

EMPORIUM *of* DREAMS REMEMBERED



Gaylene and Ted London with a 1939 Master Deluxe Chevrolet in original condition.

STORY BY DAVID RUTTER :: PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM PRISCHING



Gaylene and Ted London in their Roscoe Woodstock Antique Mall.

GAYLENE AND TED LONDON'S ANTIQUE MALL IN WOODSTOCK IS AS UNIQUE AND RARE AS THE ITEMS THEY SELL. IF YOU REMEMBER WHY YOU LOVED SUCH SPLENDID STORES IN YOUR CHILDHOOD, A TRIP UP ILLINOIS 14 TO WOODSTOCK IS WORTH THE INVESTMENT.

WHEN NOEL HANSMANN OF CARY saw the Buster Brown Bread advertising sign for sale, he knew at once it was perfect for his wife's kitchen.

He was a collector of old advertising signs, especially early 20th-century survivors. They were mere "things", but he loved them for their color and charm. Because he loved them, he gave them to the woman he loved. That made Lil love them, too.

You can't dismiss a 1920s' bakery whose motto is: "If you sell a loaf of bread for 5 cents, make sure there's 5 cents worth of value in it". In those days Buster Brown and his dog Tige were marketers who did more than live in a shoe.

So Hansmann gave the sign to her. But she lost him to this world in 2017. The sign is among his last gifts to her and remains—and likely always shall—a metaphorical symbol of their 50 years together.

We love some things, though they are more than things. There are some objects that a person must buy. Logic does not always enter the equation.

Ted and Gaylene London know exactly how Lil Hansmann feels about the sign. They live that life, too.

A NEW LIFE WITH OLD THINGS

The Londons spent 130 years in combined life experience in a glorious quest to acquire at least one of every beautiful or unique object ever made over the last 200 years. And then sell it to another collector.

Ted is expert in all mechanical contrivances, advertising signage, and oak furniture. If it is visual art or woven from textiles, Gay knows it. Ted's memory of the day Hansmann bought the sign makes him smile.

It's been a year since moving the business 38 miles down the road from South Beloit, Illinois. Now the Londons' Roscoe Woodstock Antique Mall on a Lake Avenue hill is the ultimate manifestation of their vintage collecting spirit. Humans acquire and then keep objects because they hold deeper significance.

Psychologists now suggest this trait is an inherent human component that melded with human culture 15,000 years ago. Psychologists also say at least 35 percent of all adults have some group of items they'd call a 'collection'.

At one end of the taste/management/connoisseur continuum are the Londons. At the other end are hoarders.



LEFT: This antique National cash register was built circa 1915 and is made of nickel, brass, and marble. This is one of the first cash registers made, as the early models like this one were housed atop an elegant cabinet of polished wood. **RIGHT:** A display cabinet showcases 1800s flint lock guns (gun dates from left: 1850, 1936, and late 1700s). **BELOW:** These barber chairs (1890 to 1910, sourced Chicago) are made of porcelain placed on cast iron.





Totally restored soda machines that work inside and out.

Theoretically, all antique stores are commercial outposts designed to quench this human thirst for acquired beauty, but the London universe is something much larger and grander.

In this world, Gay manages the nuts and bolts, and Ted is the treasure-hunting “head of acquisitions” always on the road scouring estates, old homes, and barns for perfect artifacts.

Gay and late husband Dennis Stomberg started the business decades ago in Roscoe, Illinois, near Rockford. He passed away on Christmas Eve 2013, leaving three adult children, grandchildren, and a wife of 38 years.

Though Ted grew up in his father’s antique store and spent most of his life selling vintage and celebrity guitars, Gay and Ted did not know each other then.

That changed in 2015 when each had reached 60 and were not looking for romance. Both were just trying to recover from life’s hard bruises.

But collectors often find what they never sought. “Gay was the best thing I ever found,” Ted says.

He had survived long bouts with profound health issues and arose from chemotherapy to face the world and begin selling antiques again. “I could barely stand up on my own after the chemo,” he recalls. Then he found Gay in South Beloit.

“At the beginning he just sold items in the store,” she recalls. “Then he

helped out at the store. Then he helped out more. Eventually, he just became part of the Roscoe family. I tried to fix him up with a nice woman at the store, but he wasn’t interested, and neither was she.”

Before long, the couple that Gay had attempted to stage manage had turned out to be Ted and Gay. Love is a collector’s ultimate serendipity.

Now two of Ted and Gay’s adult daughters help manage the Woodstock store, and have sealed the future. “They have new insights into different tastes,” Gay says. “Things will change, but the future is secured.”

DESTINATION WOODSTOCK

Gaylene (her friends call her “Gay”) and Ted stay closely attuned to changing tastes and cultural preferences, but their outpost exhibits a shared sense of exquisite taste.

Even if traditional antique stores can survive—and that’s an open question in the antiquities biz—the Londons have created a model that few competitors can match.

The business at 890 Lake Avenue is almost a living being. It breathes with ancient, quirky energy. Everything with an incandescent bulb is “on”.

It also is massive. Surprises lurk around a thousand corners in the 35,000-square-foot brightly illuminated, impeccably clean structure which is roughly three quarters the size of a football field.



ABOVE: Roscoe Woodstock Antique Mall houses several vendor booths that offer a variety of unique items for sale. This section includes antique Chinese artifacts. **BELOW:** Fully restored gas pumps include the tall pumps with glass tops to show customers how much gas they were buying. These pumps are frequently purchased by car collectors.



ABOVE: These children's toys were made in the 1920s and '30s of tin and pressed steel and many have parts that move. One brand of toy, the Buddy "L", is an American toy brand and company founded in 1920 in Illinois by Fred Lundahl, who used to manufacture for International Harvester trucks. He started by making a toy dump truck out of steel scraps for his son Buddy. **LEFT:** A 1946 Wurlitzer 1015 jukebox that plays 10-inch 78rpm records. A buyer from Holland recently bought and had shipped a Wurlitzer (customers handle the shipping).



Over there is an unannounced cranny filled with a million object d'delights. There's a brace of perfect 1860s Navy Colt .45 caliber revolvers. Twenty feet away are four matched barber chairs rescued from a defunct tonsorial parlor. Around the corner stand five Seeburg jukeboxes from the 1950s. Ted will have one fewer by the end of the day because a Las Vegas buyer has just arrived to take one.

Of the 5,000 customers in the mall's email database, you are just as likely to encounter a buyer of ancient Asian textiles in Shanghai, or a slot machine aficionado from Switzerland, as you are customers from Chicago, Milwaukee, as well as Barrington. The world knows the Londons.

MULTI-GENERATIONAL BUYERS

"A mother from Rockford brought her 13-year-old daughter here and bought an entire wardrobe for her from the 1960s, just to encourage her to "have her own unique style," Gay says. Teen girls buy 50-year-old vintage formals for proms.

If you ever had the yen for an era-appropriate Bat Masterson-style bowler, the antique chapeaus are perched in a glass case up front.

There are ancient telephones with click-click-click dials and a few with hand cranks. Over here are typewriters like your grandfather might have used to write letters home from his World War II duties. If you think an 1860 handgun is too steep at \$3,000, there's always a 50-year old Red Ryder BB gun for \$60. "It'll put your eye out," as Ralphie's "Christmas Story" mom would warn.



A collectible Italian Christmas ornament from the 1950s is one of thousands of such pieces available at Roscoe Woodstock Antique Mall.



The colorful Fenton glass bowls and baskets date from the 1950s.



Wooden slot machines are topped with an early Chicago skyline.

Top: Novelty arcade machines were a way to capture a store customer's loose pocket change—a way to keep the “change in the house”. Known to store owners as “trade stimulators”, the machines offered customers a chance to win chewing gum or cigars with their coins that remained after a purchase. “Close but no cigar” remains an everyday phrase that is derived from not winning a cigar on your slot machine gamble in the late 1890s. The Jefferson (lower left) was made in 1898 and is named after President Thomas Jefferson.



The Rol-A-Top was the king of slot machines. The cherry motif and a diamond bell jackpot in the center are seen on this fully restored slot machine that was only manufactured for two years.



The Mills Owl roulette wheel is housed in a quarter-sawn oak cabinet with nickel plated machine details. The Owl became a Mills trademark.

The true joys of the establishment are two-dozen slot machines, including one—a penny slot from 1893—that might be the progenitor of the species. Patrons from the Donley Auction House in Union, Illinois, will show up today after gathering for the “Coin Op and Advertising” auction. Devotees often view coin-operated pinballs and slot machines as Holy Grails. Ted is the High Priest.

Everything in the Roscoe Woodstock Mall works, including the neon signs and illuminated globes atop a half-dozen 10-foot tall manual gasoline pumps from the 1920s. One neon sign is the only item in the store Ted won't sell. It holds too many memories.

The Londons have 1,000 or so antique Christmas ornaments as well as 100,000 old-time postcards. There are rows of Victorian oak furniture in pristine condition. There are roughly two tons of vintage jewelry.

AN ARRAY OF MOVING PARTS

But no one knows for sure how many objects are housed there because the inventory is constantly shifting and growing as is the number of independent vendors who rent space in the business. “Ted and I have gone into antique stores and thought they were OK, but then you come back a month later, and the place is exactly the same,” Gay says. “You can't do that in this business anymore. We're always changing.”



This 1920s Old Mill slot machine was typical of machines that were in drug stores, gas stations, and candy and soda shops.

Even the no-going-back-now move to Woodstock was massive. For six weeks beginning in February, the Londons drove six truckloads of merchandise a week from South Beloit.

They moved 90 display cases. The move has been a boon to business.

The high-end antique market centered on the East Coast has suffered precipitous financial declines in recent years because American tastes, lifestyles, and culture are changing. Ted and Gay vow not to be caught standing still.

“People do not collect as they once did,” she says. “We used to have large pieces of furniture to house collections of China or porcelain figures. Younger people don't collect that way anymore. But they do spend on high-value unique objects and, as you can see from our store, they will buy ‘toys.’”

Before the Londons bought the Illinois mall and moved this spring, the Woodstock business had fallen into decline, mostly because successful proprietors must actively interact with customers. Gay laments that too many antique sellers had fallen into cheap replica merchandise.

But that distinction is why the Roscoe Woodstock Mall is not a fancy flea market. This is a museum in which everything is for sale. Call it an emporium of dreams remembered.

The Londons sell resurrected memories and constantly run customer events to enhance the experience—professional appraisals, daily Christmas specials during December, and monthly promotional events.



Ted and Gaylene London with a 1939 Master Deluxe Chevrolet in original condition.

CHICAGO RAPPER JAYLEIGH FILMED "OPE" INSIDE THE ROSCOE WOODSTOCK ANTIQUE MALL IN EARLY 2019. THE VIDEO IS ON YOUTUBE. TELEVISION AND MOVIE PRODUCTIONS INCLUDING "FARGO" ON NETFLIX HAVE INCLUDED ROSCOE'S ANTIQUES.

A LIFE WELL-LIVED

They even live the life they preach. Inside a private ante-chamber packed with artifacts, you ascend a wide oak-lined staircase to the private second floor, a 4,500 square foot palace. Tiffany lamps drench a dozen soft-colored rooms with diffused light. A massive 19th-century oak bar and pool hall stand guard over "playrooms" ringed by art, statuary, jukeboxes, and lush sofas. This is a posh retreat where Bogart and Bacall might dawdle over martinis while Clark Gable racks up the next 9-ball game. Vivian Leigh stands nearby, tapping her fingernails impatiently.

Outside it's Woodstock. Inside, it is the art-directed Cairo Hilton of 1936.

Both Ted and Gay said they had always wanted to live above the business where they worked. This edifice fulfills that dream to stretch out and relax beyond perfection.

But it is both elegant and domestic. Gay has two full kitchens stocked with two centuries of implements and accoutrements.

Their home plays by the same rules as their business. No fakes here. "Our rule is that we don't allow any merchandise to be sold here that was made after 1970," Gay says. That cuts off reproductions, licensed mimics, chotch-kies, and imported crafts. They make an exception for vinyl recordings from the '70s.

It also explains their home in the sky. The Londons are connoisseur collectors, not hoarders. And collectors never want to hide what they've found because this is passion, not merely commerce.

Though the store's clientele is worldwide, the average daily customer is more likely to be like Lil Hansmann. She still drives up to Woodstock regularly to search and wait to be delighted.

In objective terms, her Buster Brown Bread sign is a piece of property. A thing. But whatever its price, it is priceless to Lil Hansmann.

These "things" are not inanimate objects. Lil Hansmann believes that every time she enters the Londons' building she might be touched by lost memories, the recollected experiences that matter in life.

The Londons are selling happiness.

As Ted London has said of his family's emporium of dreams remembered: "You'll see things you've never seen before and may never see again." U

.....
David Rutter's career spans 45 years as publisher, editor, writer, and columnist at six daily newspapers in five states. He wrote columns for the Chicago Tribune's suburban newspapers and won Chicago's Lisagor Award for editorial writing. He has written three books, and teaches personal memoir writing at the region's community centers and libraries. Rutter lives in Lake Villa. He can be reached at david.rutter@live.com or 847-445-7684.