Local artist finds treasure in buttons

By Becky Tillson
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How does a collection start? When does the original flea market bargain become the first piece in a collector's pastime?

The collectible often starts with the nostalgic appeal of antiques which bring back childhood memories and a feeling of connection with the past.

For artist Pam Gary, more than a million buttons collected over the past 12 years bring the same simple pleasure countless children have found sifting through their mother's jar of buttons.

But as an adult, sifting through a pile of old buttons also conjures the past for this collector.

"When I find an ornate old button, I try to visualize a lady going to a party in her best dress," Gary said. "People from all generations are attracted to buttons.

"They always say something like, 'I remember my aunt's dress had buttons like these' or older people say 'I used to have buttons just like this on a dress,'" she added.

Eight years into the collection, Gary's buttons found a new function as earrings, pins, button covers and other decorated fashions designed by the 31-year-old Carencro artist.

About four years ago, Gary and her mother were shopping at a flea market when they found an old Ball jar filled with buttons.

One button visible from the outside inspired an offhand comment which had led to Gary's new career as artist she never had planned.

"I said, 'This one would make neat earrings,' and my mother said 'You should do it, that kind of thing is in style,'" Gary recalls with a laugh.

Her humor is tinged with reality because she has sold all the jewelry she brought to the only two festivals she ever worked.

However, the success of her designs still seems secondary to the collection itself.

She continues to browse flea markets and antique shops for more jars of buttons.

She has found wedding bands, scapulars, war tokens and even old gold fillings mixed in with buttons saved in a jar or can.

"In the old days, people didn't throw things away," Gary said. "When they tore up a shirt for scraps, they cut off the buttons and saved them.

"Every time I find something new or unique, I look it up," she added. "And if it is a new kind of button, I have button books I can look it up in."

Gary displays her millions of buttons all over the Carencro home she shares with her husband, Neal, and their two children, Nicholas and Lindsay.

She keeps the buttons among the other "finds" the couple has acquired over the years.

For example, some of her buttons are displayed in an old wooden cash drawer from an antique register.

But the newest product of Gary's affinity for collection is hand painted bird houses and bird feeders which, though decorative, are meant to be used outdoors.

Neal cuts and builds the houses which she paints to look like a country church or an old frame house.

They use old tin for the rooftops and on some pieces, the couple use real copper salvaged from the old Duson Elementary school.

The supply of copper, old tin and cypress are part of an array of appealing objects accumulated over the years, along with more than a million buttons.

"My house is filled to the rim with junk, but it's my junk," Gary said. "And my favorite pastime is still to pour out a jar of buttons and comb through them one at a time."