The joys of old toys
Hobby becomes basis for shop

By PAT WATTERS
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ABBEVILLE — Michael Alexander's toy collection is anything but child's play.

"I've got probably the largest toy collection in the South," he said.

He had kept the toys tucked away at home, but recently he added several to the stock of his antique, memorabilia and "junque" shop, Alexander's, at 403 S. State St. It is one of the oldest buildings downtown.

Now among the shop's antique glassware, country collectibles and knick-knacks are train sets of every description; a Keystone truck circa 1916; a "Buddy" red and black steam shovel from the 1930s; a yellow streamlined steam shovel from the 1940s and replicas of ocean-going tankers.

A few model Texaco trucks from a line which began selling for $9.95 are worth more now because people hoarded them, Alexander said.

Also in his collection is a scale replica of a Caterpillar tractor made in the 1960s for the heavy equipment company's sales representatives to show how the machinery worked, and a wind-up wagon pulled by a balking mule.

The shop is open from 10 a.m. until 5 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays.

"It's probably the nicest collectibles store in southern Louisiana," said Neil Sonnier, an antiques and collectibles wholesaler from nearby Delcambre.

"Mike Alexander knows collectibles."

Alexander, 66, is a transplanted Texan who closed his Abbeville fabricating and welding business when he retired.

Toy collecting began for him when he served from 1951-1953 as a bomber pilot in the Korean War. Once he gave a "house boy" who worked at his quarters in Japan a carton of cigarettes, "worth a fortune on the black market."

The Japanese youth, in gratitude, started bringing him model train sets.

"They were beautiful, manufactured there in Japan, probably from salvaged beer cans. Anyhow, that got me started. I've been at it ever since."

He doesn't have any of those train sets now.

"But I do have a replica of General MacArthur's staff car made in occupied Japan in 1947, also out of a beer can," he said as he gently plucked a tiny, dark green car off of a counter.

Among the trains are a 1926 steel set with an engine, passenger car and caboose in the original box stamped "Ives Toys for Boys."

He also has a Lionel red and white mail car and a Blue Comet passenger car "that have never been out of their boxes."

"Mint in the box, as we say," Alexander adds.

The rarest item in the shop sits on the floor.

It is a yellow, pedal-car airplane made in 1936 as a toy for children of Hitler's Germany, with Nazi swastikas on both wings and the sides. Alexander said he believes it is the only one left in the world.

"I got it at an auction in Tennessee," he said proudly.

But it's not his favorite. That, he keeps at home — a 1934 Lincoln pedal-car.

"It's a one-of-a-kind." Of the few made, Alexander explained, some were torn up, and World War II scrap drives got the rest.

"It's the only survivor. The lights work. The windshield goes up and down."

He bought it in Festus, Mo., from another collector.

Another rarity is his 1941 Daisy double-barreled BB gun. "Nobody believes it until they see it," Alexander said. "It's the only one I ever saw."

There are no toy guns or war toys in Alexander's collection.

"I don't care to commemorate killing or war," he said.

"Toys are a better investment now than just about anything else."

For that reason, he has an elaborate security system at his home and at the building that houses his auto collection, which includes a 1938 Bantam, 1940 Packard and two '65 Mustang convertibles.

The toys in the shop aren't for children. "Sadly, they're not," Alexander said. "Too expensive."

They're for collectors locally and ones from all over the country, attracted by notices on the Internet and by Alexander's reputation. The collectors have networked for years.

Alexander told about one of them, a North Carolina lawyer who once told him that he had just gotten a divorce.

The man's wife had given him an ultimatum.

"The toys had to go, or she would. He told her, 'Bye-bye.'"

Unlike that grass widow, Alexander's wife, Jinny, is enthusiastic about his hobbies. She and their gentlemanly Schnauzer, Barney, accompany him on collectible shopping trips around the country at least twice a year.

In the shop, he shows off three Arcade and Fenton scale-model, cast-iron items: two horse-drawn wagons and a stagecoach.

"The luckiest buy I ever made was a cast-iron Fenton fire wagon with the original paint. I got it at an auction in Mississippi for $35. It was worth $1,500."

He also counts as lucky the times visitors have seen the toys in his home and tell about old toys they've got in the attic, and they turned out to be items he bought for his collection.

Alexander handles the toys gently, looks at them fondly.

"I've loved toys since I was a kid. Like all kids, I guess. I can relive my boyhood with these. I'm a 66-year-old kid!"