



Smaller antique vendors bask in Springfield's glow

Venue owners share how they have built successful businesses that support tourism

By Michelle Sullivan
Contributing Writer

Springfield is known throughout the Midwest and beyond for its realm of antique dealers. From massive, nationally recognized malls to humble vintage shops, the city has earned a solid reputation among avid collectors, many of whom travel from state to state in search of the prime spots for antiques.

Anecdotal evidence aside, 13 out of the top 20 keyword searches on Springfield's website are directly related to antiques, said Chris Schutte, director of the Greater Springfield Convention Visitors Bureau.

"We absolutely use it as a marketing tool — and to a certain degree, to brand Springfield," he said. Sections in visitor's guides dedicated to antiques as well as standalone publications developed specifically for collectors help target the antique market.

While the major attractions, such as the Heart of Ohio Antique Center and the Springfield Antique Center, draw in hundreds of thousands of visitors each year alone, the smaller and lesser-known vendors also play a major role in tourism, he said.

We talked to the owners of several local antique venues about the business behind antiques and how they use Springfield's draw to their advantage.

Honeycreek Galleries reminiscent of a simpler time

It was Linda Campbell's longtime dream to own a little antique shop. Growing up, she had a fascination with old things and still has some of her great-grandmother's keepsakes in her home.

"I always held an affection for the workmanship and skill that went into the pieces that stand the test of time," she said.

It is fitting, then, that Campbell's Honeycreek Galleries features an extensive collection of antique furniture, some pieces dating back to the 1820s. An entire room of their New Carlisle store, which Campbell owns with her husband David, is dedicated to their Tell City Furniture and Chair Company collection, a line of maple wood furniture from the 1960s that the Indiana-based company has since stopped producing.

"True antique folks want solid furniture," she said. "So we try to have solid wood items."

In addition to vintage furniture, the Campbells have an array of antique items, including costume jewelry, house wares, books and artwork. They have kitchen utensils from the Great Depression and flow blue china from the 1880s. They are items the cou-

ple have found over the years while attending estate sales and auctions, though she prefers to buy straight from an owner.

But with the flux in the economy and antiques falling under the category of luxury spending, Campbell said their sales have been affected.

Their budget is simple: "If we're bringing in money, we can buy new items. If nothing is selling, we don't buy," she said. Antique vendors need to be careful with how much money they keep tied up in inventory, she said.

"You might find yourself paying \$3,000 for something that you can't get \$800 out of now."

Owning versus leasing their space and frugal spending helps keep their overhead low. Presumably, so does a minimal utilities bill. Keeping in tradition with the antique industry, the Campbells do not have a computer or television in their store. Even their cash register is from the 1920s.

"We also have kerosene lamps," she said. "We could stay open for business with no electricity."

Even without a website in this digital world, Honeycreek Galleries must be doing something right. Since they opened in 1997, the Campbells have seen three other antique shops come and go.

Located on U.S. Route 40 in what is referred to as "antique valley," they thrive on the overflow from the big antique venues nearby and do what they can to help the cause of the smaller ones.

"Most antique dealers help each other out," she said. "I'll refer people to other shops I know of and hope they do the same for us."

Grandpa's Garage finds its niche in the antique market

Dick Butler knows vintage cars. For 35 years he traveled the country to drag race, from Minnesota to Florida to California, all the while collecting car parts and memorabilia from the days of racing hot rods. He has frequented antique car shows with wife Linda, showcasing their prized Canopy Express truck, a gem the couple found and purchased before it was junked.

Eight months ago, the retired radiologist turned his hobby into a business when he opened Grandpa's Garage. Inside, patrons will find all things transportation related, or as Butler puts it, "all things with wheels."

But Grandpa's Garage is more than your average corner antique shop. Located in a former antique mall, it boasts 31,000 square feet, 200 booths and as many lockable bookcases. It operates in the same

vein as an antique mall, but with a unique twist.

When dealers lease a booth, they are given 50 free tags to price and display their collectables. Dick, Linda and their daughter, Melissa, manage the booth's sales seven days a week. They collect all taxes, take out a portion of sales for commission and cut a check to the dealer at the end of each month. Apart from arranging their booths and setting their prices, dealers do not need to be present at all.

"There is no place that matches what we do," Butler said. He said the concept is appealing to dealers who want to sell their collections, but do not have the time or interest to staff a booth, while the niche they have established at Grandpa's Garage attracts their targeted market.

The combination of the two has been key to their success.

Items for sale in Grandpa's Garage range from old carburetors to antique streetlights and historic Daytona 500 memorabilia. They have toy cars, trains and airplanes for sale as well as vintage cars, like an El Camino pickup truck and a 1929 Model-A Ford. Butler even has a booth with some tokens from his racing days for sale.

"Some people just want to see history we have here," he said. He said they get visitors from all over the country — even some from Canada — and are signing up new dealers each week.

"We're growing every weekend," he said. "Word of mouth seems to be the best advertising."

To help spread the word, the Butlers pass out flyers at car shows and other antique venues and encourage their dealers to do the same. Their prime location in a city known for its antique venues sells itself.

"We see traffic coming in off I-70 every day," he said. Grandpa's Garage sits just across the Interstate from the Fairgrounds and just down the road from the Springfield Antique Center.

Butler hopes to expand the customer base even further this May when they begin hosting cruise-ins. Owners of vintage cars will be invited to drive into Grandpa's Garage on the first Sunday of each month, attracting visitors who want to see their automobiles and hear their stories.

"One of the best parts of this job are hearing stories people have about their old cars, their collections," he said. And with 35 years of drag racing under his belt, he admits he has some pretty good ones himself.

Vintage Depot combines art of selling with enjoyment of buying

It was on a whim that Ronnie Stephenson bought the building to open his own antique shop. He attend-

ed an auction, as he often does, at an old flower shop to peruse the items for sale and ended up buying the space.

"It was too good of a deal to pass up," he said.

Open for business since December, the Vintage Depot sells the things Stephenson has acquired over the years, a collection that has a variety of genre and age. His collection is ever expanding.

"I love buying more than selling," he said. Stephenson frequents auctions and garage sales, preferring them to flea markets when it comes to finding prized items for a good price. One of his favorite pieces in his store is a dinette set from the 1950s, which he found at a thrift store.

Finding valuable items, he said, is not as easy as it looks — especially not as easy as it looks on television. Referring to the recent spike in reality shows focused on storage auctions, pawning and antiques, he said the chance of finding a valuable item at any given auction or garage sale is slim.

"They paint an unrealistic picture of what you're going to find at some of these auctions."

Still, attending auctions and meandering through flea markets is something he enjoys doing with his two daughters and twin brother.

"The family that flea-markets together, stays together," he said.

They see regular customers who have the same mentality, stopping into his shop on their way to or from some of the larger flea markets on U.S. 127, which is known for its annual outdoor secondhand sale that stretches along the road for more than 600 miles.

If he does not have what his customers are looking for, he takes their information and contacts them when he finds it.

Yesterday meets today at American Antiquities

Half-century-old collectibles and QR codes could not seem more opposite. But Art Wilson converges the two with his American Antiquities, where antiques meet online forums and mobile media.

Wilson opened his business in 1993 with wife, Nancy. They have owned several restaurants and pubs since the 1970s and collected items over the years to furnish the joints with what he calls "eclectic junk." Wilson had always had an affinity for architectural antiques and embellishments found in older buildings, but the business of antiques was new to them.

"We are purveyors of collectables by the American standard of antiques," he said, which is defined as any item older than 50 years. The European standard is 100

years. The store contains a variety of antiques, all of which Wilson bought because they caught his interest.

"I only buy things I like and things I can afford." Though one of the challenges of antique dealing, he said, is not to become a collector. "You have to remember that everything [in your store] is for sale."

The Wilsons began publishing journals as a supplement to their storefront. Now, the *American Antiquities Journal* is published in April and November of every year and distributed to an estimated 50,000 readers nationwide. The publication features narratives from collectors he has met, information on various genres of antiques, industry trends and paid advertisements for other antique shops.

Through pedaling the journal across the country and meeting people whose hunts for antiques take them abroad, Wilson recognized a market for something else.

"People who enjoy antiques also enjoy traveling and dining," he said. It is the concept behind *American Antiquities'* mobile app.

The GPS *Antique Atlas* pulls a user's location and marks local antique venues in addition to restaurants, hotels and bed-and-breakfasts. It is a way for them to target a new market and demographic, he said.

They have customers in 15 states as well as the United Kingdom.

"The most popular item is anything American made," he said.

The thrill of the find is part of what keeps antiquing so popular. He has stories of friends and strangers who momentarily thought they had uncovered hand-written copies of the "Star Spangled Banner" or original surrender documents from World War Two. Even for him, it is the possibility of finding something irreplaceable that keeps him hunting.

"If some of the cost wasn't offset by thoroughly enjoying what we do, I'm not sure this would be the best business venture at this point."

Brothers bring antiques to Yellow Springs

Josh and John Marcus Murray grew up collecting antiques together, shopping flea markets and participating in paper and postcard shows when they were in their teens.

"My mom used to pick me up from a show and I'd have boxes full of stuff," Josh said.

Their passion for antiques led the brothers

to open *Ohio Vintage*, a vintage store that features everything from mid-century antiques to nostalgic items from the 1980s. Since they opened in December, the duo has already seen an increase in traffic, averaging between 40 and 70 visitors a day. He estimates that number will increase to 200 or 300 by the summer.

They opened the shop in *Yellow Springs* with its market and demographic in mind. The town is a popular destination for shoppers and *Ohio Vintage* is its only antique store.

"We try to have things that you can't typically find anywhere else," he said. "We offer unique items someone might want to collect or decorate with."

He said they do try to target younger generations with their collection, but it's certainly not limited in that way. Customers frequently comment about items in their store, remarking how it reminds them of a past memory.

Murray said connecting people with the past in this way is one of his favorite parts of the business.

"It's a cool thing to take something I picked up in a garage somewhere, something that had been somebody's junk, clean it up and give it new life," he said. "Now someone new can use it as a memory."

History is what attracted Murray to antiques originally and why old postcards have always been so appealing to his brother and him. The images on early-century postcards, he said, are often the pictures used in textbooks and historical documentaries because they are the only photographs from that time.

Sometimes, they even include written bits of history.

"I have a postcard from 1910 or 1911 that at the end says something to the effect of, 'Well now I have to go watch the Wright brothers fly their planes.'" He said he also has a postcard with an original photo of the *Titanic*.

While these items of his are not for sale, those that are tend to be reasonably priced. They keep them that way to encourage new business.

He likes when dealers buy from him, even if it means they resell the item and turn a profit.

"I just like that they are passing it on, that they got excited about it and now someone else will too," he said. "Just like I got excited when I first found it."



Ronnie Stephenson, owner of *Vintage Depot*, inside his *Springfield* shop. B2B photo by James E. Mahan

ABOUT THE BUSINESSES

American Antiquities

126 E. High St., *Springfield*, OH 45502

937-322-6281

www.americanantiquities.com

Open since 1993

Specializes in architectural and American standard antiques; also publish antique journals and have mobile app related to traveling while antiquing

Grandpa's Garage

4700 S. Charleston Pike, *Springfield*, OH 45502

937-324-8448

www.i70grandpasgarage.com

Open since summer 2012

Specializes in transportation-related antiques

Honeycreek Galleries

131 S. Main St., *New Carlisle*, OH 45344

937-845-3443

Open since 1997

Specializes in antique furniture, but have a range of antiques dating back to the 1800s

Ohio Vintage

213 Xenia Ave., *Yellow Springs*, OH 45387

937-215-2471

www.facebook.com/OhioVintage

Open since December 2012

Specializes in eclectic, urban and industrial antiques and vintage items

Vintage Depot

2905 E. High St., *Springfield*, OH 45505

937-327-9143

www.facebook.com/VintageDepot

Open since December 2012

Features a variety of antique genres