

## Popular antique business obtains national reach

By Eric C. Deines

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Don Cline helps Bob Smith find an item amid an abundant collection of antique chairs, signs and other classic items at Cline's County Antiques outside of Mount Pleasant on Friday.  
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MOUNT PLEASANT - If you've ever dined at a Cracker Barrel anywhere in the country, chances are there was piece from Cline's Country Antiques nearby.

The Mount Pleasant "antique farm" on N.C. 49 has become a go-to spot for restaurant decorators around the country, with the farm supplying businesses like Cracker Barrel, Fuel Pizza and, at one point, Applebee's.

Don Cline, who took over his family's 100-acre-plus chicken farm in the mid-1970s, said decorators for some restaurant businesses will leave with a truck full of goods that are kept in the national warehouse.

He also said restaurant decorators must be very particular about the items they purchase.

"For instance, the old signs they use. One decorator couldn't use Pepsi signs because the restaurant had a contract with (Coca-Cola). It had to be all Coke," Cline said.

Antique, metal signs are a strong part of the business for Cline.

Large gas station signs can sell for \$700 a piece - though Cline said many year's ago they were hard to get rid of.

With the right kind of eyes, one can find just about anything at Cline's farm.

"A lot of it that looks like nothing is nothing," said Cline, who has degrees in both poultry science and agri-economics, and nearly completed a Ph.D at University of Tennessee. "But some of it is something."

Piles of old, wooden elementary school chairs sell for \$5 a piece. A Jetsons-like television waits for a home. And a late 1800s pump organ is ready for a great deal.

"In the 70s, that would have sold for \$700," Cline said.

The antique farm itself is geared toward wholesale - 80 percent of his business is wholesale, Cline said.

The vastness of the collection and the wholesale leaning can lead to better deals for the singular buyer - who have traveled from as far away as California just to visit Cline's farm.

"This is a source for dealers, so they can probably find things at the bottom price," Cline said.

Much to his wife's chagrin, Cline said the antique farm continues to expand.

Already consisting of several barns and chicken buildings, Cline has had to add five tractor-trailers full of antique furniture, traveling trunks and grandfather clocks.

The farm, Cline said, has been a boon for art students, drama clubs and "shabby chic" antique shoppers.

"Shabby chic" shoppers, as defined by Cline, buy Depression-era furniture and "paint it purple or something."

Ashley Spinks, 32, of Charlotte, was first introduced to Cline's when she was a student at University of North Carolina - Charlotte.

Her friends majoring in art would use items from Cline's farm for multimedia and photography projects.

Now, Spinks is seeking a master's degree in architecture and was back at Cline's farm on Friday.

"I try to use found objects in my models," Spinks said. "I've never found another place like this anywhere."

Items from Cline's business can be seen in films like "The Color Purple," "Fried Green Tomatoes," and the 1997 version of "Lolita."

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