

Confessions of a Mad Collector

By Dolly Berthelot



Writer Dolly Berthelot's eclectic antique collection includes a Native American woman in folk art cypress knee chair, a Gene Autry doll, a small cowboy doll, plastic chicks, an early color TV bank, and a toy leather drum with original tag "Handmade by Indians." On the other end of the spectrum, an art nouveau statue lamp is surrounded by glass and art pottery. Photos by Dolly Berthelot.



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AFTER 12 YEARS OF marriage on the move, Ron and I came to Pensacola in the late 1970s with only a Ford van load of belongings. We brought mostly books, records, clothes and the odd piece of art or craft—souvenirs of Turkey, Ethiopia and other far-flung adventures. Almost no furniture. We'd left our native Louisiana a decade before, eager to remain unfettered and see the world.

We had chosen barrenness: freedom from children, couches and other standard "burdens." We were wonderers and wanderers needing time and energy for professional study, creative careers, travel.

Pensacola changed us. Or was it life's natural progression from Bohemian to bourgeois? Fresh from graduate school at the University of Tennessee, fortified with Ron's University of Maryland professorship in Europe, my freelance travel

writing, and our freelance photography, we were ready to return closer to home, to find an old house under mossy oaks and settle in.

We quickly transformed from being un-materialistic to being MAD, MAD COLLECTORS. *How* did this happen?

No doubt there were many causes. I was heavy with our only child when we moved into our East Pensacola Heights bungalow. Pregnancy *does* intensify the nesting instinct. It certainly boosts the need for creature comforts long spurned. Pillows on the floor are *not* charming at eight or nine months.

Pensacola's unique history and preservation had strong influence. After all, that charm had lured us here—along with white sand beaches and aqua Gulfcoast waters. Trekking regularly through the old Thieves Market downtown in the late '70s, we marvelled almost weekly at the

transformation of Palafox—as ugly modern facades were stripped to the beauty of brick, long hidden.

Our rambling 1928 house *itself* seemed to beg for "old stuff"—she gobbled it up as fast as we could find it.

And find we did. Weekends were for treasure hunting, what else? Auctions, flea markets, garage sales. Before Pensacola, we had barely tasted such pleasures. Now we gorged on their abundance. Who knows how many room arrangements we did and redid those first years?

Each excursion brought new bounty, new booty. Some was clearly sought; more was serendipitous.

The initial search had a certain practicality. At least golden oak and other 20th century hardwood furniture was cheaper than you could find at Rhodes. *We needed* the chairs, tables and small

cabinets we nabbed at auctions; but what about the antique parlor stove that spent a decade just sitting on our porch?

The claw foot tub and pedestal sink were each grabbed for \$5 at garage sales—just in time for our upstairs remodeling. But how can we explain the old metal grocery cart and doctor's examination table that merely rusted outside?

The red, green and gold Oriental rug bought off a dump picker a decade ago remains rolled up and unused—just waiting until we change our color scheme. The iron deco smoke stand is ours long after we've banished smoking from our home. And each window sill holds more vases than we'll *ever* have flowers.

Every inch of this house is filled to overflowing; the garage has held everything *but* cars, and brief bouts in the antiques business to "weed out" became simply another excuse to gather more.

Clearly, what may have started out as a practical search became a hobby ... and then an addiction. Above all else, I blame—or credit, depending on my mood—the Treasure Trove of Bayou Texar.

One Saturday, our first year here, we happened innocently upon the Quina Estate Sale, at a routine-looking ranch house on Bayou Texar. We had already savored the thrill of the hunt, the joy of the bargain find; so we were vulnerable.

The Quina Estate Sale was enormous, varied, fascinating—and cheap. It hooked us for sure. And for good. It was then and still is the best single sale of our experience, the one to which we have compared all others. "Yeah, that was a great one," we might say about other sales through the years, "but it doesn't match the Quinas." No doubt the first is always special. In this case, first really *was* best ...

Apparently, two elderly brothers had long lived together. One died, and the other was moving. Obviously these guys were kindred spirits of us and all the crazy collectors in the world. And obviously their families were *not*—at least not those shoveling out the "left over junk" as fast as we vultures could grab it.

We bought a half dozen trunks that day—some were giant grab bags filled with the paraphernalia of life times: souvenirs of *their* world travels and letters and turn-of-the-century bills, mothball-strong linen bloomers, and miles of braided drapery pulls.

We also bought walnut mirrors and framed photos of ancestral strangers, and lithographed tins full of political and advertising pins: President Wilson, Pensacola Business College, and the Yellow

Kid cartoon—all long-extinct reminders of life's transiency.

My Cajun in-laws were visiting from Louisiana that day, and they too got into the spirit of the search. It was among our most endearing times together.

We purchased (for a pittance) everything we could justify and more—much more. Then I noticed a huge pile of ... trash! Real trash. The stuff the family acknowledged was headed for the dump. Of *course* I asked. I had no shame! This was passion!

For at least two hours more, my husband, his aging "good sport" parents and I plundered and prowled, rummaged and revelled while 6-month-old Destin played amicably nearby. The newfound joy of parenting may have spawned our particular attraction to fragments of youth: a hand-carved pop gun, a battered tin horn, a tiny leather high-top shoe and lacer, one-armed dolls, antique cards and school work from children long gone. Remnants of lives, holding secrets of their past, hints for our imaginations.

These became the hub of the diverse "little old stuff" collection that now fills our shelves and pigeon holes and printer's nooks. These things have no rhyme or reason, and most have little value beyond that we attach.

We didn't know the first thing then about our finds, just trusted our instincts. And our instincts said, "Wow! This is wonderful!"

Life is full of surprises. Homes should be full of surprises, too. We are doing our part. We've since met other mad collectors doing theirs, each of us in our own unique ways. We are grateful that the Quina boys and other strangers have helped make our house a home. A home unlike *any* other.

Why *not* have old toy trucks and trains and ethnic dolls in the den and a bit of Disney in the dining room? Who says cracks and chips detract from art pottery? We say: out of sight, out of mind! Turn things just right and *pretend* they are perfect. For us, the choice is clear: better cluttered and blemished than sterile and boring. □

Author's Blurb: Dolly Berthelot is a Communication & Training Consultant with Berthelot's Consulting E. T. C. Inc. She assesses needs, develops and leads personal and professional growth workshops for continuous improvement, and writes and edits nonfiction, particularly stories of individual lives. Internationally published, Dr. Berthelot has been a professor of writing at Loyola University and others.

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