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## A Heritage for Sale

By JOHN BALZAR



### Commentary

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There is simply no end of the fun that the filthy rich can have. I know, I know, you think I'm about to start up again just because I'm jealous. I'm not filthy rich myself so I'm going to carp about 'em.

OK, true enough. But if I were filthy rich, I wouldn't let the latest opportunity pass me by.

If I were filthy rich, I'd hurry up and fly out to Washington and lay claim to America's heritage. Haven't you heard? The Smithsonian is up for sale.

Yes, the people's museum, the greatest museum in the New World, the storehouse of our culture and our history, is taking bids.

If you've got the cash--and by that I mean a filthy lot of it--you can buy yourself a piece of the Smithsonian and decorate it the way you want. You can tell whatever story you want and however you want to tell it, and never mind what those pointy-headed PhD curators and musty scholars have to say. You know what's up because you are *rich*. What are they? How many Gulfstreams do they have? If they're so smart, how come they aren't rich?

By golly, is this a great country or what?

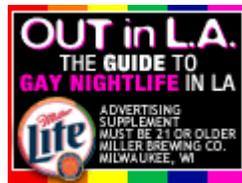
First it was filthy rich Kenneth E. Behring, the real estate mogul and onetime NFL owner. He bought himself a centerpiece wing of the Smithsonian's Natural History Museum, the hall of mammals. Behring likes mammals. He has been going around the world shooting them for years, even endangered ones.

But killing animals and fielding a ho-hum football team are not the stuff of legends. So, in honor of himself, he donated \$20 million to the museum to enlarge the hall of mammals and put his name on it. He even tossed in some trophy pelts. Now we can all enjoy even more dead mammals without having to take the subway trip up to the National Zoo and see the live ones. And Ken can walk into the country club while people whisper admiringly, "Hey, there's the guy who bought out old man Smithson."

Behring went on to donate another \$80 million to slap his name all over the Smithsonian's American History Museum. He was also given rights as an advisor to its future. He brought in his own architect to draw up plans. Smithsonian officials explained, "The museum values Mr. Behring's expertise and insight." Sure.

Trophy-hunting sharpshooters are well known for their insight into what makes America great.

Now it's filthy rich Catherine B. Reynolds who, through the



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foundation she has named for herself, bought her way into the museum business for \$38 million. She gets "hands on" rights to establish a 10,000-square-foot "Spirit of America" exhibit to honor deserving Americans. She's suggested Oprah Winfrey, Martha Stewart and ice skater Dorothy Hamill, among others. Wow, what choices!

The museum said its regents will retain final say on which Americans are celebrated, while Reynolds will only make suggestions. Sure.

Did I mention that her suggestions include 10 of the 15 members who sit on the committee to nominate the American spirits?

Never mind that curators had different priorities for the museum. Never mind that other exhibits were mothballed or put on hold to make way for the whims of these two. Never mind that other Americans--that would be us taxpayers--provide \$494 million to support this museum and its staff of professionals who are supposed to safeguard our heritage.

No, give the rich their say.

When curators and scholars publicly objected to this flimflam, Smithsonian Secretary Lawrence M. Small dispatched a lackey to slap them down with a public proclamation: "To suggest that we have brokered the trust of the American people flies in the face of fact." Sure.

This whole business, I'm afraid, is what politicians have in mind these days when they speak of public-private cooperation. The public--that is, those with money--decide what they want, and the rest of us cooperate. Not so long ago, this was called the economics of a bordello.

But back to my point. What would I do if I were filthy rich? Well, I'd quit whining and buy myself a wing in the Smithsonian. It would feature interactive, virtual reality exhibits where visitors could extract a little well-deserved revenge on the 25 or so notable Americans who have caused us the greatest irritation in our lives.

I'm thinking of a life-sized 3-D hologram where you could watch, say, the judge who broke up the telephone companies as he sat down to eat dinner. Every time the fork went to his mouth, you could speed-dial a phone and interrupt him with an offer to switch phone companies.

Smithsonian curators might devise an exhibit where a hologram of Secretary Small would walk through his museum. He would see a wallet on the marble floor, look furtively around and stoop to pick it up. You could pull a hidden string and yank it right out of his greedy hands.

Or how about sending a hologram Behring into the savanna and giving a paintball gun to the antelope?

Because I'd like to think that, as a filthy rich person, I'd be different from other filthy rich people, I wouldn't design everything myself. I'd ask for your help. Send your choices for irritating people directly to the Smithsonian, c/o Small.

Together, we could promise one thing: Our "Modern Villains" wing would outdraw anything Behring or Reynolds dreamed up.

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