

Three of a Kind – Our State Magazine – April 2005

A trio of Tar Heel specialty shops offers interesting alternatives to the ordinary purchase.

by Bryan A. Oesterreich

At three North Carolina niche stores – The Tuba Exchange in Durham, the Silver Thimble Shoppe in Swansboro, and the Chicago Old Telephone Company in Sanford – you'll get far more than what you may have bargained for. You'll find cultural insights and history that stretch beyond a commonplace shopping experience.

The Tuba Exchange Durham

While tubas probably don't come to mind as collectible items (imagine the room one would need), Vincent F. Simonetti of Durham can't get enough of them. He began his collection in 1998, when he opened The Tuba Exchange at 1825 Chapel Hill Road. The collection, housed in a museum setting at the store, now numbers more than 180 instruments and counting. But the musically inclined Simonetti does far more than play, collect, and display tubas. He sells them – and nothing else.

Simonetti knows all you need or want to know about tubas. He graduated from the Manhattan School of Music in 1965 and landed his first gig in 1967, playing tuba for the North Carolina Symphony. He held that position until 1975. After leaving the symphony, he started a family, raising three children. His first business venture was in piano sales, but he found the instrument too regionally restrictive. "People will only travel so far to buy a piano," he says. So, he explored selling the instrument he so dearly loves – the mighty tuba.

To beat the band

One might ask how a store in Durham could survive selling tubas and only tubas. Easy: Sell them around the country and around the world. "We sell our instruments to marching and military bands in all 50 states," Simonetti says. "And, like other businesses, the Internet has opened up our market." The Tuba Exchange's sales figures support this. Last year, the store sold more than 1,000 new and fully reconditioned tubas – and accounted for gross sales of more than \$2.8 million (they range in price from \$3,000 to \$7,000).

Why shop at the Tuba Exchange? Donald L. Strand, tuba player with the Atlanta Opera and Ballet, feels he knows why. "Your level of

confidence goes up when tubas are all they sell," he says.

Simonetti looks to both domestic and foreign manufacturers for the very best value in tubas. "We've been selling a large number of Russian-made instruments," he says. "Their pricing and quality is outstanding. But of course, the German-made tubas are still the industry standard. And, to no surprise, the Chinese are aggressively marketing their product."

Next time you're in Durham, stop to visit Vincent Simonetti, and browse through his extensive collection of tubas. He still plays professionally – in the Durham and Raleigh symphonies and in a rocking Dixieland band. You'll find him willing and very able to give an insightful, colorful, and interesting history lesson on one of the larger band instruments in use today – the instrument that no one can miss as the band marches past.

Tuba Exchange
1825 Chapel Hill Road
Durham, N.C. 27707
(800) 869-9922
www.tubaexchange.com

The Silver Thimble Shoppe
Swansboro

Front Street in Swansboro is lined with maritime village shops worthy of a leisurely afternoon browse. At 137 Front Street, the cedar-shingled cottage that borders the White Oak River and the Intracoastal Waterway was originally a fish house. Since those early days, it has housed numerous business ventures. In 1996, Onslow County natives Gary and Betty Shepard decided to fulfill a lifelong dream – a shop of their own where they could sell the collectibles they love and make many new friends along the way.

The Shepards have traced their Scottish ancestors in Onslow County to the early 1700s and back to the 1600s in eastern North Carolina, which explains their passion for Scottish, Irish, and English arts and crafts. Betty's mother, renowned quilter Hazel Rhodes Reece, introduced her into the world of quilting and needlework – and family traditions.

Today, Gary and Betty pass on traditions of old world craftsmanship to visitors and Internet surfers, who they meet either in the store or online.

"We started collecting years ago," Betty says as she pours a cup of tea. "It just grew on us." She and Gary took trips to England, Germany,

and France to attend trade shows where craftsmen displayed their work. During these trips, they met manufacturers of thimbles and other collectibles. The Shepards learned about the traditions and people behind the products they sold – knowledge they're happy to share with those who stop and linger at the Silver Thimble.

Silver lining

On a recent trip to England, the Shepards met a silversmith who was close to retiring. "It was sort of sad, in a way," Gary recalls. "This very friendly man spent his life crafting silver thimbles, and yet he had no one to whom he could pass on his skills." Gary and Betty were so taken with him they bought not only some of his thimbles, but also the rare tools he used in his work. "This sort of work is quickly disappearing," Gary says. "We're doing what we can to preserve the craft."

And that's one of the reasons many people enjoy collecting thimbles – especially older ones. "Thimbles are still in production," Betty says. "But mostly they're ceramic and come from the Orient." The Silver Thimble carries the more inexpensive ceramic versions that display pop culture icons: Coca-Cola, The Yankees, Elvis, and other symbols of Americana. But they also stock thimbles with a rich history – including some that date back more than 100 years.

As the Shepards' business grew, so did their offerings. Now, in addition to one of the largest selections of thimbles in the country, one can browse through custom-made English pewter, fine bone china, Irish and Celtic music selections, and unique English toys and games – all imported directly from the manufacturers.

What really makes a visit to the Silver Thimble memorable is something rarely found at a shopping mall. One need only ask Betty or Gary to discuss an item in their store to notice the difference. Thimbles can be traced back 30,000 years, based on archeological finds in Moscow. Visit their shop, and savor the story that follows.

Silver Thimble Gifts & Music

137 Front Street

Swansboro, N.C. 28584

(910) 326-8558

www.silverthimblegifts.com

Chicago Old Telephone Company

Sanford

In my opinion, the telephone is the most important invention of all time!" exclaims Richard Marsh, owner of the Chicago Old Telephone Company in Sanford. His assertion is probably open for argument, but one thing is for certain – Marsh is an expert when it comes to our favorite communication device. Need proof? Stop by his store in Sanford, or give him a call – really – and ask him about telephones.

Restoration work

Telephones became a hobby for Marsh about 36 years ago, while he was an electrical engineer for the Exxon Corporation. As his job became more and more demanding, he started tinkering with old phones. "It became therapeutic for me," he says with a chuckle. "It was very satisfying to take something old and unusable and restore it to a beautiful, practical tool." Marsh and his wife, Judith, along with 20 shop employees, restore thousands of telephones each year. A visit to their store or website will provide an unexpected history lesson in telecommunications – not just in the United States, but around the world.

"We do much more than sell interesting old phones," Judith says. "A large part of our business is restoring phones for people who've come across a phone they don't want to part with."

Since "retro" has become a buzzword recently, the Marshes have seen a great deal of interest in simple desk phones from the 1940s and '50s – including the ever-popular "Princess" phones. Older telephone booth pay phones are also sought after by those seeking the ultimate retro look in the family room. "Pay phones are a little pricey," Richard says. "But they were pricey when they were produced. A 1950s pay phone cost around \$800 back then. Therefore, they were always rebuilt."

The "call" of duty

The store sells retail but will also restore old telephones to work on current modular phone lines. Their business also reaches out to the entertainment industry. "We do a lot of work with Hollywood – including Disney," Judith says. "In fact, we recently shipped an old phone to a Japanese filmmaker in Tokyo who just had to have it the next day. The shipping was as much as the phone!"

If you're in the vicinity, drop into the Chicago Old Telephone Company and take time to browse through their extensive collection of old telephones from around the world. And, if you

can, ask Richard or Judith about their collection. You'll "hear" a lot more than you ever have over the phone.

Bryan A. Oesterreich lives in Washington and teaches English at Beaufort County Community College and East Carolina University.

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