

Profile of a Super Collector

Georgian's Early Augusta Artifacts, Include Bottles, Ceramics, Ephemera

By Bill Baab



Master Collector Walter Smith and Collection
Photo By Bea Baab

AUGUSTA, Ga. – Walter Smith has nearly always had a fondness for wood and woodworking, becoming fascinated by what he saw in the Augusta Boys Club shop when he was 11 or 12 years old.

"Mr. Timm was in charge of the shop and I'd stand in the doorway and watch what was going on for hours," said Smith, now 63. "I begged him to let me come into the shop, but he always said no. One day, I told him, 'Let me come in and sweep the floors and clean up.' He agreed and I did this for three days in a row. Finally, he gave me permission to come in and eventually gave me a project that didn't involve power tools."

Smith has never looked back. He eventually parlayed his considerable knowledge of antique furniture restoration into a thriving business in his hometown called "The Furniture Doctor," a name that came naturally.

"When furniture comes in, we turn it upside down and start examining it like a doctor examines a patient. That's where we came up with the name."

Before he established the business, he and friends would go looking for damaged furniture. He learned the art of furniture restoration through the process called trial and error, and by learning from other skilled workmen.

During the 1960s, he had the opportunity to work for Claire and Dick West, a couple

who lived on Hereford Farm Road near Evans, Ga. They had a small antique shop adjacent to their home. Later, they moved to Houston, Texas, and still later moved back to Dick's home in the Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket areas of New England.

They were pleased with Smith's restoration work and he later became their broker, traveling across the country buying antiques and refinishing them for the Wests' antique store. During the winter or summer months, they'd travel to Europe and took him with them a couple of times.

"I got a whale of an education during what I think were among the best days of my life," he said.

Remember the British TV detective character called "Lovejoy?" He

could tell by look and feel if a piece was genuine or not. That was fiction. Those of us who've known Walter for years feel that he has the same magical touch, but in a very real way.

Then one day during the late 1970s or early 80s, he was driving back from his job at Kimberly Clark in Beech Island, S.C., across the Savannah River from his home town when he spotted a group of people using potato forks on a



Walter Smith with Indian friends carved by Filipinos
Photo by Bea Baab

vacant lot.

"I drove a few blocks farther and then it dawned on me they weren't digging fish bait! I turned around and went back to discover they were digging for old bottles on what had been an early landfill."

So he started digging and what is now one of the premier Augusta bottle collections in existence evolved from that day. Add to that Augusta-related memorabilia, from ceramics to post cards and other ephemera, most of it pre -1900.

Smith later became fascinated by Indians – wooden ones of the cigar store variety.

"I bought two early wooden Indians hand-carved in the Philippine Islands from Pierce Farmer," a North Augusta, S.C., collector who is now deceased. "Then, a few years ago, I discovered they were still being made and learned where I could buy them. There was a factory in Manila, P.I., whose subcontractors (carvers) lived in the jungle and they'd ship them to the factory where they were painted. When I get them, I apply a different glaze that makes them look older.

"Earlier this year, I decided to travel to the Philippines and meet with the people who own the factory as well as the carvers. I spent 10 days in the jungle and was fed fish and rice. I was ready for a nice hamburger when I got back!"

He said he was cordially received by the Filipino carvers and was told that the increased sales he caused were paying for college educations for some of their children. Sales had been lagging before he took over the distribution.

A pair of Smith's Indians were on display at the Co-



Exlax thermometers
Photo by Bea Baab

lumbia, S.C. Bottle Show last February.

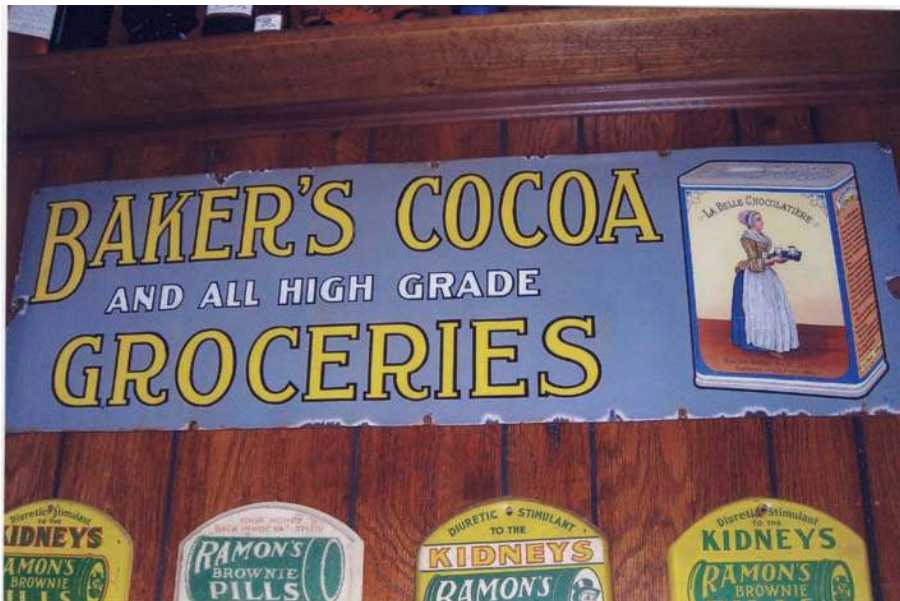
The life-sized ones bring \$550 and up, the smaller ones a couple of feet high \$50, and he said he has sold 3,000 of the statues in all, 1,000 in 2007 alone. Contestants and visitors to the Augusta Futurity (a cutting horse event) and others just love the figures.

"I've sold 'em to people in Nebraska and other Mid-western states as well as Canada."

The collecting bug is alive and well in the home he shares with his wife, Lisa, and daughter Megan. Lisa is a pharmacist and so it was natural for the family to begin collecting mortars and pestles, including some huge ones that had been drug store signs.

Drug store jugs, tin and porcelain advertising signs, thermometers and drug cabinets from China and England are among the other memorabilia they've collected. And let's not forget another of his hobbies – restoring 1929 Ford Model As and a rare 1929 "double-A" Ford stake truck that have won state and national honors.

(AUTHOR'S NOTE: Parts of this story were taken from a feature story about Walter Smith in the May 1, 2000 issue of *The Augusta Chronicle*, written by Melissa Hall).



Baker's Coca signs and Ramon's signs
Photo by Bea Baab

Bill Baab
2352 Devere St
Augusta, GA 30904
(706) 736-8097
riverswamper@comcast.net