

Pop art



TUESDAY, 22 DECEMBER 2009 13:26 | SCOTT RECKER

★★★★★ (1 vote, average 5.00 out of 5)



Jim Fentress has got that pop.

When the Holland resident retired from the construction business in 2006, he quickly realized he needed an activity to occupy his time and a kernel of an idea popped into his head.

Located at 7922 Hill Avenue in Holland, the 1800-square foot J.H Fentress Antique Popcorn Museum displays more than 30 antique popcorn and peanut machines, and related memorabilia such as retro popcorn bags, original machine blueprints and vintage advertisements. The eclectic museum is one of only two museums in the world devoted to the history and evolution of one of the Western world's most beloved snack foods (ironically the other popcorn museum is located in Marion, Ohio).

But it's not the popcorn that inspired this former educator and independent contractor to amass his odd collection, but rather the machines themselves. In 1981, the former industrial education teacher bought a vintage popcorn popping machine from a friend after becoming intrigued with how these grand old devices operated.

"I became obsessed with the mechanics," said Fentress. "We're talking about a machine built in 1915 that was fully automated. It popped the corn, separated the unpopped kernels, added butter. These were some of the most advanced machines of their time. It's a real Rube Goldberg setup and it's so fascinating to see how they work."

Shortly after that initial purchase, he stumbled upon a vintage Holcomb & Hoke popcorn box at an antique show with a picture of the same model of popcorn maker that he had just bought—and he was hooked.

Corny hobby

"It was a hobby that got out of control," he says with a laugh. "But we collectors are an odd bunch of people."

After realizing in 2006 that his machines and memorabilia had outgrown his basement, he purchased his current building, which once served as the headquarters of SMS Sewing.

Fentress gives free tours to the public by appointment and always fires up a machine so his guests can sample the taste of popcorn from back in the 1920s. This is not the same corn you get at your neighborhood multiplex. Always a stickler for authenticity, Fentress uses the same type of kernels that were used by popcorn vendors of yesteryear. Called 'rice corn,' this variety of corn produces smaller, more flavorful popcorn. Fentress buys his rice corn stock at an Amish grocery store in Indiana.

"Popcorn today pops about three times larger than it did in the '20s because over the years most corn turned into hybrid crops," says Fentress. "But everyone who's had this type of old corn says they like it better. This is as far away from microwave popcorn as you can get"

When not giving museum tours, Fentress stays busy helping friends with construction projects, restoration work and, naturally, conversing with fellow popcorn history enthusiasts and collectors from all over the world via the internet.

“Much of the joy in collecting is derived from talking with other collectors, sharing information and seeing their findings. I don’t have the most exciting life in the world, but I sure do love it.”

The J.H. Fentress Antique Popcorn Museum is located at 7922 Hill Ave. Tours are available by appointment only.

Donations accepted. 419-308-4812/

antiquepopcornmuseum.com