.

Tucked a few feet behind an arched entryway just south of the Wells Fargo ATM, the Arizona Historical Society's Downtown branch, 140 North Stone Avenue, primarily tells modern Tucson's early story from 1880 to about 1950. A



You can walk by this museum for years and not know it's right next to Wells Fargo Bank.

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few exhibits do go back to 1770 and before.

The museum opened November 13, 2001, and just had its 10-year anniversary.

This is the place where you can learn the details of the capture of Public Enemy No. 1 John Dillinger in Tucson at the mid-point of his brief but highly publicized bank robbery career.

A John Dillinger Room tells the five-day drama from his gang's arrival in Tucson on January 21, 1934, to the January 25 capture of Dillinger, Harry Pierpont, Charles Makley and Russell Clark. Dillinger's bullet-proof vest is on display as is a trombone case that carried a machine gun. Archival photos tell much of the tale.

"A lot of people say 'I didn't know John Dillinger was captured here,'" said Jim Bleess, the museum's associate curator. "Those who do know he was captured here don't know how big a story it was."



Jim Bleess

Dillinger checked into Hotel Congress January 21 but had to flee the next morning as a fire broke out in the hotel. Dillinger moved to a house at 927 North Second Ave.

The gang did not start the fire nor commit any robberies in Tucson. But firefighters thought they recognized the men from newspaper photos, and a moving company grew suspicious because of the gang's heavy bags.

Police summarily rounded up the foursome. Dillinger ended up in an Indiana prison from which he escaped, only to end up shot dead July 27, 1934, outside the Biograph Theater in Chicago.

Tucson has had a few extraordinary 10- and 20-year cycles where phenomenal change struck the city. These unfold vividly with photographs and artifacts from the given era in sophisticated museum displays.

"You can get the Spanish feeling of the place with the town plaza," Bleess said about an 1856 drawing on display with a town gate at the eastern end. "In 20 years, the town looks completely different."

There are two photos taken from an elevated vantage point, one capturing the 1919 Armistice Day Parade and the other from 1909.

"In 10 years, there's this dramatic transformation," Bleess said. "At the parade, all the vehicles are automobiles and there is one horse and buggy. In 1909, all the vehicles are horse and buggy and there's one car."

The museum's story pretty much ends in 1950 because Tucson rapidly expanded beyond what we now call Downtown in the years immediately following World War II.

"Eighty years ago, Downtown was Tucson," Bleess said.

And that's the focus of the Arizona Historical Society's Downtown museum.

A large, 5-by-8-foot photograph right at the entrance lays the groundwork in March 1880 for what evolved into modern Tucson. The town wasn't much more than four blocks wide on the east bank of the Santa Cruz River. The west bank was flood plain and agriculture – and the ruins of the Mission San Agustin.

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All of Tucson fit between the river and the railroad tracks and, in today's terms, extended only from Stone and the tracks south to about 18th Street.

The railroad just arrived that year, opening Tucson to the world for easy commerce.

That period around 1880 also marked the arrival of all the players whose names would dominate Tucson's retail scene for the next 100 years.

Carlos Jácome arrived here in 1876 and Jácome's store was a Downtown fixture until 1980. Fred Ronstadt followed in 1882 and opened his first hardware and housewares store in 1901 with the Ronstadt name remaining on the Downtown retail scene until 1983.

The Zeckendorf brothers, Albert and Luis, came to Tucson earlier, in 1866, and were followed by their nephew Albert Steinfeld in 1872. The Zeckendorf's opened a store that Steinfeld eventually bought and in 1904, he opened the Steinfeld's store that served Downtown until 1985.

The museum has pictures telling this retail story as well as a case of retail items from the early 1900s, such as a dress, shoes, a hat and a sewing kit.

The museum has the check-in counter from the Hotel Orndorff, which burned down in 1935, and a three-barber work area built in 1902. A 1957 photo shows Johnny Gibson cutting the hair of Gov. John Pyle.

History does remind us that something new could just well be history repeating itself. Case in point, the Modern Streetcar project that is expected to start laying track this year.

The Tucson Street Railway offered the city its first horse-drawn streetcar in 1897. It was electrified in 1906 and served Downtown through December 31, 1930.

"We have the history of Downtown," Bless said. "People absorb the information off the walls. You learn something about the town you live in. If you want to go in depth, we can do that for you."

Arizona Historical Society Museum-Downtown

140 N. Stone Ave.

Hours: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday-Friday

Admission: \$3

\$2 for ages 60-plus and 12-18

Free for children younger than 12

Free for everybody on the first Friday of each month

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