Expert on antiques born into business

By LOUISE OKRUTSKY

J. Jordan Humberstone was born in Greenfield Village.

His birthplace not only determined his name, but it makes his position as a leading antique expert and a consultant to the Detroit Historical Museum and Greenfield Village almost seem like predestination.

Humberstone shares his expertise in fine furniture, glass, ceramics and metal with his Farmington Community Center classes and through shows which he manages, such as the annual antique show for the Daughters of the American Revolution at the Birmingham Community House.

But he admits his interest in the collectibles is rooted in his birth at Greenfield Village.

His father was an aide to Greenfield Village's founder Henry Ford and supervised the buying of antique pieces for the museum. When Ford's project began, the man who invented the assembly line envisioned the village as a place where persons lived in a historical setting.

Humberstone's family were to be the first residents.

"Henry Ford took my father under his wing and moved him into the village. Where the Martha-Mary Chapel is now, there was an old farm house. My parents lived there," Humberstone said.

LIFE IN AN HISTORICAL setting proved to be less than cozy for the Humberstone family.

"It was terrible. My mother would go to hang out her laundry and President Hoover would be standing there.

"It was like living in a goldfish bowl."

Right before Humberstone's birth, his mother moved into the Sarah Jordan boarding home in the village. Ford thought it would be fitting for the village's first child to be born there.

It was Ford who picked out the child's name. Actually, he chose two — if it was a girl, her name would be Sarah; if it were a boy, he would be called Jordan.

Six months after Jordan was born, the Humberstone family moved from the village to Dearborn.

His father remained curator for the village. After growing up around antiques, it seemed only natural Humberstone would take up a life dealing with the finely made collectibles.

In the late '60's after a stint as a manager for a jewelry firm, Humberstone became an antique dealer.

Eventually he added writing for trade papers and managing shows to his professional endevours.

Throughout it all, he hesitates to use the word antique, prefering the term collectible.

IT'S A SEMANTIC way to circumvent the argument made by traditionalist dealers who claim that quality left the scene in 1830 when machinery was introduced.

Legally, antiques are at least 100 years old. Anything made before 1879 is technically an antique.

With furniture, age doesn't necessarily make the piece valuable. It's quality that makes a collectible, according to Humberstone.

"Just because something is old doesn't mean it's an antique. If it was junk 100 years ago, it's junk today," he said.

Beauty and craftsmanship are the deciding features.

Furniture made after 1895 is worthwhile even if it is less than a century old.

"We did a lot of good things from 1895 to about 1910," he said.

Art deco furniture and misson oak furniture of the 1930s are good buys for someone who wants craftsmanship at an affordable price, according to Humbertone.

"Anybody who wants to invest in furniture with style and craftsmanship can buy the those styles," he said.

YOUNG BUYERS who invest in mission oak or golden oak of the 1930s can eventually branch out into older pieces.

The quality of older furniture isn't being reproduced today, according to Humberstone.

"Wood furniture is becoming an endangered species. They're making furniture today that is half plastic or Formica," Humberstone said, in disaproving tones.

While antiques can't be replaced or their supply replenished, the market takes in new items. At the turn of the century, local factories such as the Detroit Chair Co. produced sets of furniture bearing the stamp of the manufacturer's name.

These chairs are relatively inexpensive but are items to watch on the market, according to Humberstone.

Buying articles because they bear the manufacturer's stamp can be a bad practice, Humberstone advises.

"Just because its signed doesn't mean it's good," he said.

BUYING A NAME instead of quality is a mistake many novices make, especially in the case of glassware.

Experienced buyers looks at the cut of the crystal, its clarity, the design and its proportions. If a good piece lacks a signature, it doesn't make a difference. Mediocre signed pieces of crystal were made for the mass market. Their value hasn't risen like the value of higher quality pieces.

Another buy to avoid is a collection of first day editions. These include coins, plates and other smaller items which are touted as limited editions.

"If they get 15,000 orders, then they limit their production to 15,000," Humberstone said.

Once purchased, the editions are usually sold at half of the initial investment.

Christmas plates are a bad investment, also. Once there were only a few companies producing the plates. Now about 20 concerns issue them.

"They'll kill the market," Humberstone said.

Aside from the traditional antique markets of furniture, glass and metalware, textiles are coming into their own.

"You have to consider it's what the women of this country left us. They were spending their time making a home for their families. In the evenings, they made coverlets for them. They needed them to keep warm but the women also used them to express themselves," Humberstone said.

"BEFORE NOBODY one knew what to do with them. The quilts ended up as packing material for furniture. But within the last five years, quilts, coverlets and early textiles have become popular.

"All of a sudden everyone kind of got smart," he said.

Homespun sheets, pillowcases, table cloths and drapes are rising in value.

Old tools made from such rare woods as teakwood are in demand, too.

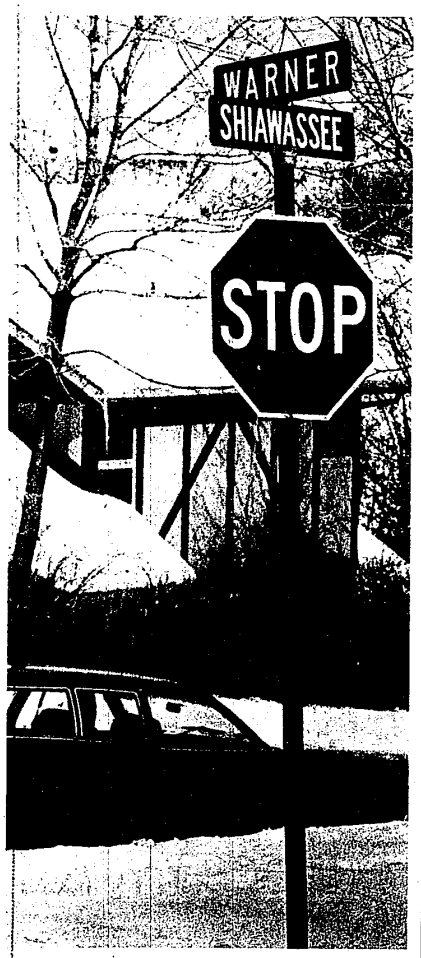
Jordan Humberstone, an antique expert, appraises a chair (circa 1870) which is an example of Chippendale furniture. (Staff photo by Harry Mauthe)

Cross country skiing slides into Center

Cross country skiing slides into Beechwood Touring Center, Nine Mile and Beech, from 9-10 a.m. and 10:30-11:30 a.m. on Feb. 3.

The hour-long session is available for $21 with equipment or $12 if students bring their own equipment.

Registration for the classes can be obtained by calling the Farmington Community Center at 477-8404 or by calling in person at the Center, 24705 Farmington Road. Classes are open to anyone more than eight years old.



While most drivers pay attention only to the STOP sign at this intersection, the names honor Fred Warner, first three-term Michigan governor, a Farmington resident and Shiawassee, an old Indian trail. (Staff photo by Harry Mauthe)

History in everyday life

Signs of old times dot streets

By MARY GNIEWEK

Perched at the corner of several local streets are tributes to the founders of Farmington.

Unlike large monuments that grace city parks and provide pigeons with a place to roost, these little mementos go nearly unnoticed, except for an occasional glance by persons seeking a sense of direction or the postman–they are street signs.

Some of the best known local routes are named for the first families to settle this area. The prime example is Power Rd., named for Arthur Power, who founded Farmington in 1824.

Power came here from Farmington, New York, which was founded by Quakers from Berkshire, Mass. in 1789. He had the first saw and grist mills and accompanying dam in Farmington village in 1840.

Power's offspring of seven sons included Nathan, a state legislator, and John, a great orator with a flair for the dramatic. A contemporary descendent, Philip Power, is publisher of the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers.

Quakertown is a logical choice for another street name since Arthur Power established Michigan's first Quaker community here. A local history book, "Farmington: A Pictoral History", by Lee S. Peel, says the Quaker settlement fizzled out by the mid-1860s.

Warner street is named for another reputable family with a long Farmington history. Fred M. Warner, a Republican, was the first three-term governor in Michigan. The Warner home still stands at 33805 Grand River.

EVER WONDER HOW that major thoroughfare got its name? According to local history buff Bob Cook, Grand River is a derivative of an old military road that ran through the area.

"It was laid out as a military road from Detroit to the Grand River in Lansing," Cook says.

Adds historical society member Nancy Leonard: "It is also known as Old Plank Rd. because the actual street was made of boards."

Named for a closer to home waterway is Orchard Lake Road, after that blue body of water in the community of the same name.

Street signs honoring other pioneer families include:

- Steel–named for Edward Steele, who had the first grist mill in the township of Farmington
- Howard–Named for Lydia and Theodore Howard, leading fruit growers on their farm at Twelve Mile and Halstead
- Halstead–Named (and misspelled) for the Halsted family, who were first to establish growing apples on a commercial scale in the early 1800s.
- Schroeder–Named for the family that emigrated from Germany in 1867
- Harrison Ct.–For Richard and Elizabeth Harrison, who emigrated from Ontario Canada in 1874.

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