



## Wanderer Series: The historic Tiffin Glass Museum has its own reasons to shine



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TIFFIN — Nestled amid a row of local businesses across the street from the Ritz theater, the Tiffin Glass Museum might not seem like much from the outside, but within glass treasures and rarities shimmer in abundance.

Many of the pieces can even be purchased at astonishingly low prices.

“In the backroom we have seven to eight hundred pieces of handmade Tiffin stemware, we actually sell it cheaper than if you go to Walmart,” said Paul Coffman, President of Tiffin Glass Collectors Club and Docent at the Tiffin Glass Museum.

Located at 27 S Washington St., the museum was founded to honor and preserve the heritage established by the men and women of Tiffin’s original

glass factory. Operating for nearly 24 years and run entirely by volunteers, the museum offers a glimpse into the history of glass production in Tiffin.

“It was sold worldwide as the United States Glass Company product. Tiffin was a division of the United States Glass Company called factory R. There were 17 factories in the United States Glass Company spread out through Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Ohio,” Mr. Coffman said. “We had [this] one in Tiffin, and it was the largest of the entire group.”

Mr. Coffman is a passionate glass researcher and tour guide for the museum. He said it’s the rich history and exciting finds that keep him going through the tedious work.

“Love of history got me involved in this whole thing. It’s not difficult, it’s just tedious work to see so much and you have to go back and try to pick up on something you read somewhere else,” Mr. Coffman said.

Always on the hunt for another intriguing story or historic item for the museum, Mr. Coffman has helped the Tiffin Glass Museum procure a massive collection of memorabilia.

Displaying antique or vintage glass, production tools, factory photos, oddities and engraving plates, the museum allows visitors to see first-hand the kind of craftsmanship that went into producing the collection of glass on site.

“The factory, finished in 1889, made glass for 91 years,” Mr. Coffman said. “At peak production in the ‘20s, newspapers reported 900 employees and 100,000 pieces of glass a week.”

With high turn over rates and quality work, the glass factory powered through years of production, creating some of the most coveted and specialty glass items in the world.

“People that owned Tiffin Glass were the White House; FDR and Jackie Kennedy both bought Tiffin Glass for the White House. Grace Kelly, when she married Prince Rainier of Monaco, she bought it and took it back to the castle with her,” Mr. Coffman said. “Elvis Presley had it custom made; the gold design that’s on there, he had it put on green glass. He’s the only one who ever had it made.”

Beyond producing work for celebrities and presidential customers, the factory was also commissioned to create a very special and expensive set of glass, which is often overlooked these days in antique stores. Luckily, the museum was able to collect some of the pieces before they were lost with time.

“Boeing aircraft company ordered a set of Tiffin Glass for the Shah of Iran. They paid \$270 a piece in advance to have it made,” Mr. Coffman said. “Shah never saw a piece of it; he got thrown out of the country before it was ever shipped. So the company had it in the warehouse, paid for and they threw it on the market. Now it shows up in antique shops and flea markets for \$3 to \$5.”

The factory was not only known for its celebrity interests. Over the years, glass factories all over the United States were experimenting with new color formulas, searching for the next big thing. For Tiffin, the next big thing was a color they never saw coming.

“Neodymium Oxalate, the company made it up, chemical engineers came up with the formula, perfect except production room lights were incandescent light bulbs,” Mr. Coffman said. “Put it in the boss's office, he had fluorescent light bulbs, it changes to blue.”

The lilac colored glass is displayed in cases inside the museum, lit with incandescent bulbs to show the purple hue. They even have some of it for sale in their back room.

“We have that Twilite that changes color, this just came in,” said Nancy Coffman touching pieces of the softly colored glass. Mrs. Coffman is Paul’s wife and a volunteer at the museum. “It’s blue here but it will turn purple or the lilac color.”

During tours, Mr. Coffman pulls out pieces of the glass to show how a change of light completely alters the color. He even shows how other companies tried to replicate the color changing glass.

To Marissa Stephens, stakeholder relations and marketing manager for Destination Seneca County, this part of the experience is the most interesting.

“My favorite part is when Paul does the light trick,” Ms. Stephens said. “They put the glass under the light to show someone was trying to copy

what Tiffin Glass was doing. That's my favorite part because I remember seeing it when I was little and doing my tour of Tiffin, but also because it shows that Tiffin Glass was making something really unique."

Along with color changing pieces, the museum holds an even more intriguing set of glass. While the glass goes by many names, it has one special feature: it glows in UV light.

"This we call canary, it's yellow and dipped in acid. Other companies made it and called it Vaseline glass, Vaseline glass collectors call it Uranium glass because uranium oxide makes this color," Mr. Coffman said.

And for those who worry about the safety of the glowing glass...

"No you won't get radiation off of it," he continued.

With such unique pieces and a delightful team of volunteers, the museum draws enthusiasts from around the world.

"Folks from all over, not just the United States but from other countries as well, come to the Tiffin Glass Museum and it really brings this piece of history of the city to life," Ms. Stephens said. "The Tiffin Glass Museum and the Tiffin Glass factory were a huge part of what put Tiffin on the map."

According to Ms. Stephens, the museum also boosts the local economy.

"When they come to the museum they may purchase some glass that catches their eye, but also a lot of times they are eating at restaurants or they are staying in hotels or shopping at other boutiques so it really helps us to have destinations like that glass museum that bring people in and they are spending the money locally. That helps our economy be boosted," she said.

With such a momentous amount of glass to care for, preserve, and sell, the museum can never get enough volunteers. Contributing to the town and maintaining the legacy of hundreds of glass factory workers, the museum serves as a pillar of what Tiffin stands for and where the town came from.

"A lot of times people don't think about Tiffin as a place that there is a lot to do and I would say give it a try. You're definitely sure to find something that you are interested in, you're for sure going to find something that you didn't know about," Ms. Stephens said. "For the museum, we can't thank

the volunteers and the people that run it and have a passion for it enough, and we hope that inspires the next generation.”

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