

ROAD TRIPS

The man behind The Thing, Arizona's strangest roadside attraction



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When Vada Tate was a little girl, Christmas had a special meaning: shrunken heads under the tree.

She had only to look at the gift tags to know which cheerfully wrapped present held the shriveled, prunelike handcrafted heads, lips stitched together with thick black thread. When she spotted the package from Grandpa Homer, the 5-year-old's eyes lit up.

Since then, Tate has lost or given away many of her heads; the remaining few dangle from a bedpost in her home in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. But those few are a constant reminder of a man whose works were designed to coax gasps from the lips and dimes from the pocket.

Few have heard of Homer Tate, who from the 1940s to the 1960s crafted mummies, man-animal hybrids and more, selling them to sideshows and carnivals.

But if his name means nothing, you likely know of his desiccated masterpiece, a feat memorialized on bright-yellow billboards on Interstate 10 from Tucson to the New Mexico border — the Thing.

The Thing is a classic roadside attraction, a riddle wrapped in a display case tucked in a shed behind a souvenir store (the Bowlin Travel Center 17 miles east of Benson, to be precise).

MORE: It's aliens vs. dinos at the new Thing Museum

Mystery of the Desert

Proprietors share the legend of a discovery made in the cliffs of the Grand Canyon (there are other stories, but this remains the one most often told). Visitors are left to decide for themselves — and many still leave unsure — exactly what they saw, which is a testament to Tate's talents.

Born in 1884 in Texas, Tate found a talent for working in papier-mache, and plied his trade in Arizona. He became the pre-eminent creator of oddities designed to lure drivers off the highway and into the roadside stands that thrived along the fresh, endless pavement.

While his works — made more provocative by his inclusion of bones, animal hides and human hair — befuddled viewers and frustrated the devout members of his family, the shrunken heads, devil babies and wolf boys rarely were appreciated beyond those who charged a dime to see them.

But just as folk art slowly ascended a ladder of appreciation, Tate's creations continue to find a new appreciation in a category all their own — primitive art.

Rite of passage

Erick Jimenez, 48, and his 16-year-old son, Eric, dutifully walked through the series of large sheds, past the antique cars, Old West relics and modest dioramas to a wooden box sealed with a scratched acrylic top.

Here, finally, was the Thing, the subject of 28 billboards stretching from just north of Tucson to just east of Benson. Each sign drills a bit deeper than the last with such messages as "Mystery of the Desert" and "What is it?" By the time Exit 322 rolls around, your brain demands an answer.

The two El Paso residents could not resist the siren call of the obsessive signage. Stepping inside the curio shop attached to a Dairy Queen and a gas station, father and son paid \$4 (\$2 each) at the front counter for the privilege of walking through the faux-cave entrance at the back and following yellow "Bigfoot" prints to the Thing.

Jimenez had seen it years ago, and it was time to satisfy his son's curiosity. It was a rite of passage.

"He wanted to see it, and I wanted him to see it," Jimenez said.

Both believed it was worth the admission price, but perhaps not the billboards.

Is The Thing real?

Also peering into the display case were Jorge and Amelia Saenz and their two sons Aaron, 8, and Jorge Jr., 4. Not only were they curious, but they appreciated the rest stop on their drive from Las Vegas back to El Paso.

Although Dad was not convinced, the boys believed the Thing to be a true Mystery of the Desert. It certainly looked as if it had spent centuries under the sands of time.

But the only thing truly buried was Homer Tate's role in its creation.

Vada Tate, 67, remembered how as a little girl she was entranced by all those yellow billboards, finally asking her father, Martin, if they could stop. She asked him if he'd ever seen the Thing.

"Seen it?" she recalled her father saying. "I was there when your grandfather made it."

They did not pull off the freeway.

Vada Tate knew her grandfather Homer was the rogue of the family. She and her cousins often visited him in Apache Junction, where he allowed the public to view what relatives called his "Hoozie Goozies."

"We just didn't know what else to call them," she said from Coeur d'Alene. "That name seemed as good as any."

While living in Safford in the late 1930s, Homer Tate made art that was more off-the-shelf than off-the-wall. Then, his papier-mache became dioramas depicting slices of life — workers picking cotton, a minister presiding over a shotgun wedding and children playing outside a red schoolhouse.

No one is sure how or why Tate went from Norman Rockwell to H.G. Wells, but it could have been as simple as supply and demand.

Museum of the weird

Papier-mache worked just as well for mummies and shrunken heads as it did for dioramas. People would gladly pay a dime to see them, yet wouldn't give a nickel for a miniature

courtroom scene

Not long after Tate moved to Apache Junction in the early 1940s, he set up his museum of the weird. A few years later, he moved to Phoenix and opened Tate's Curiosity Shop on East Van Buren Street, and he became well-known among sideshows and carnivals.

Business was brisk; Tate even printed a catalog advertising his wares for \$10 to \$30. Among his most popular offerings was the \$55 assortment of shrunken heads and bodies.

Though not always as appreciative of her grandfather's works then as she is now, Vada Tate always looked forward to shrunken heads at Christmas. She enjoyed his Feegee Mermaids, as well as his spelling of the human-fish hybrids (they typically were doll bodies fused on fish tails).

She delighted in his human-bat crossbreeds and all manner of shrunken male and female bodies, each with strategically placed swatches for modesty.

She recalled a grandfather who was very resourceful when it came to finding material. He scoured the desert for animal hides and bones. He visited barber shops for human hair, but also used doll and horse hair, she said.

But it was something beyond his control that would prove disastrous to Homer Tate's legacy. And that would make his creations so hard to find.

Roadside sideshows

In the early 1900s, America was hitting the road. As cars replaced horses and highways supplanted trails, Americans were on the move.

If half the country traveled for enjoyment, the other half stayed put devising ways to get people to stop and spend a few bucks. As roads were laid, roadside attractions soon followed, said David "Doc" Rivera, executive director of a Florida museum dedicated to carnivals, sideshows and oddities.

Anyone with an idea and a few bucks could start a career in tourism, he said. A roadside stand could be erected in an afternoon, its shelves stocked with produce, arts and crafts, or cheaply made souvenirs. When such stands became common, proprietors needed a gimmick to differentiate their Native American blankets from those of their neighbors.

There were few better hooks than a two-headed "fetus" bobbing in a jar of formaldehyde, said Rivera, who oversees the International Independent Showmen's Museum in Gibsonton, Fla.

Not only would people stop, but they'd spend a nickel, even a dime, to see it. If they bought a soda for the road, so much the better.

The roadside oddity was born.

Some found that their attractions were so compelling, Rivera said, that they were selling more tickets than, say, tacos.

Dimes well spent

"All you needed to get started in the business was imagination and something that people would pay a dime, or heaven forbid, two bits, to see," said Rivera. "Put up a banner and you're in business."

Always popular were "pickled punks" — the carnie term for human oddities in jars, purchased from morgues and hospitals, Rivera said. But there were problems in dealing with actual human remains. Bodies decayed and formaldehyde yellowed, and there were pesky laws about transporting corpses across state lines.

The answer was as plain as the astounded look on a rube's face. Who needed real when rubber would do? An artificial oddity in a jar of water was the perfect stand-in, Rivera said.

But as the audience's sophistication evolved, the shows had to get even weirder, leaving authenticity further behind, Rivera said.

Pickled punks were still a roadside and carnival mainstay in the 1940s and '50s, but the floating curiosities were joined by more mysterious and exotic finds. Man-beast hybrids were popular, as were shrunken heads and bodies, as well as the mummified remains of, well, anything, Rivera said.

Freaks (not) of nature

The one-of-a-kind Cardiff Giant became so popular that you could find dozens of the 8- to 12-foot prehistoric man whose body was preserved in ice-tar-peat.

"I was 10 or 12 when I got one of my first jobs, selling tickets to a Cardiff Giant," Rivera recalled. "You know why they hired a kid? Because they knew no one would beat ... a kid for charging a quarter to see that thing."

Rivera can identify a Homer Tate gaff (carnival slang for a con or trick), as soon as he sees it. It's just that he sees so few.

The main reason is Tate's medium of choice. Though his creations incorporated hair, feathers, bones or claws, they were made of papier-mache, a material vulnerable to water, improper storage and time.

"You don't see them often and usually when you do, they're in bad shape," Rivera said. "Which is a shame."

But something even deadlier than the elements took a bigger toll on Tate's achievements. Family.

Collectible — and rare

Evan Michelson prides herself on the weirdness that fills the shelves of Obscura Antiques and Oddities, her Manhattan store that deals exclusively in the strange, if not morbid.

And those oddities are authentic, from the medical mummified human head to the frog purse and numerous animal skulls.

Michelson, whose shop was featured on the Science Channel show "Oddities," does not deal in the fake. That mummified cat is an actual cat that was mummified. The four-legged chicken was not a Col. Sanders dream.

But she made a rare exception when a Feejee Mermaid came in. She recognized it as a Homer Tate piece and made a deal.

"That purchase was a one-off thing because it's a very limited market," Michelson said. "But he (Tate) is among only a handful of people whose work is considered to be collectible."

It's not just craftsmanship, but the relative rarity of Tate pieces in good condition that make them valuable to those who collect gaffs, Michelson said.

Abominable tragedy

Had it not been for familial disapproval of his art, the world would have dozens, if not hundreds, more Homer Tate creations. But unfortunately for gaff collectors everywhere, Tate's extended (and largely devout Mormon) family found his creatures to be abominations, sideshow expert Rivera said

When the artist ran into legal trouble in the 1950s, and spent a month in jail for an unknown offense, his family emptied the Curiosity Shop of its mummies and devil boys and dragon snakes and other creatures that emerged from dark corners of Tate's fertile mind. All were thrown out.

Vada Tate remembers it differently. Yes, she said, her grandfather was in jail for something or other, and family members thought it the perfect time to be rid of his embarrassing oddities.

But she said her father contacted previous customers and offered everything at steep discounts. Much of what did not sell wound up in a hangar owned by another family member who operated a crop-dusting service in the Chandler area, Vada Tate said.

Hoozie Goozies go missing

The macabre menagerie was forgotten for years, she said. Her grandfather died in 1975, devoting his later years more to poetry than to his creations. In the 1980s, the family sold the crop-dusting business, prompting them to clear out grandfather's Hoozie Goozies, Vada Tate said.

But there was little left to them.

"When they got to all of Grandpa's art, it was infested with bugs because he used a lot of fur and skin and hair," she said.

"They took everything to the dump."

Vada Tate said she gave away many of her grandfather's works to friends and relatives. By the time she discovered they were collectible, she had few left.

By the early 1990s, the decades-old sideshow gaffs had gained respectability for their craftsmanship, and Vada Tate has been sure to take care of what little she has left of her grandfather's Hoozie Goozies — er, primitive art.

To this day, those creations continue to tantalize. While visitors to the Thing wonder about its past, in April 2012, Holbrook police were puzzled by a roadside find — a newspaper-stuffed box containing what appeared to be three mummified pygmies.

It was up to Joseph Meehan, curator of the Arizona Historical Society-Pioneer Museum in Flagstaff, to determine what, or who, these things were.

One helpful clue — the newspapers were dated 1943. After a little digging on the Internet, Meehan identified the pygmies as works of Homer Tate.

"I told the police we were interested in keeping them if no one else wanted them," Meehan said. "Homer Tate is a true Arizona character. It's because of his story that these things had value to people in Arizona."

But after word of the odd discovery spread, and word that these creations might have value, the owners turned, Meehan said.

Homer would be happy

Vada Tate said her grandfather is smiling somewhere each time a visitor hands over \$2 to see the Thing. But she believes he may have gotten his biggest kick out of the time some well-meaning folks thought it should be buried out of respect.

In 2002, the Associated Press and *The Arizona Republic* reported some Native Americans and historians believed the Thing to be mummified remains of Hohokam and Papago people. As such, it deserved last rites.

"I am sure he is up there laughing at all this," Vada Tate said. "And he had a great laugh."