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## LeClaire, Iowa — American Pickers, “Buffalo Bill” and the Mighty Mississippi

by Marilyn Jones

LeClaire, Iowa, is the perfect stop-off for a quick meal, a little shopping and great views of the Mississippi. This quiet little river town, just north of Interstate-80, also features the William Cody Museum celebrating local history and LeClaire's hometown hero. “Buffalo Bill” was born two miles north of town and lived in the city as a child.

But recently, three locals, a white van, and a gray-painted cinderblock building are adding even more visitors to the daily tally. Every week Mike Wolfe and Frank Fritz [travel](#) the back roads of America looking for treasure while Danielle Colby Cushman takes care of business in LeClaire. American Pickers has become one of the History Channel's most popular shows drawing audiences as varied as the items they find and buy for resale.

Wolfe, Fritz and Colby Cushman take viewers across the nation as they look for antiques and collectables for their businesses — Wolfe's Antique Archeology and Fritz's online store Frank Fritz Finds.

From antique dealers to junkyard owners the men find collectables and other treasures in the most unusual places making the show interesting and educational.

### Visiting LeClaire

LeClaire has always been known for its location and river traffic. Situated on the point where the Mississippi River makes a sharp turn to the West, it runs southwesterly for fifteen miles and was once the site of the Upper Rock Island Rapids.

Dangerous to navigate during the 1840's to 1910 because of high rocks and a narrow twisting channel,

LeClaire also was known for its very capable river pilots.



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The community — named for Antoine LeClaire, one of the founders of Davenport, Iowa — began when three white families moved to the area in 1829.

Although American Pickers is gaining in popularity, LeClaire will always be known as the birthplace of William "Buffalo Bill" Cody. Iowa became the 29th state in 1846. In April of that year Cody was born in a log cabin two miles northwest of LeClaire.

By the late 1890's the railroad came through town, and wing dams and support walls were built on the upper Mississippi making nearly every channel navigable. These events caused a decline in the need for river pilots and river traffic reached a low point — logs and lumber were now being transported by rail. Farming became more popular with the decline in river-related employment.

For a three-dimensional look at LeClaire's past, there's no better place than the Buffalo Bill Museum.



The museum name is deceiving. Although there is a small section about the town's famous son, most of the museum deals with the thousands of other Iowans who lived and worked in LeClaire for nearly two centuries and beyond when American Indians lived along the river.

Another famous LeClaire resident featured in the museum is James Ryan who invented the seat belt, crash bumpers for cars and the flight recorder — the "black box" used on airplanes.

Other exhibits illustrate the pearl button industry, home life, fashion trends and the Lone Star, a wooden-hull sternwheeler currently being restored. The sternwheeler was the last wooden-hulled, coal-fired steamboat operating on the river.

## Antique Archeology

Visit the museum in the morning and Antique Archeology in the afternoon for a real LeClaire experience.



The famous storefront is quiet and seems abandoned, that is until the shop opens in the afternoon. Your first task is finding a place to park, but the walk is worth it especially when the "boys" are in town, or Danielle is behind the counter. Mike's brother Robbie is often on site building shipping crates or loading merchandise in vehicles with license plates from all over the United States.

Other helpful employees show merchandise and ring up the most popular products — T-shirts and ball caps.

"You want to know about Mike, Frank and Danielle?" says Peggy, an employee at the BP store and filling station next



