

TAKE A CHANCE WITH 'FAT CHANCE' ELAINE STRONCEK

AND

LYNN WORRELL

BY

LAURA WERNER



An old rocking chair, a once loved teddy bear, an old oak cabinet; these tell a story of another time and place. They expose a way of life that many people remember. Several years ago two students, Glorianne Lewis and Lisa Harley, decided to talk to Elaine Stroncek and her daughter, Lynn Worrell. Lynn and Elaine own and operate the Fat Chance Antique Shop. I, Laura Werner, decided to finish the story, because I had an interest in antiques, so I went to visit the shop and found it to be amazing. There was a huge collection of antiques and collectibles. The variety of antiques ranged from fine china to farm implements.

Here is their story. Elaine told us:

"We started in the antique business by chance. This shop was for sale seven years ago, so my daughter and I bought it on a whim. It was more of a shop with all kinds of things: clothes, furniture, fabrics, not just antiques. The previous owner had some antiques, so we decided to turn it into an antique shop. A friend in real estate told us about the shop, that's how we got started. Now we have been in this business for nine years.

"We have a pretty good year 'round business; the local people are the best customers. We also sell to a large number of tourists, but it can be a

little slow between seasons when there aren't as many people in town. The Christmas season is always good, and we do have certain customers who ask for specific things. For instance, we shop especially for a general line of antiques; furniture, china and primitives.

Lynn then told me: "The most fun is traveling and buying. We work hard, but we enjoy it. My father and husband usually go along, and we take a big trailer and a van. It's fun meeting new people and looking for a little bit of everything. We make nice trips out of buying.

"We shop all over the country, the East coast, New England, Cape Cod, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Pennsylvania. Flea markets are a really good source in Ohio and Tennessee. The one in Nashville at the State Fair Grounds is huge. We don't buy much at auction because it takes too much time and prices at auctions often are very high. We usually try to make our trips in spring or fall to replenish our stock."

(Elaine) "If we always have the same things in our shop some people won't find us interesting and will stop coming. We try to price things to sell quickly. It wouldn't be any fun to sit here with the same old stuff all the time. It takes time



I HAVE SOME DISHES FROM MY GRANDMOTHER AND GREAT GRANDMOTHER,

and hard work to find good antiques and other collectibles. There seems to be a lot of junk out these days. It is hard to find furniture which hasn't been remodeled, and it's hard to find furniture in really good shape at a saleable price."

(Lynn) "I've got some family things which mean more to me than anything I would buy. I have some dishes from my grandmother and great-grandmother that I (Lynn) don't like to use because I would feel really bad if I broke any. When I buy an antique dish, I don't mind using it, because it doesn't have the attachment. I buy some pieces just so I will have some to use. I have quite a few items, like tins. I have a few clocks and I have a collection of cobalt glass, and a lot of furniture. My mother has most of the family pieces, but I have glassware, china and an old treadle sewing machine that was my great-grandmother's. Since we have been in this business for nine years, I have collected quite a few things."

Next Elaine talked about the antiques in their store: "I have always appreciated antiques because I grew up around them. I had some things from before I married and have been accumulating since I own the shop. We like to buy primitives, wooden things and boxes of all sorts. We don't carry a lot of glassware because

we don't really have enough room. Things have a funny way of selling. For instance, a wooden box with a tag saying feedbox from a covered wagon or feedbox for animals, now someone will buy that and use it for magazines or a planter, or even put it by the fireplace to hold kindling. We also sell copper boilers to use for wood, fireplaces and stoves. My favorite is old glass and china, especially cobalt blue.

"It's fun to buy with a customer in mind. We get a large number of local customers and tourists. We also have newly married young people who are interested in antiques. We have regular customers, both men and women, that come to check and see our stock. We try to buy things that our regular customers will like, and when we go on trips we take lists with us that indicate what certain customers want. We do very little restoration; we try to buy things in good shape because we don't have enough work space to restore anything. We would rather buy things in a shape that they can be sold. We occasionally refinish or fix a piece for ourselves.

"We don't do a lot with European antique furniture, because in the beginning, we bought several pieces which did not sell, so we decided to stay with the American pieces. We have loads of books on antique collecting. These books help us fix the age and the value of items. As with the European pieces, we learn by trial and error. We have bought some things and made mistakes, but everyone does that. Since we carry such a variety of things, it's very hard to stay up on all the prices. I wouldn't care to deal just in furniture because carrying a variety of things is interesting. We carry a lot of turn-of-the-century pieces, from the late 1800s to the 1930s. We do have some older things too.

"Most of our customers want oak furniture. I like walnut wood and pieces from the turn of the century, and I prefer Victorian. I like the pie cupboards and cupboards with the tin pierced sides for ventilation. Some are called jelly cupboards. We try to get older items from the middle 1800s to the early 1900s. As I've said, that period is more affordable and easier for us to buy. The really old items (18th century) are very expensive and we just don't have the clientele. The turn-of-the-century oak furniture often makes people's decor."

In 1982, Elaine Stroncek and Lynn Worrell moved from their old location on Twenty Mile Road to the Old West Building off Lincoln Ave. They have been in there for two years as of March first. Elaine told me of their trials and tribulations concerning relocating.

"We had to move because the city was going to build a bus barn there. The little house was going to be torn down, and we had to find another place quickly. We had to move seven years of accumulation to a smaller area with no shed in



"A FEW WELL-CHOSEN ANTIQUES GIVES HOME A FEELING OF WARMTH AND A LINK WITH THE PAST."

back. We put only the best things in this location. At the other place we had a lot of tools, horse hames, single trees, etc. We can only keep a few on hand here, but we still sell those things because they look western. The move definitely changed our merchandising. We have gradually been selling more to the tourists, smaller items which can be taken by car or plane.

"We have been in business for nine years and in this location for two years. We will have our tenth anniversary in March 1985, and we have become more involved because antiques aren't like a regular retail business in a catalog where a person can order six dozen of this and four dozen of that and then it comes by UPS. We have to hand pick every item that we put in our store. We have to go somewhere else to buy because there is not much available locally. The Unique Shop sells Senior Citizens' antiques on consignment, so most of the local antiques go there. We usually go to the midwest, but once in a while we go to Craig to pick up some things.

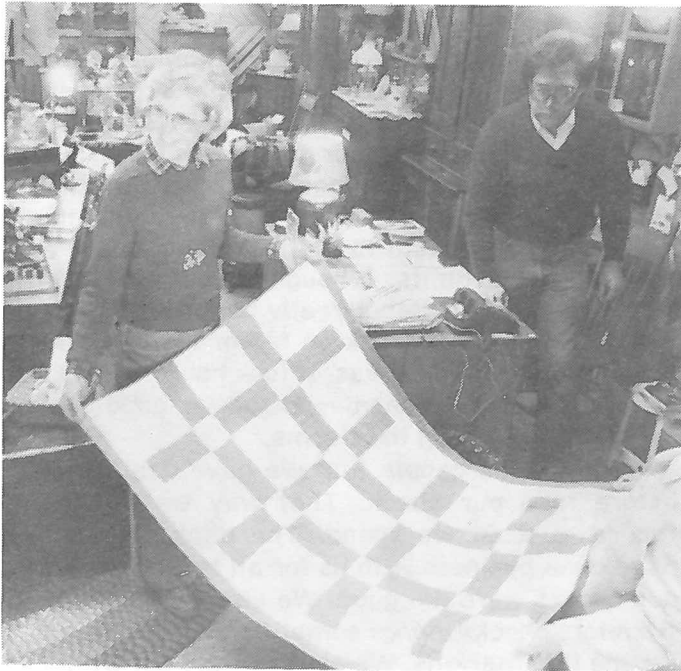
"We just took a buying trip to Iowa. We left on Sunday morning and drove through Nebraska. We arrived in Des Moines too late that night to call any of our people, so we met early the next morning. We met a lady who said she had a big

double garage full of stuff and would like us to come over, so of course, we did. Sure enough she had this huge garage filled; we only scratched the surface because of all the boxes. We didn't have time to unpile them or go through them, but we did buy a lot of things from her, mostly glassware and smaller things. It was exhausting. The next day we went to southern Iowa to see a lady who sold quilts. I bought about 20 quilts from her and some other really beautiful things. We packed the roof rack on top of the van and covered it with the canvas. It took hours to pack. We started out for home; it was a good trip home, we missed all the storms.

"Most of the people that we have dealt with before take our check. That way we have a record of what we spend. The bank wouldn't have done business with us for all these years if our checks were not good. We also take a lot of travelers checks along; sometimes we take cash for the flea markets. We always start out with a budget and we always go over it. We buy less for our money these days. It costs much more to fill the van now than it did seven or eight years ago.

"One of the hardest things is keeping the merchandise changing. If we don't have new stuff the local people will not come in, so we try to move things around to show them differently. Lots of times people come in and think something is new because it is in a new place. For the tourists there are standard items we like to keep in stock, like wooden ski poles, old skis, kitchen utensils, horse collars and old tools, basic things that aren't unusual. People just love the old things and I like to think that we are keeping alive a love for these old items. Young people are so thrilled when we tell them about the history behind an antique. We have fun telling people about what we know about different antiques, and, of course, we have a lot of reference books.





IT'S EASY TO SELL QUILTS BECAUSE EVERYONE LIKES THEM.

"When we are dealing with quilts, we have to refer to the book to identify the patterns and estimate the age. We can't just say, 'Oh, it's from 1800,' but by the print, color and fabric a person can pretty well date the quilt. A lot of them are from the 1930s, that was a big quilt-making-era. I'm not sure if it was the depression, or if people were just using up their old fabrics, or if it was just a creative outlet for women at that time. We have always sold some quilts in the past, but since we have been in this location we have really sold quilts! Now we keep a good stock of them on hand. Quilts are popular with tourists; it is easy to sell quilts because everyone likes them. Any kind of old kitchen utensils are really good sellers — crocks, too. I couldn't tell you the number of crocks, from the small ones to the big ones, that we have sold.

"We buy for people, but always with the stipulation that they don't have to take it after they see it. We have a long list of things that people want and we try to find them for people, but we aren't always successful. This service does keep the local people happy though."

Elaine continues, "The people whom we have met have been the most enjoyable part of the business. We just meet many nice people all the time, our customers as well as the dealers. There are some local people whom we have come to know quite well. We like to see satisfied customers, so that makes buying for them a fun part, too. We do most of our shopping in Iowa and Ohio, and of course, we do a lot of shopping in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Montana. My son lives in Montana so we go up there quite often. We have some people in Ohio that we deal with and I

"PINE FURNITURE SEEMS TO BE GAINING IN POPULARITY HERE' AS IT GOES SO NICELY WITH THE NOW-POPULAR "COUNTRY LOOK"

have bought a lot of quilts there. We don't buy much from the West because people here go to the midwest to load up and deliver to California. They seem to have a good market there, and people must be able to pay any price for things. But all this is what makes this job an enjoyable one.

"We occasionally have a dealer drop in, but by the time we have transported things to Steamboat, it's not too feasible to sell to them. Once in a while, even with all this considered, a dealer will find something he/she can buy and still come out ahead. We don't have a large enough stock to satisfy dealers. When a person sells wholesale, like the people we buy from, they have the quantity to make really good buys."

As I finished the story I had found out so much more about antiques than I ever knew before. I started the story, and after talking to Elaine Stroncek and Lynn Worrell, I understand the importance of saving the old, antiques or other things, to contrast with the new.



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