



PHOTOS BY KATHY SMILEY/Eastern Colorado News

Left photo, Laurelin Kruse, founder of the Mobile Museum of American Artifacts, accepts a plastic squirt gun for the museum from Strasburg resident Erica Kramer, 9, during the museum's stop at Byers General Store Oct. 13. Kruse says that the museum presents an "archaeology of the present" with objects of significant — and insignificant — connection to everyday American life. Right, Maura Kramer, 6, of Strasburg contemplates the collection.

## Museum of the present features personal items, their tales

by **Kathy Smiley**  
Staff Writer

**BYERS** — A shotgun casing and a plastic water gun were among the items donated by locals when a mobile museum traveling across America made a stop in Byers this month.

The Mobile Museum of American Artifacts (MMoAA) was at Byers General Store for four hours the afternoon and evening of Oct. 13. The tiny museum housed in a converted 10-foot vintage trailer displays personal artifacts and their stories, collecting more at each stop.

Laurelin Kruse, an artist who was born and raised in Alamosa, says that, through the project, she is conducting an "archaeology of the present" that uncovers objects of significant — and insignificant — connection to everyday American life.

Kruse, 26, founded the mobile museum in July 2014 in collaboration with the Connecticut nonprofit arts organization Artspace New Haven. She was also selected as a National Arts Strategies Creative Community Fellow to develop the project.

A Yale University graduate, she envisioned the Mobile Museum of American Artifacts after working several jobs in rare books libraries and archives. Raising funds through crowd-sourcing, she purchased a 10-foot long, 1968 Cardinal travel trailer she found in Palm Springs, Calif. She renovated the 40 sq. ft. trailer into a museum that includes exhibition space, archives, a movie theater for one, a library and a gift shop.

In June 2014 she hauled the museum cross country, collecting artifacts and stories along the way.

"I drove straight forward the entire 3,000 miles because I didn't know how to back up a trailer," she said.

Objects currently on display in the museum include a television remote control donated by a Connecticut man who last used it and



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Byers General Store employees Samantha Hagan and Tabitha Trimble pose for a photo after visiting the Mobile Museum of American Artifacts Oct. 13.

its corresponding television to watch the news on Sept. 11, 2011. Prior to that day, the television hadn't been turned on for years. In contrast, three balls formed over 11 years from wax scraped off the surfboard of a Gloucester, Mass., surfer as he cleaned it might fall into the "insignificant" category. A Connecticut woman donated a bib she cross-stitched with the name "Joey" on it, noting that, by the time she finished it, Joey was too old to use it. A 3-year old boy named Lio donated a rattle his musician parents had obtained at a roadside garage sale while they were touring in a motor home. The boy played with the rattle extensively while living in North Carolina, but lost it during a move across country. When rediscovered in a box in storage, Lio had outgrown the toy.

"I don't fact-check anything concerning the artifacts," Kruse said. "It's important that it's the donor's perception and the history is reported exactly as they tell it, unscrutinized."

The museum visits both urban and rural settings to capture con-

trasting stories. Kruse visited 10 cities on the East Coast and collected over 70 American artifacts there. This fall the MMoAA is making its first official visit to the West, visiting Colorado in October and Utah in November. Colorado visits along with Byers included the Children's Museum in Denver, the University of Colorado at Boulder, and the San Luis Valley in southern Colorado.

Kruse has family in Alamosa and Eastern Colorado.

"They're mostly all farmers. This summer I helped with wheat harvest on my grandmother's farm in Woodrow (north of Last Chance, off Highway 36) so I went through Byers every day," she said.

Kruse is enjoying her travels, but admitted that sometimes the logistics of the project get old — like when it's hard to find places to park the museum overnight or the weather is bad. She usually travels with her dog, but sometimes he isn't welcome where she sets up. She is often put up overnight with members of groups who sponsor the museum. She said she tried sleeping in the trailer one night in Arizona, but she'll never do that again.

"It's a cool way of life, but I do swing back and forth," she said. "Sometimes I think maybe I should just stick to writing — something where you don't have to physically manifest your idea and wait for visitors that may or may not come. The next moment I have a good conversation with someone and I think it's great."

Kruse isn't shy about encouraging passersby to take a look. She's

learned a lot about human nature when it comes to her visitors. She said having a sign outside the trailer can encourage people to enter.

"People want to have their experience mediated — they don't want to go into someplace they don't know anything about," she said. "They are afraid I'm selling something. I've also learned that if I sit right by the door, some people won't go in because they don't want to talk to someone."

Kruse has noticed that often a particular artifact is a town favorite. Many visitors in Byers were impressed with the Eastern Woodlands arrowheads a man found in Gloucester, Mass., after looking at one of 17th century explorer Samuel de Champlain's maps of Gloucester Harbor and deciding to search a certain field he suspected would be rich in Indian artifacts.

Around 30 visitors stopped by the museum at the Byers stop. One man donated a shotgun casing, explaining that he shoots prairie dogs — rodents that cause costly damage to crop and pasture land.

"That's a great local story because it's something that people in Boston or Los Angeles aren't going to know about or think about," Kruse said.

She added that getting one or two artifacts from a short visit is typical.

"I was in Gloucester for a month and I got 21 artifacts," she said. "But that took the whole month of people trusting you, knowing you're there, and thinking about it."

Christine Kramer and her three children looked through the display after shopping at the general store and decided on the spur of the moment to make a donation of their own.

"We came out to Byers General today because we needed squirt guns for my son because they had a fundraiser at Strasburg Elementary and tomorrow his whole class gets to shoot the principal (Marc Taylor) with water guns," Kramer said as her story was recorded. "This is the third store I've been to; it's taken me about two hours to get these water guns, so thank goodness for Byers General."

Kruse was pleased with the new acquisition for the MMoAA.

"People all over the country will see your purple squirt gun and read your story," she told the children as they handed it over.

Visit [www.themmoaa.org](http://www.themmoaa.org) for more information on the tour.

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