

A smelly, squishy exhibit at the Peggy Notebaert Museum is a big hit with an audience fascinated by crime-scene investigation

Easy to stomach—at least for kids

By William Mullen
Tribune staff reporter

Perhaps no exhibit in the history of museums anywhere has stunk up the place more than "The Disappearing Pig Program" this summer at the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum.

Its concept is simple: Set out carcasses of dead pigs in a sunny museum side yard and let nature take its course. Within minutes, they are covered with blow flies. Within hours the pig bodies bloat and emit a putrid smell of rotting flesh.

Within a day or two, they are ripe with masses of maggots—the perfect time to invite schoolchildren out of the museum to don rubber gloves and poke around the deteriorating bodies.

The museum has six pig carcasses in its yard and adds a fresh carcass every week or two.

"It's hard to explain it to somebody without seeing it because it sounds so macabre," said Cheryl Main, a museum exhibit coordinator who runs the exhibit.

"But once we have people out here, they are absolutely fascinated and riveted by the lessons."

The pig exhibit is an adjunct to a much larger, more conventional show in the museum, "CSI: Crime Scene Insects."

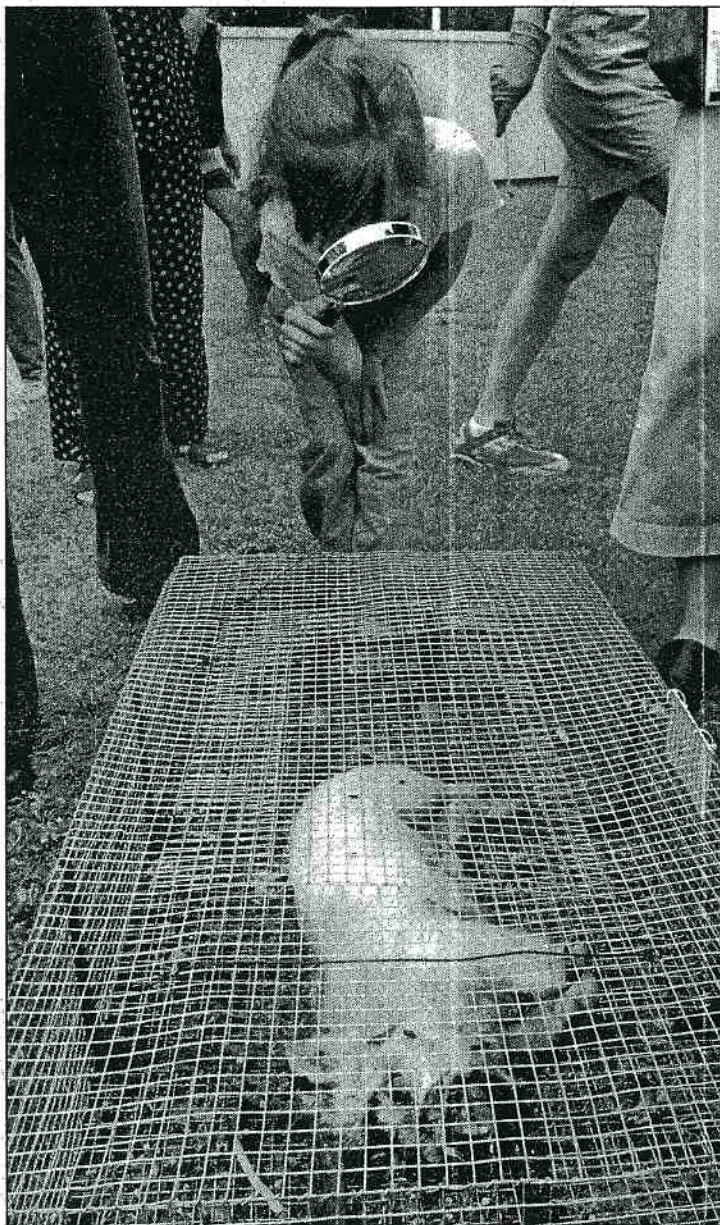
The museum has barely mentioned the pig exhibit in its publicity, but it has proved extremely popular with visitors.

"Pick it up!" a group of children shouted on a recent afternoon to a museum aide who was standing over a flattened pig carcass. "Turn it over!"

That pig was in its final stage of decomposition. As the aide turned it over, the skin was all that held the skeleton in place. A few beetles, cleaning up on what little flesh remained, scurried away.

"My gosh!" gasped Madeline Karp, 6, squatting next to the carcass. "That's cool!"

She and the other children had already been through the "CSI" exhibit, which uses models and video to explain how entomologists help detectives solve murders by studying bugs attracted to dead bodies.



Tribune photo by Kuni Takahashi

Madeline Karp, 6, studies a pig carcass, part of an exhibit on how entomologists help solve murders by examining bugs.

The traveling show, inspired by the immense popularity of the TV crime-scene investigation series on CBS, has drawn good crowds, said Doug Taron, museum biology curator.

"But we wanted to impart a vivid, real-life experience of what forensic entomologists actually encounter in their work," Taron said, prompting the Notebaert staff to design the secondary exhibit.

Not sure how it would be received by the public, the mu-

seum offers "Disappearing Pig" as a guided tour once a day at 1 p.m. weekdays, limited to the first 20 or so to sign up. On Saturday and Sunday, it is offered at 11:30 a.m. and 1 p.m.

Taron said visitors are warned of the frank nature of the exhibit. Most days the guided tours are full, he said, and the museum has received no complaints.

Madeline was absolutely riveted by the sight of Mother Nature at work on the pigs.

"At first I was a little bit disgusted, but I learned a lot," she said. "I like animals and I like science. I learned that bugs aren't that disgusting. They're actually interesting."

Main said she has been astonished by the intense interest children show in the pig exhibit.

"When the idea for the program was first suggested, I, for one, certainly thought a bunch of dead pigs in the back yard wasn't going to fly as an exhibit," she said.

"Since it opened [June 5], there has not ever been one visitor to my knowledge who has not been totally engaged by this as they have moved through it. It is thrilling to see the eagerness to learn and the interest in the science.

"The smell is a little off-putting when they first come out, but once we start talking about and showing how successions of bug communities take over the body in different stages of decomposition, they are fascinated."

Under Main's guidance and that of other trained staff, the visitors—the children usually are most eager—collect maggots and other insects, viewing them under microscopes and magnifying glasses, learning which eat the pigs and which eat the insects eating the pigs.

The carcasses in the exhibit come from a Kane County pig farmer. They are animals that have died of natural causes on the farm.

The museum stores the carcasses in a freezer, pulling out a new one periodically.

"We settled on using pigs because forensic entomologists are trained on pig carcasses because they have a body density and bone-to-muscle ratio similar to humans," Taron said.

Cheryl Haugen brought her son, Chris, 9, and daughter, Emma, 7, to the "CSI" exhibit.

"I didn't know about this part of the exhibit, but once we [got] out here, I think it's just excellent," Haugen said.

"How often do you get to see things decomposing up close? The kids have been genuinely fascinated by it, so how can you argue with that?"