Antique shops revive downtown Denham Springs

By MARY BROUSSARD

DENHAM SPRINGS — Five years ago an Amite River flood on 4-H Club Road forced antiques dealers Bonnie Loftus and Elaine Day to flee with their stock to higher ground.

The women held a sale in the old Carol Theater on Range Avenue in the deserted downtown area to reduce their inventory. They planned to return to their original location.

Sales were modest, but something told Loftus and Day to remain in the theater. In their first week more than 1,000 customers came in.

Denham Springs Antique Village now bustles with 15 antiques shops, three crafts shops and two gift stores. Even the village's jewelry store has a section that sells antiques and some furniture.

Businessman Joseph "Pee wee" Day said his wife initially thought the long-closed theater wouldn't work as a place to sell antiques because the theater was old and dirty.

"But they opened the doors, and the doggone place took off," Day said. "From then it grew like wildfire."

He said part of the lure of what would later become J&D Antiques—and now Theater Antiques—is nostalgia.

"Everybody was so curious about going in the theater," he said. "Old buildings are what antiques thrive in."

Some of the names of the shops are Painted Lady, Hart to Heart, Southern Heirs and Things From the Past.

Julie Dyason-Norris, a Denham Springs resident who opened Romantic in 1990, said she gave it that name because she thinks it's nice to create a romantic environment in one's home.

"I think you can do that with furniture and accessories," she said. "It can make life more pleasant because we live in such a hustle-and-bustle world."

The shops feature an array of furniture ranging from early primitive pieces to mahogany reproductions. Many shops have cast-iron toys, war memorabilia, china, pottery and Depression-era or elegant glassware.

Loftus said her most popular request is for primitive, or country-type, tables and Hoosier cabinets.

"I call it Little House on the Prairie furniture," she said. "Day said one of the hottest items these days is wooden fishing lures."

"People like to find these things," he said. "It's like a treasure hunt."

Richard and Jeanne Spicer of Dallas inspect merchandise at one of the shops in the antique village in Denham Springs. The Spicers were in the area on business.

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Mary Crowson, who owns Live Oak Antiques, said her taste for furnishings changed as she grew older. She thinks people love the beauty of an old piece of furniture as well as the story behind it.

Crowson said she never thought the village would prosper.

"It's a hobby, but it's work, too," she said. "It's hard to find things and keep prices at a reasonable level."

Not everyone is selling antiques, though. Within the same block is a dress shop, restaurant, print shop, hardware store, bank and a florist.

But the popularity of antiques caused 56-year-old Benton Bros. Furniture Co. to gradually scale down its inventory and allow interested antiques dealers to rent space in its 10,000-square-foot building.

Earle Benton said he was skeptical but now rents space to 36 antiques dealers in what he calls Benton Bros. Antique Mall.

Benton said the antiques business is thriving partly because buyers realize that a good antique is better and lasts longer than a new piece of furniture.

Joe Jackson, an 87-year-old retired real estate agent, still keeps an office in what was once a hardware store in the downtown area. He said before the antiques boom, he walked the block daily for exercise. He said he was disheartened to count 15 unopened shops on one excursion.

"I'm happy just to see all this," Jackson said. "Those vacant stores were just a black eye to Denham Springs."

Most of the shops are open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, and from noon to 5 p.m. on Sunday. During December, many stores remain open until 8 p.m. on Thursday to accommodate customers who attend the Nativity pageant and Christmas caroling.

Much of the business is from groups of people who park for the day, browse and eat lunch. Some designers and antiques enthusiasts arrive from other states with U-Haul trailers or large vans.

Most of the merchants formed an association called the Denham Springs Antique Village. The association recently bought a billboard off Interstate 12 near Holden. The billboard and word-of-mouth referrals have boosted sales, according to the merchants.

The Denham Springs/Livingston Chamber of Commerce erected highway signs on the interstate and on Range Avenue directing travelers to the antiques shops.

Dyason-Norris of Romantique said some Baton Rouge residents do not realize how close the antique village is until they visit.

She said the overwhelming success of the shops has boosted the Denham Springs economy. Many of her customers also will shop at the town's Wal-Mart or visit the post office after they've visited the antiques shops, she said.

"It's not just us (the merchants) exchanging money with each other," she said. "It brings tax dollars from out of state and out of town."

Some shop owners are collectively advertising in antiques magazines to attract new business. But most of them say the word-of-mouth method from pleased customers creates the best draw.

"That's our best advertisement," Crowson said. "People talk about us after visiting. I don't foresee this ending soon."