

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



Lucy unveiled after her 2021-22 restoration. Photo: J. Morton Galetto

A Singular Attraction

*National Landmark: Lucy The Elephant
America's Oldest Roadside Attraction*

By J. Morton Galetto

Last summer my friend Christine and I embarked on a multiple-day trek to the South Jersey Shore's nature areas and other outdoor-oriented venues, resulting in a three-part travelogue in SNJ Today.

After leaving Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge we headed to the Marine Mammal Stranding Center, before visiting barrier island nature preserves. Passing through Margate we decided to see New Jersey's famous pachyderm – Lucy. After all, who could resist directional signs marked with an elephant topped by a howdah, and further proclaiming her a National Landmark? Surely not I, which basically meant Christine couldn't either, since I was the designated driver.

Christine, being originally a Yorkie (yes, England), finds Americans' ideas of what's old to be amusing - or "simply rubbish." By English standards Lucy is a pup. But she's *our* pup. So let's venture on, shall we?

As we turned off Ventnor on to N. Decatur Ave. some dust blew off my memories' shelves and I said to Christine, "I think Lucy is getting a spa treatment." Little did I know she would be wrapped from toes to howdah, in a giant cocoon obscuring even a glimpse of her tusks.

This is when I vowed to the readers to return after her unveiling and report on our elephant-sized findings.

Upon our arrival this year at Lucy, the executive director, Richard Helfant, met us in the gift shop at the base of Lucy's feet. By the way, there is not a specialized name for elephant feet - not paws or hooves - simply feet. This might possibly be the only natural history fact that this summertime fun article will impart. For those not in the know I suspect I should mention that Lucy is an elephant with a room - a "folly."

We discussed with Richard how America's oldest roadside attraction came to grace both Margate's shores and her current location.

She was constructed by Philadelphia engineer and land speculator James V. Lafferty, Jr. who hired William Free to design this architectural piece of whimsy. It was constructed in 1881 at a cost of \$25,000-38,000, and was intended as a temporary attraction, or marketing tool, to encourage prospective buyers to purchase his land holdings.

Lucy was originally about 100' further north and 100' foot closer to the shoreline, but

after being buried knee-deep in sand she was moved 100' back. By 1969 Lucy was a decaying shadow of her former self; she had never been intended to be a permanent structure and her functions and ownership between 1881 and 1969 were varied.

In 1887 Lafferty sold Lucy to the Gertzen family and Sophia Gertzen is responsible for having renamed his Elephant Bazaar simply "Lucy."

Later her location was sold by her owners to developers and Lucy was unfortunately not part of the new plan. Had it not been for the Margate Civic Association's *Save the Lucy Committee's* vision, demolition would have been her destiny. (Check out Lucytheelephant.org, which offers many more historic facts.)

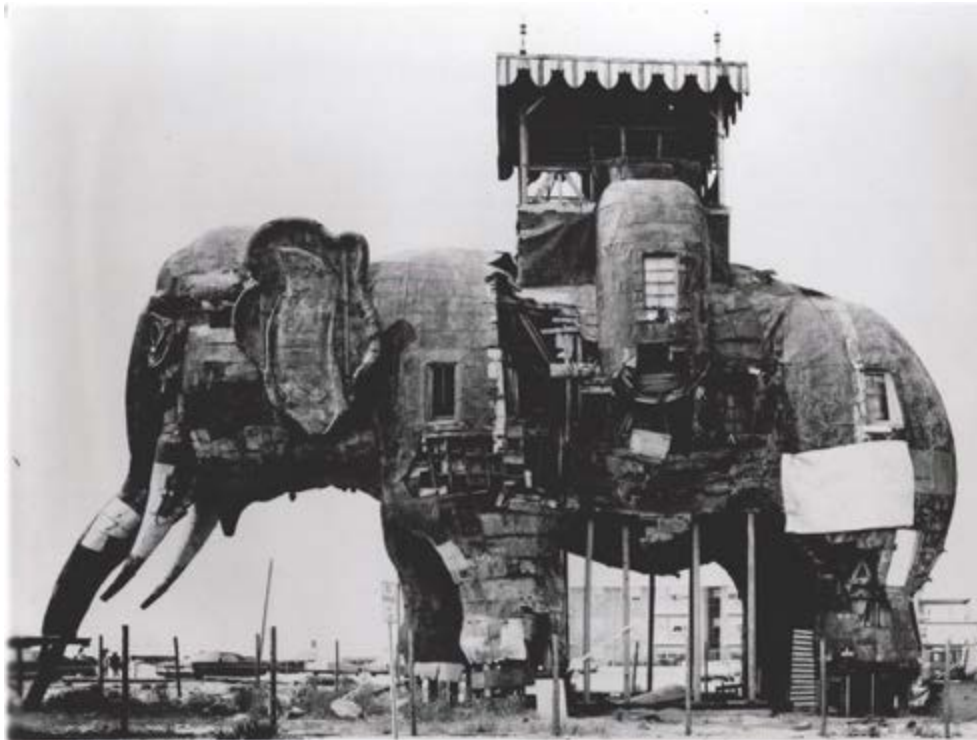
I asked Richard how long he had been associated with Lucy and he told me, "Since I was seven years old."

"Then did you witness her famous hundred-foot two-block move to this location?" I inquired.

He pointed out the window across Decatur. "Yes, from that corner where the gray car is parked. She creaked and jostled about. The house-moving contractors Mullen and Ranalli

voided their contract's guarantee, which promised an intact move, when they realized how frail she was. I remember when she was navigated over a curb how the noises she emitted almost made her seem alive!"

He explained that Atlantic Electric, Bell Telephone, and the cable company all had to detach wires for her six-story frame to navigate Atlantic Ave. The 1970 move to her current location took around eight hours.







In 1969 Lucy was in serious need of an animal hospital. Her eight-hour two-block trek to her current location in 1970 was featured on the back cover of LIFE magazine. Photos: Save the Lucy Committee Archives.

Richard has been the Executive Director since 2000. I asked what he likes best about his job and he replied, "The kids! Their faces when they first see Lucy. The way they talk

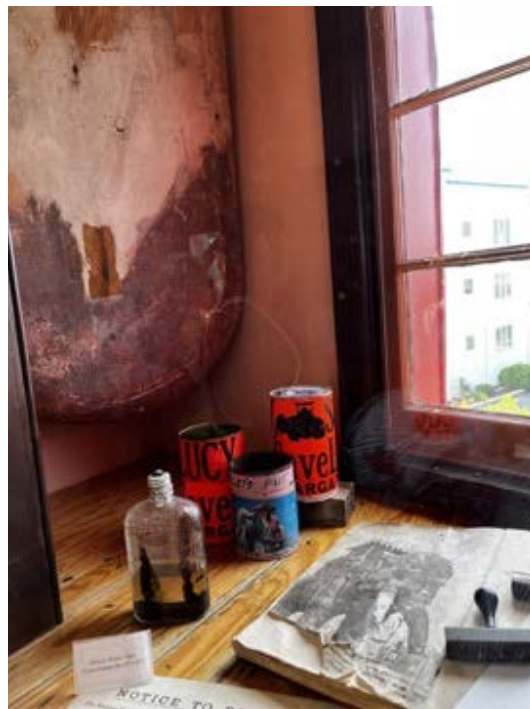
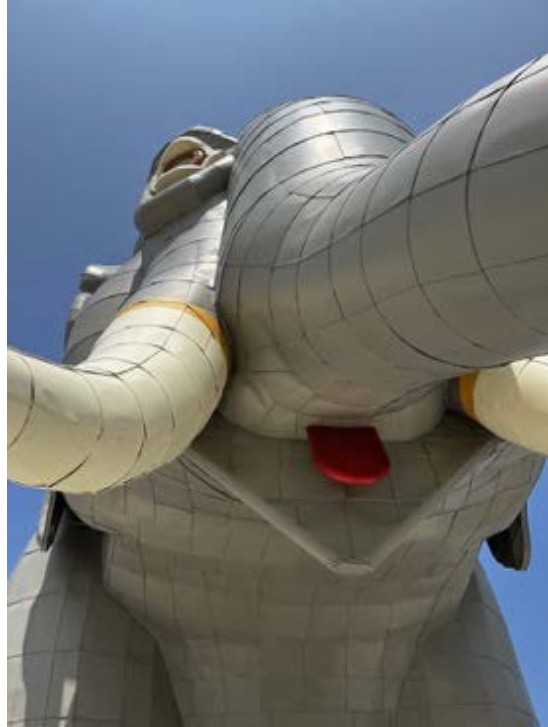
about her as if she is alive. Well, honestly, we all talk about her that way.”

Richard, the Board, staff, and volunteers have taken the organization’s finances from the red into the black and are currently very proud to show off a newly-restored Lucy.

The restoration was supposed to take eight months and cost \$1.2 million, but COVID and the great increase in the price of building materials increased the total to \$2.4 million and fifteen months of work.

Richard hopes to carry on the legacy that Josephine Harron and Ed and Silvia Carpenter spearheaded in establishing the Save Lucy Committee.

During our guided tour with a fellow named Mortimer we learned that the only casualty during Lucy’s 1970 move was her tongue, which I suppose gave her no say about the details of her relocation.



Lucy's original tongue is displayed in a window box in her belly. Her current tongue is in the top photo. Photos: J. Morton Galetto

Tour groups travel up Lucy's spiral wooden staircases, housed within her legs, at 45-minute intervals. There are 25 stairs to climb to her belly and about 32 to the howdah. Once perched in the howdah you have achieved mahout status, and have a great view of some of New Jersey's southern coastline and ocean. From this vantage point you can also see Margate's water tower with its portrait of Lucy, the City's mascot.





Lucy tower over visitor on the shores of Margate, NJ. Photo: J. Morton Galetto.

Mortimer is truly vested in Lucy. He was just a bit quirky but factual enough to hold the attention of our tour group. He relayed the history of her ownership as well as the storms and weather that continually challenge Lucy's existence. He also discussed

her most recent renovation and a strange overnight Airbnb fundraiser.

Mortimer mused that since Lucy predated the Statute of Liberty by three years, immigrants would have quite possibly been treated to a look at this sixty-five-foot-tall elephant from eight miles off shore. What might they have thought about a new world with six-story tall elephants?

Lucy lore also relates that during prohibition a green light was lit in her right eye to signal that the coast was clear for bringing contraband ashore, and a red light meant authorities represented a threat. Recently this story was confirmed by some old timers familiar with the details; the organization continues to uncover historical facts and sort them from the fiction that has arisen around Lucy.

Currently in the works is the demolition of the gift shop and the establishment of a new visitors' center, which will allow those who can't climb stairs to have a virtual visit with Lucy while viewing her from the outside. It will also enable the organization to provide a larger gift shop to generate the proceeds that feed the beast!



Conceptual plan of the proposed new welcome center by SOCH Architects of Atlantic City. Projected completion date is 2025.

I hope that in their shop they will offer some children's books about the natural history of elephants and their plight. And for the adults, permit me to recommend Carl Safina's *Beyond Words, What Animals Think and Feel*. After all, what better way to learn about what animals experience than to explore the world of elephants?

Since the advent of the car, roadside attractions have long been a part of America's travel heritage. For the neighbors they arouse mixed reactions. Honestly, I'd rather not look out of my bedroom window at Paul Bunyan or a dinosaur. But like her or

not, Lucy is iconic in Margate and worth a quirky tour.

There is plenty of room in the elephant for your visit. So take some time to enjoy a fun friend or family day and enter the belly of the beast!



Lucy under wraps in summer 2022. Photo: Author.



THE ELEPHANT

A U.S. National Historic Landmark
& the World's Greatest ELEPHANT
Located in Margate, NJ

- 1881
James Lafferty of Philadelphia builds Elephant Bazaar.
- 1887
Lafferty sells Elephant Bazaar to Anton Gertzen.
- 1902
Sophia Gertzen renames Elephant Bazaar "Lucy the Elephant" & turns it into a tavern.
- 1903
Lucy becomes the summer residence to a British doctor and his family.
- 1970
The Gertzens donate Lucy to the newly-formed Save Lucy Committee, Inc.; Lucy is moved to her new home and restoration begins.
- 1974
Lucy re-opens to the public after 12 years.
- 1976
Lucy is designated as a National Historic Landmark.
- 2000
Restoration is completed.
- 2023
Lucy reopens after a 15 month 2.4-million-dollar restoration of her exterior. On July 22 Lucy celebrated her 142th birthday.

Timeline Source 1881 – 2000 from lucytheelephant.org – This official website of Lucy the Elephant offers many interesting historical facts about our local pachyderm.