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Sunday, July 11, 2010 - Arab, Alabama

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News

Downtown developing niche with antiques

By DAVID MOORE - The Arab Tribune
Wednesday, July 7, 2010 10:57 AM CDT

Black's Furniture City started in 1943. In the years since, Graves Furniture, Wright's Furniture and The Home Place have joined Black's on U.S. 231 as traditional stores serving local customers and drawing out-of-town shoppers to Arab looking for good buys on furnishings.

Now, off the four-lane in downtown Arab, a new niche in the local furniture business is beginning to take hold - boutique shops featuring antiques, collectibles and an eclectic array of furnishing.

The latest of these shops is Yancy Eclectic D/cor, owned by Kathy Ramsey.

Talking to her, it's hard to miss her enthusiasm for both her new store and what's stirring downtown.

Yancy is her maiden name, and the beyond antiques she stocks an intriguing mix of vintage items, collectibles and art - hence Yancy Eclectic D/cor.

"I can really handle a lot of things," she said. "And what we are selling is quality stuff. It's not a bunch of junk."

Many of her antiques, especially the high-end pieces, come from buying trips every three months or so to Charleston, where her sister, Melinda Nicholson lives. A friend of her sister's, Julie Ziff, is a set designer there, and she and her sister came to Arab to help Ramsey set up her stock.

"They helped me stage it," she said. "People come in and say, 'Wow this is like somewhere in the big city.' It looks professional because Julie is a professional set designer."

In addition to what's in stock, Ramsey keeps a wish-list for people who ask about some item she might not have. Out buying, she watches for those items and gets them if she sees what she thinks she wants.

"They are not obligated to purchase it, but it's been a good service for me to offer," she said.

A core develops

Yancy adds to this core of furnishing stores:

- Caroline's on Main Street, owned by Carolyn and Linn Brannon, is a few doors south of Yancy and features stylish, mostly new furniture;
- Belinor Antiques, a few doors north Yancy is owned by Belinda McKinney, who

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moved her shop downtown several years ago from just south of Arab;

- Antiquities 'n' More, located near Fourth Avenue in the old Alaco Drug Store, was opened in 2007 by Shelba Harbin and her son, Keith Jones.
- Wayne and Jean Scott at Scotts First Avenue have added a section of antiques - the Antique Attic - to the store they opened in 2007.

As the antique and boutique shops numbers grow, Ramsey said, they begin to feed each other in terms of generating customer traffic. Where one shop might have so much appeal, a number of them makes it worthwhile for shoppers to come downtown to see what they all offer.

Ramsey said McKinney told her that, since Yancy opened, she's not only seen first-time shoppers from Arab but people from Huntsville. She said they had heard about Yancy and while they were in Arab decided to check out the other shops in town.

Drawing more folks

Last week, Ramsey said, she had people from Athens, Birmingham and Huntsville - all in Arab to go to Buddy's Antique Auction, long a drawing card for out-of-towners - stop by her shop, saying they saw her display window or 8-foot, glass front, mahogany store door.

"It attracts people," Ramsey said. "I hate to brag, but I'm so proud of it and can see how everyone is embracing it. It's been wonderful, and it's because of Arab. They are telling their friends."

Another draw, she said, is the Alabama Antique Trail, which lists 90-100 antique stores statewide. Antiquities, Scotts and Yancy are all listed.

Ramsey said she's asked shoppers from Tennessee how they found her store, and they told her they went to the Alabama Antique Trail website.

The more the merrier

It's not just five stores with antiques that are beginning to feed each other business, but other specialty shops are part of the emerging niche.

For instance, Ramsey explained, she might buy an antique clock to sell, but she wants it to work. She tried unsuccessfully to catch Carey's Clock Repair open on First Avenue, but has taken broken antique clocks a few doors down to Steve's Jewelry Repairs.

Ramsey called Chafin's Chair Caning and Seat Repair an unique asset for the antique stores downtown, not to mention individuals with old chairs.

She also noted the Huntsville clientele Patrick Leak has built at Patrick's Upholstery. Ramsey said he's sent designers to her store, and she refers people to him.

"I might have a good wingback chair, but I'll sell it like is without reupholstering it because I don't know what a customer wants," she said. "But after they buy it, Patrick can customize it any way they want it."

Patrick's carries some furnishings, too.

And so a core of related businesses is forming and beginning to support one another.

"They feel the same as I do - they want all the shops full," Ramsey said. "The more shops, the more the attraction and the more people it brings."

A 'family' of businesses

Yancy said her love of downtown began after she moved here in the 1970s, when few businesses were located on U.S. 231.

"Downtown was the heartbeat of Arab," she said. "I think our downtown is really special. That's where it all began and that's why Terry and I purchased the building. We want to do our part to save downtown.

"Downtown makes Arab unique."

As they worked to restore their building, they learned about the sense of "family," as Ramsey put it, among the business owners there. They would stop by and express excitement that a new business was coming and offer support.

Ramsey, who grew up in Cullman, married shortly after graduating from Cullman High School. She and her husband at the time moved to Arab in the mid-70s, where they raised two now-grown daughters, Allison Craft and Danielle Latham.

Nineteen years ago, Kathy remarried, this time to Terry Ramsey. At the time, she worked at Wrangler where he was the manager.

They bought a house on Fry Gap Road.

"We started going to auctions and estate sales just to furnish our house," Ramsey said. "When the garage and basement filled up with antiques, I began selling stuff from booths at antique malls."

Several loves

So love - and perhaps a monster, both - grew for old, interesting furniture.

Even as she had her booths, she worked in Huntsville for ITC Deltacom in later FTMI as program manager for it's Transportation Security Agency contracts. Her husband worked for FTMI for a while, traveling extensively in the U.S. territories.

After FTMI lost its contract in 2008, he went with Lockheed Martin. She remained with the company until the first of this year, helping close things out, but the writing was on the wall.

Knowing that, they made the decision about Ramsey opening her shop.

They bought the building formerly owned by Cross the Creek gift shop, which for years was Tony's Pawn Shop. Ramsey said they spent tens of thousands of dollars - on top of considerable sweat equity - restoring the old tongue-and-groove ceiling, jacking up support beams, laying a new pine floor and painting.

"Terry has lived everywhere, and we could have moved to Huntsville when I was working there," Yancy said. "But we both love Arab."

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