

# HISTORIC ROOTS

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# ELECTRA WEBB'S MUSEUM

By CATHERINE WOOD

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People like to collect things. Books, baseball cards, stamps, pennies, pictures, even string—you name it, someone collects it. Some things end up in attics or garages. Things of value often end up in museums. But who decides what is of value? Electra Webb's ideas about collecting were very different from those of the people of her time, and she started a very different museum.

The Shelburne Museum in Shelburne, Vermont is spread over 45 acres of rolling green fields in the Champlain Valley. At first you might think the museum is like a village. Its 37 buildings include houses, barns, a church, shops, a school. But then you notice things you do not expect to find in a village: a railroad car, a lighthouse, and a steamboat. "A collection of collections" Electra Webb called the Shelburne Museum. She even collected some of the buildings. Here is how the museum came to be.

Electra was born in 1889 in New York City. Her parents were very rich. They were also very interested in art. They took Electra with them when they went to museums or to visit

Shelburne Museum Archives



*Electra Webb had lots of dogs too!*

artists in their studios. They filled their houses with art. When her father died and left her some money, Electra began to collect too.

In 1910 Electra married James Watson Webb. He was also rich. Her collections grew. Like many other people who were collectors, she bought paintings and china and silver and glass. But she also bought dolls and quilts and tools and hat boxes, anything that interested her. Why did she do this?

Electra Webb lived at a time of great change. When she was born, most people moved about on foot or by horse and wagon or train or bicycle. A few years later, they could ride in motor cars and buses. By the time she

was married, air travel was possible. Before she died, men rode into space on top of powerful rockets. At the time she was born, most people still lived in the country or in small towns. By the time she was grown up, most Americans worked in or near fast-growing cities.

Electra saw that the way people lived was changing. She worried that there would be no way to remember a way of life she thought was simpler and better. Her parents were shocked when she brought home a wood carving of an American Indian that had once stood outside a cigar store. But Electra saw it as a beautiful part of a past that was dying. She thought it was worth keeping because it would help her remember that past. That Indian was the beginning of what was to become the Shelburne Museum.

Most of what Electra collected was made by hand. She bought tables, chairs, beds, dishes, rugs, quilts, toys, games, and clothing to show how people had lived in their homes. She bought buckets, tools, wagons, carriages, spinning wheels and looms, a sawmill, a blacksmith shop, a general store, and even a lighthouse and steamboat to show how they had worked and travelled.

In 1947 Electra and her husband retired to Vermont. She decided to find a way to show others what she had collected. This is when she started collecting buildings. She wanted her



*The Stone Cottage, with all its parts numbered, before it was taken apart and moved to Shelburne, 1949.*

collections from the past shown in buildings from the past. She bought houses where people had lived and a schoolhouse and a meeting house and moved them to the museum. Some of the structures she bought, like the Covered Bridge and the Stone Cottage, were too hard to move whole. So workmen put numbers on every piece. Then they took the buildings apart, moved them to Shelburne, and put them back together. There they all still stand.

When Electra could not find the right kind of building to buy and move, she built one. The Horseshoe Barn, where she put her collection of carriages, is a copy of a barn she saw somewhere else. To make it look old, she had it built out of old wood and slate.

After Electra died her son added more buildings. He built another large horseshoe

building to house a 500-foot-long circus parade made of more than 1,000 tiny, carved wooden figures. The parade took four men more than 30 years to make! He also built a house in which he copied rooms from his mother's apartment in New York City. They are full of fine furniture and paintings and show us how she lived too.

Today people come from all over to see Electra Webb's collections. They walk over the green lawns and go into the buildings. They climb the lighthouse and walk around in and on the steamboat. They learn about life in the past from seeing what Electra collected for just this purpose. They also learn about this thoughtful and unusual woman who collected everyday things to remind us of our connection to an earlier time.



*The General Store on the road to the Shelburne Museum.*

## Rooting Around

What do you own that tells you about the past or about how people looked and lived in the past? Ask your family and friends about things of their own that connect them to their past.

What might the things in your home tell people from the future about the way people live today?

Are there any museums or historical societies in or near your town? Think about visiting them to see what kinds of collections they have and what they tell you about the history of the place you live.

Shelburne Museum is on Route 7 in Shelburne, Vermont. If you would like to go there, call 1-802-985-3346 for more information.