

APRIL 2011

Acres of Antiques

Vito and Mary Ellen Sico started out buying antiques to furnish their first home. Their collection grew into a business, and today it's the inspiration for the Liberty Antiques Festival, a twice-a-year event that attracts hundreds of vendors and thousands of shoppers from nearly two dozen states.

by Chip Womick



It's not a complaint, really.

"This place is too big," a woman in the crowd says. "There's too much to see."

The place is a field on a 100-acre farm south of the Randolph County town of Liberty.

Too much to see?

Judge for yourself. On the last Friday and Saturday every April and September, close to 400 dealers from more than 20 states set up shop here under tents and tarps to sell antiques and collectibles. They're here for the Liberty Antiques Festival.

Do you want 18th-, 19th-, or 20th-century furniture? Pottery, paintings, toys, or dolls? Or are you

looking for jewelry? Glass? Quilts? Hubcaps? Mirrors? Marbles? Clocks? This place is full of such items.

Or maybe you're in pursuit of talking machines, thimbles, tools, or postcards. You'll find them here, along with oil lamps, fishing lures, gas pumps, and photographs.

OK, there is a lot to see, which is why thousands of shoppers attend the festival, many of them twice each year. It's hard to imagine someone wandering up and down the 30-foot-wide grass aisles for an hour or two, talking to vendors whose knowledge of their wares borders on encyclopedic, and not finding what they came looking for. Or something they just can't go home without.

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Unique finds

Ben Blake of Montgomery County filled the back of his SUV with treasures at the festival this past fall. Among his bounty: an antique grandfather clock; a Victorian corner chair; a milk-glass hobnail pitcher; a Pennsylvania Dutch doll cradle; old handkerchiefs; and more. Some of the pieces are destined to decorate his home, some for resale in his Mount Gilead art and antiques shop.

Kelly Barkman of Greensboro totes a pair of wooden Witco figures, which she calls mid-century modern art. She bought them as Christmas presents for her sister, who collects the primitive-looking carvings. Barkman requested time off from work to come to the festival. She comes twice a year.

"I collect junk," she says, grinning.

Michael Wagoner of Winston-Salem, who says he's never smoked a cigarette, fills his vendor space with tobacco-related memorabilia, from snuff tins to old cigarette vending machines bearing tags that still advertise a pack of smokes for 40 cents.

"A lot of folks are buying these and restoring them and putting them in man caves and garages," Wagoner says.

Carolyn Partin of Lillington faithfully attends the festival. She comes in search of McCoy pottery, which she has been collecting for about 30 years.

"I heard that there was no more McCoy because there was a woman in Lillington that bought it all," Partin's cousin, Joann Britt, chimes in.

Britt was kidding, of course. At the festival, Partin found — and bought — a McCoy wishing-well vase.

Partin praises the wares found at the Liberty festival.

"It has good quality stuff," she says. "They don't have the rinky-dink fairground stuff."

There's nothing rinky-dink about the offerings from Joy and George Shivar of Huntersville. Under their awning, shoppers see historical artifacts from the colonial period, the Civil War, World Wars I and II, and items related to the United States presidency and black history. Two examples: a 1952 travel guide that let black travelers know where they could find accommodations and restaurants that

would serve them, and a WWII recruiting poster featuring United States Army Pvt. Joe Louis, who was the heavyweight boxing champion of the world at the time.

Elaine Williams's booth has vintage dresses, hats, suitcases, spice tins, and more. She says the variety of offerings at the Liberty festival and the affordable prices make the show an amazing event.

"On a shoestring budget, you could furnish your own house if you know how to shop," says Williams, who runs a collectibles shop in Greenville.

Another booth offers a mind-boggling assortment of antique metal chocolate molds and vintage pewter ice cream molds. One candy mold, a Santa figure standing several feet tall, has a jaw-dropping price tag of \$140,000.

"Very simply, we don't want to sell it," says Jim Baughman, explaining that it's one of only three such molds in the world and was made in Germany in the 1920s.

Some people buy the molds to make candy, Baughman says; others purchase the shiny metal objects to use as decorations.

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Top of the list

Jim Mills and his wife, Elaine, who have been married 55 years, travel to Liberty from Albemarle to set up a booth every six months. He used to buy and sell a lot of tools until the inventory got too heavy to lug around anymore. Old trunks are a specialty now, along with antique banks, mechanical contraptions, such as the one with a magician who makes coins disappear like a rabbit in a hat.

Since Jim retired after a career in education, they've been traveling to sell their stuff at shows far and wide, from Massachusetts to Key West, Florida. He rates the Liberty festival at the top of the list.

"I say, basically, it is best because of the quality of stuff they have here," he says. "It's all good stuff that covers a wide range, jewelry to kitchenware to furniture."

At a booth around a corner, two men dicker over a tall and very old piece of handmade furniture. As it turns out, both of the men are dealers. One of them, David Evans of Walterboro, South Carolina, says the piece is a milk safe that dates to 1830.

"And most likely slave-made," he adds. "It's pure and original and so folksy with those feet. It's not even finished. And I love it. I think it's outstanding."

The milk safe, which stands 79 inches tall, belongs to the other man, Tom Ineson of Mill Spring. His business card identifies him as Tom the Picker, who will buy most anything old — one at a time or entire estates. Ineson says he's never taken the milk safe to a show before.

"There's probably not a soul that walked by and didn't stop to look at it," he says. "And some people loved it, and some people thought it was a chicken hutch."

Finally, Ineson and Evans strike a deal. Evans says he will be back later to pick up the milk safe — and

cannot wait to see it standing in his antiques store: “It’s just a showstopper.”

Ineson says he sets up at 46 shows each year. Picking the top one, he adds, is easy.

“This is the best show in the country. I will tell you ... the man that runs this show is the best in the business.”

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A taste for older things

The man who runs the show is Vito Sico. The old saying that behind every successful man is a woman does not apply in his case. Behind Vito stand two women — his wife, Mary Ellen, and their longtime friend, Janet Hill.

“He knows his antiques, and all the dealers love that,” Mary Ellen says of her husband.

She shares an example of his knowledge of antiques: He sold one table and made enough money to buy their home when they moved to North Carolina.

The trio started the festival nearly 20 years ago.

“It was kind of a fluke,” says Hill, who sold the Sicos their house when they moved to Liberty from New Jersey in the 1980s.

When they first married and Vito was still in school, the couple did a lot of shopping in “junk shops” to furnish their living quarters. Over time, they acquired a taste for older things. They also acquired quite a lot of older things. In a few years, they filled every nook and cranny of storage space they had with stuff. Their antiques spilled over into friends’ garages. It seemed logical to open an antiques store, she says, although they had never run a business. They leased a building, and business boomed. Five years later, they bought their own building.

They moved south because Mary Ellen’s father retired to North Carolina and urged them to move to the Tar Heel state. They visited one Easter and bought a house before they returned home. Hill, apparently, is quite the salesperson.

Somewhere along the way, Vito mentioned his idea for organizing an outdoor antiques festival. Hill told him about the farm just south of Liberty that had been in her family for decades. Hill’s great-grandfather bought the land, and her parents later ran a dairy on the place. After the dairy closed in 1987, beef cattle roamed the pastures.

“One thing led to another, and here we are, 20 years later,” Mary Ellen says. “And 20 years older.”

“Of course, you fit in better,” Hill quips.

Shortly before the first festival, a storm dumped five inches of rain, turning the former pasture into a quagmire. But 80 vendors showed up to sell wares. Hill recalls her father and brother using a tractor to pull vendors and their vehicles through the muck to their assigned places. A Charlotte food vendor engaged to feed the sellers never showed up. So, Hill’s mother cooked up a big batch of stew, and her

father grilled burgers. (Family members have helped make the festival a success from the beginning, Mary Ellen says.) They fed the crowd like it was a family picnic.

In the end, the food snafu turned out to be a good thing, leading to camaraderie among organizers and vendors, and setting wheels in motion for a tradition that continues — a much-anticipated pig pickin' for vendors on the farm the night before each show opens.

“Well, they’re like family now,” Mary Ellen says.

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10-mile yard sale

Over the years, the Sicos, Hill, and company have found themselves out in torrential downpours in the middle of the night during festivals, helping hold poles to keep vendors’ tents from blowing away, using every towel they owned to help dry furniture and other wares.

On festival weekends, Friday morning starts, slam-bang, with vehicles backed up on the narrow two-lane road leading to the festival site and hundreds of people in line, waiting for the steam whistle to blow, signaling the 8 a.m. start of the event that has been voted the best show in the mid-Atlantic region. The show goes on rain or shine.

“It’s like having a baby,” Hill says. “You’re going to the hospital when it’s time — and you’re going to have that show.”

The surrounding countryside transforms, too, not just the old Pike farm. Essentially, there’s a 10-mile yard sale, stretching from Liberty to the nearby town of Siler City, as individuals try to piggyback on the popular festival.

“The whole town of Liberty turns into a yard sale,” says Carole Langley, who works in the information booth, makes announcements, and keeps things lighthearted over the loudspeaker. If asked, she’ll sing “Happy Birthday” to a festival patron or vendor.

“I have to know everything,” she adds, smiling.

One thing she knows is that you never know who may show up at the festival. She knows that actors Bruce Willis and Demi Moore came one year. And she knows that another movie star, Julia Roberts, a friend of a vendor, has been, too.

Festivalgoers can find tasty food, including carnival fare such as kettle corn, funnel cakes, frozen and dipped cheesecake, blooming onions, and homemade ice cream made on the spot using a chugging 1937 John Deere hit-and-miss engine to power the churn. As they have for years, the youth group from Harmony Baptist Church in the nearby town of Ramseur sells hot dogs, grilled chicken sandwiches, sausage dogs, and good old Southern homemade desserts.

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Social gathering

Nancy and Norman Conover of Greensboro were the first vendors to sign up for the first Liberty Antiques Festival. She died in 2005 at age 84; he was 89 when he died two years later. Their booth still occupies the same space it has from the beginning, manned by their children, who always showed up to help anyway.

These days, Conover grandchildren and great-grandchildren fill the booth. It's a family tradition. Wares for sale still include the North Carolina pottery Nancy collected and the wooden duck decoys that Norman loved.

"We do this so we can see all the people we see every six months," says daughter Judy Conover of Oak Ridge. "It's more like a social event now."

Linda Emory of Mebane recalls when the space she and her mom, Nita Emory, now deceased, rented at the Liberty festival was a 10-foot square. On this day, Emory sits under a white tent that looks like a circus big top, in a spot that measures 50 feet square. It's Saturday morning, the second day of the festival, and customers amble among the aisles. Emory says traffic is nothing compared to the day before.

She and her kin — eight family members bring this show on the road — arrived in Liberty with a 40-foot truck filled with antiques. It's virtually empty now, she says. The reason that the tent offers aisles with plenty of elbow room now is because customers have bought so much, including 160 pieces of furniture, sterling silver, dolls, Depression glass — and 1,000 rolling pins.

According to checks Emory received, customers hailed from as far away as California and Connecticut, with healthy representation from several states closer to home, including South Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee, and Maryland.

Shortly after lunchtime on Saturday, a man and a woman exit at the front gate, joining a steady stream of shoppers laden with their purchases. The woman is carrying a bag, and the man, a small cabinet with a glass front.

"Well," he says, "at least we didn't spend too much more money than if we'd gone golfing."

Liberty Antiques Festival

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