

KITCHEN COLLECTIBLES

Written and Photographed by June Grayson

Dorothy Hultgren, the curator of the Dunham-Hunt House Museum of St. Charles, Illinois, may be the only person to watch a Cary Grant movie so she can see the furniture. "Remember The Bachelor and the Bobby Soxer?" Hultgren explains. "The sets contained beautiful American antique furniture. I fell in love with Windsor chairs when I first saw them in an old Joan Crawford movie. And I never tire of seeing the English Victorian interiors in the movie of Dicken's Christmas Carol."

Hultgren may have been born one hundred years too late.

During the museum tours that she leads through the Dunham-Hunt House, she introduces each treasure from the Nineteenth century with obvious affection and encyclopedic knowledge.

Her home shelters enough collectibles to stock another museum - treasures from an even earlier period in American history, the American primitive of the Eighteenth century. Yet her home is no museum with a don't touch atmosphere or rigid adherence to decorating dogma. Hand forged kitchen tools mingle with modern electrical appliances. Cast iron pots are stacked above the electric refrigerator. A writing-arm chair looks old, but it's new. The Windsor chairs in the kitchen were made only thirty years ago but they are authentic copies of the original Windsor chair. Dorothy Hultgren's adaptation of her possessions to a Twentieth century home creates the cozy clutter that family and guests find irresistible as well as eminently livable. Functional tools from any age may always seem modern.

Since high school, Hultgren has cut out magazine pictures of old American homes. She grew up in the 1940s when her boyfriend, now her husband, was away fighting World War Two. "Movies were our favorite entertainment then and I went to a lot of them. My mother liked beautiful clothes but she didn't care much about housekeeping, so I learned about beautiful furniture by going to

movies."

Home decorating magazines even wrote feature stories about outstanding movie sets. "Watch the old Cary Grant, Shirley Temple, and Joan Crawford movies for good ideas," Hultgren suggests, "as well as Susan and God and Up In Mabel's Room."

She started to collect antiques when they moved to the Fox River Valley in 1966. Her first purchase was an oak washstand. When she decided she liked earlier furnishings, she sold it. "That is the nice thing about antiques - you usually can resell without losing any money," Hultgren says.

She started with little things, such as kitchen utensils, and learned as she went along. "It gets to be a gut reaction," Hultgren explains. "At first, you are not sure of yourself but you know if what you buy is not quite right. After awhile, you can just glance at something and you know it is for you."

She frequented flea markets, estate sales, and antique shops. She and her husband even belonged to a "flea market supper club", whose other members shared their passion for antique hunting. Now she has so many treasures that more acquisitions are few and far between. "You get to the point where you go to the flea market just for a social occasion," she

observes wryly.

The Hultgren home is a simple builder's house to which they added their own versions of American primitive. They painted the exterior wood siding Colonial Red. A wreath on the front door welcomes guests. A string of buoys on a hook beside the door suggests ties to New England seafaring days.

Her husband's interests are complementary. He likes to build and restore furniture. While he has no real interest in buying antiques, he will seek out special antique utensils as her surprise birthday presents. When they were first married, he built reproductions of traditionally styled furniture. They sold those pieces when she became interested in primitive Americana. "He can copy anything from a picture," Dorothy says, "and he won't add things that do not belong." When she found the top of an old hutch at an antique shop, he was able to build a matching bottom using wood from another old cupboard.

He used old barn siding to face the fireplace wall. To give the hall and stairwell a cozier feeling, he paneled the walls with more old wood. He built the box ceiling beams from which they hang her collection of antique baskets.

The kitchen and its adjoining dining and sitting areas serve as one big "keeping room" just as in Colonial times. Everything

is instantly accessible for daily use.

She loves Victorian rabbits. Most of them sit patiently on a hall shelf built by her husband, although one of them has escaped to hide under the sofa's end table.

Hand forged tin cookie cutters lay cluttered in a dough box on the kitchen hand-carved plank table. She has a lot of cookie cutters because she likes to bake. Carved wooden ware bowls and plates line the open shelves of several hutches. Pewter plates and porringers - some original and some reproduction - fill the rest of the shelves. She strews homespun coverlets casually over the sofa and chairs for protection against sudden drafts. Additional hand-woven table coverings can be seen through open cupboard doors.

Her cast-iron collection includes an Eagle toy stove similar to one in a Smithsonian Institute catalog, a heart waffle iron, a heart-punched tinderbox, and a maple-sugar mold. She polishes the antique copper twice a year - "whether it needs it or not," she smiles. The heart-shaped motif abounds throughout all of the rooms - "a common symbol of affection," Hultgren explains.

Hultgren has advice for new collectors. "When you see something you like, buy it. If you buy from the heart, you will

not go wrong."

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