

BIBLICAL HISTORY CENTER



It was, I have to admit, not a promising start. My anticipation had been high as I joined a group headed for the Biblical History Center, the interactive museum of daily life in biblical times founded by internationally respected archaeologist James Fleming some 10 years ago in LaGrange. Everything I had heard about the center, formerly known as Explorations in Antiquity, had been positive: knowledgeable guides, authentic artifacts, full-scale archaeological replicas, painless learning experiences, fun times.

Still, as our vehicle rounded a curve, passing a beauty salon, a forklift business and then – not kidding – a mental health clinic, my inner skeptic reared its head. How could “the Bible come to life,” on something called Gordon Commercial Drive? I still can’t answer that, but I can tell you, without a doubt, it does. It truly does.

And not in some hokey, cheesy way. The Biblical History Center is a serious place of learning and scholarship, yet



welcoming, entertaining and fully fascinating to anyone with a decent level of curiosity about what life was like in biblical days. It’s the real deal, not a Disneyland of ancient times.

“I hope to make the scriptures jump off the page,” said Vern, a retired military chaplain who was our guide, as he opened the Biblical Life Artifacts Gallery. Within seconds, he was doing exactly that. The hair on the back of my neck stood up as he pointed out actual tools and implements from the time of Abraham and Sarah.

I saw a jar like the one the Samaritan woman brought to the well. Coins that could have been the widow’s mite. Weights that had helped cast nets and ancient anchors used by fishermen on the Sea of Galilee.

“I can’t believe this is here,” said my traveling companion, and with good reason. Only four museums in the U.S. have artifacts on long-term loan from the Israel Antiquities Center. Three are in major cities. LaGrange has the fourth, the only one in the Southeast and, with 250 artifacts, the largest collection. Like I said, the real deal.

Vern opened another door and led us outside into the “scripture garden,” with carefully-created areas depicting the Life of the Shepherd, Life of the Farmer and Life of the Village in both Old and New Testament times. The attention to detail is jaw-dropping. Even the plants are those that grow in the holy

land. A crowing rooster, which has the run of the place, provides an authentic soundtrack.

Sitting on a primitive stool under a goat-haired tent, I listened in wonder as Vern described how girls began weaving at young ages, section by section, creating the tent-covering that would become their adult home after marriage. The loosely woven goat’s hair looked vulnerable to rain, a tour member suggested. “Not so,” said Vern. It swells when wet, creating a waterproof surface. Who knew?

Well, Vern knew, that and much more. At every stop – the sheep fold, the rock-cut tombs, the grape press, the watch tower, the threshing floor, the olive press, the aqueduct, the city gate, the crucifixion tree – fascinating stories spilled out, creating lightbulb moments. “I’ve heard about that all my life but never understood it, until now,” a visitor blurted out.

I shared her wonder. At last I know how – and why – they separated the sheep from the goats.

Many group tours begin or end with a biblical meal, served in a room decorated as in the Roman Period. Teachers explain the customs, foods and manners of a First Century meal to help interpret the scene and meaning of the Last Supper. (Hint: Da Vinci’s famous painting is beautiful, but not very accurate.)

We spent most of an afternoon strolling through the Biblical History Center and could have stayed longer. Dr. Fleming says he’s not done yet. Long-range plans include additional development on a large plot of adjacent land. My future visit might last all day.

As I think back, the unlikely location of the Biblical History Center – along a busy road near an industrial park – turned out to be one of its charms. And a symbol of sorts. Biblical history, after all, is filled with unlikely settings, including a manger, a hillside, a tomb.

Somehow, it all fits. It works.

I left feeling wiser. And uplifted.

Vern had done his job. The scriptures really did jump off the page. ▯



MEET MISTY REE

My tourist gene runs deep. I love to go, to see, to do. I am always ready to eat, shop, play, listen, view, wander or try something new. I want you to go along with me, at least in spirit. We’ll visit some familiar places and others off the beaten path, from one end of beautiful Troup County to the other. To make our journeys more interesting, I am going incognito. You won’t see me coming. You won’t know where I am going next.

If you have a suggestion of a place I ought to visit, just drop a line to my buddy Dave Marler, Tourism Director at the Chamber. (dave@lagrangechamber.com). Tell him you have a message for Troup’s Mystery Traveler, or use my nickname: Misty Ree.

TEN YEARS AND COUNTING

Biblical History Center (BHC), 130 Gordon Commercial Drive, LaGrange, is celebrating its 10th anniversary in 2016.

Not related to any one denomination, BHC welcomes all visitors who want to experience the ancient biblical world, its history and culture.

In addition to tours and biblical meals, the museum offers a variety of activities and special seasonal programs, many of them in the Roman-style amphitheater on site. Upcoming events include “Follow the Cross” walks, a Good Friday Reflection, Holy Saturday multi-media presentation and Easter Sunrise celebration in March, as well as Roman Army Day on May 7, featuring a re-enactment by soldiers of Legion XI.

Special activities for children and youth include kids’ digs, the shepherd’s breadmaking experience and, in summer, Bible Lands Adventure camps.

On Feb. 29-March 2, founder James Fleming, an expert in biblical geography, will lead the spring conference, featuring eight lectures and other activities on The Land of the Bible. The center also offers travel opportunities with its Mediterranean Study Tours.

Details, complete calendar and directions are available at the website: BiblicalHistoryCenter.com or by calling 706-885-0360.

